

Article

The Genealogy of Roberts Settlement Explored Through Black Feminist Autoethnography

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Abstract: This autoethnographic research examines the legacy of Roberts Settlement, a mixed-race settlement in Indiana that became one of the largest rural communities of free people of color in the state before the 20th century. As a Roberts descendent, the researcher uses Black feminist thought and poetic inquiry to investigate the gendered and racial family narratives that constitute the genealogy of the Roberts family. Utilizing present and past narratives to analyze the lived experience of being a black hoosier woman, the researcher finds that dominant male narratives marginalize the stories of Black women in the Roberts family genealogy.

Keywords: Autoethnography; Black feminist thought; poetic inquiry; genealogy

“We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children and, if necessary, bone by bone” ([Walker 1983](#)).

1. Introduction

In a coffee shop in Noblesville, Indiana, a stranger introduces me to a barista as his cousin. I’m startled that he uses the word so readily—cousin. In my research, the word has felt natural, even a bit clinical. But here, when the word comes from his mouth, our relationship takes on a corporeal dimension, and the newness of it settles in my stomach.

He leads me to a table where his laptop and a sizable book await. As we sit with our drinks, I take in his gray hair and wide smile and search for resemblance. The sun shines directly into my eyes from the window behind him. The harsh light, coupled with the darkness of the room, renders me unable to decipher how dark his skin is.

Are we the same color? Is he much lighter than me?

Bryan and I are meeting for the first time to discuss Roberts Settlement, an early mixed-race settlement only a few miles away, from which we both descend. The settlement became one of the largest rural racialized settlements in the state before the 20th century. So, it is possible that he is not Black, for many people from our family have permanently passed for White over generations. As we begin getting to know one another, I find myself wanting to blurt, “So are you Black?”

In time, he does say that he’s Black, and, later, in different lighting, I notice the similarity of our skin color. For some reason, I feel relieved. I’m not sure if I react this way because he is Black or because the uncertainty felt uncomfortable.

For our shared, distant family, the definition of their race and the color of their skin shaped every aspect of their lives. History has fumbled in its attempt to categorize the Roberts and our kin in a definitive and exclusive way. From the 1700s to the early 20th century, we were labelled as (free) Black, African American, Negro, Colored, Mulatto, mixed-blood, and (free) people of color; each label brought with it nuance, opportunity, disadvantage, shame or pride. At any rate, we were a racialized family.

The bound book on the table turns out to be [Conkling \(1957\)](#) dissertation about Roberts Settlement that came from Conkling's own estate sale. Bryan carefully unfolds the genealogy charts in the back, and we trace our lineage through the lines, shapes, and names.

When Conkling wrote his dissertation, there were only a handful of families left living on the settlement. The hundreds of people who once lived there had passed away, dispersed into nearby cities like Kokomo and Noblesville, or migrated far from their central Indiana roots. Though their voices may be physically gone, our family members speak to us through letters, free papers, gravestones, and other artifacts preserved through time. They say "cousin," "kin," "family." I try out the words for myself.

2. Poetic Inquiry

In completing this work, some of the connections I have forged have come easier than others. I am interested in Roberts Settlement and, more specifically, the women of Roberts Settlement, who history has not remembered as keenly as the men. The "manifold and simultaneous oppressions" ([Combahee River Collective 2014](#), p. 271) of racism and sexism make the work of remembering the women of my family difficult. For this reason, I use poetic inquiry to re-member, or put together, pieces of the story of the Roberts women. Arts based research, including poetry "offers ways to tap into what would otherwise be inaccessible, make connections, and interconnections that are otherwise out of reach" ([Leavy 2015](#), p. 21).

to begin forget the missing
pieces the puzzle
always never will be complete
find the lady's smile
in this the gap
of her teeth
and hole of her hat

Poetic inquiry, or poetry as/in research provides an alternative way to interact with data and can engage the audience at an emotional level ([Koelsch 2016](#)). Poetry breaks the traditional rhythm of prose, offers new perspectives on the data, and evokes different meaning from data for both the researcher and the audience ([Leavy 2015](#)). The political power of poetry has been used to create space for marginalized discourses before within scholarship, including those of refugees ([Reale 2014](#)) and mothers ([Faulkner 2014](#); [Faulkner and Nicole 2016](#)).

Poetic inquiry in this work creates space for voices that might otherwise be silenced in the retelling of history. This includes my own voice—as a Roberts descendant, as a Black woman, and as a scholar—and the voices of the women with whom I identify. Like in [Faulkner's \(2014\)](#) work, it may not always be clear whose voice you hear—mine as the researcher, or the women in the story. This is done purposefully, in the same spirit in which [Collins \(2000\)](#) speaks of Black women as "we" in her work to leverage her identity as "situated knower" (p. 19).

Through poetry I strive to evoke a different meaning from data that has largely muted the voices of racialized women.

we are here
here

& here

3. Autoethnography

"So who exactly are these Roberts?" my dad asks, the day I come home after meeting with Bryan.

I fumble through an explanation, not knowing where in history to begin. In a roundabout way, I say something of their unusual prosperity as Black people for the time.

“Well they were only partly Black,” I say. “I mean today we wouldn’t think they were Black, but they kind of were.”

I’ve only explained this a few times, and it doesn’t seem to be getting easier.

“They’re family,” I say, as if that settles it.

In researching the women of my family, I inherently research myself. Autoethnography, a blend of autobiography and ethnographic research, takes on many forms, but at its core, it is a methodology that utilizes self-narrative as both a process and a product for research (Hobbs 2006; Ellis et al. 2011). Autoethnography investigates the other, as well as the self in relation to the other, connecting the “autobiographical and personal to the cultural social and political” (Ellis 2004, p. xix).

As a tool for questioning the creation and representation of reality, autoethnography tends to both the substance of the study and the presentation of that study (Bochner and Ellis 2016). “What we understand and refer to as “truth” changes as the genre of writing or representing experience changes (e.g., fiction or nonfiction; memoir, history, or science)” (Ellis et al. 2011, p. 282), which is why, when coupled with poetic inquiry, autoethnography presents truths in alternate ways. The “truth” of Roberts Settlement, as constructed by data, is mediated through documentation, memory, and artifacts. When we examine this data, we can see how power works to influence “what the group will choose to remember, how it will be valued, and what will be forgotten, neglected, or devalued in the process” (Blair 2006, p. 57).

Perhaps this autoethnography could be labelled as Black Feminist Autoethnography (BFA) as scholars have named the pairing of autoethnography with Black feminist epistemology (Griffin 2012; Salters 2016). Mawhinney (2011) used this method to describe the lived experience of other-mothering at a historically Black university, and Boylorn (2011, 2016a, 2016b) has built a body of scholarship that she names blackgirl autoethnography, through which she centers Black women’s lived experiences in relation to music and media. Through BFA, Black women ask and answer: What does my lived experience as a Black woman offer in this research story? How is it the story, itself? As I enter the history of Roberts Settlement, I enter my own story as well.

4. Black Feminist Epistemology

In her seminal work, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins (2000) posited that a key dimension of Black feminist thought is lived experience as a criterion of meaning.

we know (because)
 we have been
 we know
 (through) our process
 of being
 we know (because)
 we are

Viewing lived experience as a valid source of knowledge is a common thread among other feminist and critical standpoints. A rich body of qualitative literature exists in which people’s subjective realities offer insights for meaning-making and make meaning out of/for themselves. Within the field of communication, researchers have used this criterion in virtually every branch of the discipline, including health communication, race and communication, intercultural communication, interpersonal communication, and family communication (Trujillo 2002; Menchaca 2005; Smith 2008; Gray 2015), while using a myriad of methodological approaches.

Collins asserted that Black women's experiences are useful and even necessary to understanding the truth about their lives as gender and racial minorities. More broadly, their experiences are essential to understanding the power structures that work to subjugate them (Collins 2000; Allen 2009). We, Black women, have been using and continue to use our subjective experiences—narrative, wisdom, and life in general—as modes of knowledge-production (Griffin 2012; Allen 2009). Work speaking to Black women's experiences includes key scholarship from hooks (1981, 1989) Lorde (1984), and Crenshaw (1991), all of which set the precedent for bringing Black women's lived experiences into scholarly and proverbial spotlight.

what I know is
I am
I woke
created life today
out of this black body
that was mine also
yesterday I know
and / because
I am being

Historically, Black women, have been underrepresented, misrepresented, and/or presented through the lens of outsiders, which has limited ways of knowing and understanding social constructs, such as power, race, and gender and related oppressions, classism, racism, sexism. Black feminist thought, then, offers a way to clarify and center Black women's experiences by highlighting Black women's interpretations of the world (Collins 2000, 2015). In turn, their interpretations provide a more nuanced and deeper understanding of reality. I question how the underrepresentation, misrepresentation, and/or outsider presentation of Roberts Settlement has created limited ways of knowing about the women of Roberts Settlement and, more generally, the settlement itself.

we were there
there

& there

The second dimension of Black feminist thought, dialogue, is essential to understanding the construction of experience, knowledge and self, in relation to others (Collins 2000). In everyday situations, Black women clarify, develop, and refine their knowledge through community. Within the academy, this dialogue can be seen in numerous works in which Black women who speak to one another through their work. Simultaneously, they use their work as a mode of "talking back" (hooks 1989) to that which oppresses them as "an expression of . . . movement from object to subject—the liberated voice" (hooks 1989, p. 9). In this way, the voices of Black women speaking to one another and speaking to others offers a form of resistance to oppression. This resistance creates empowerment, or "the liberated voice" of which hooks speaks.

I am speaking back to the powers that have intentionally or unintentionally silenced the women of my family. I am speaking to these women and because of them.

The third dimension of Black feminist thought is ethics of caring, which consists of "valuing individual uniqueness, viewing emotionality as appropriate, and developing the capacity for empathy" (Allen 2009, p. 76). Instead of casting all women or all Black women in the same roles and foisting upon them a universal or national experience, through Black feminist thought, Black women are viewed as individuals within a collective. The interdependence of Black womanhood does not negate individual social identities created through experience, culture, place, and other factors. My struggles as a Black woman are different than Clara and Alzadia Roberts' struggles, and yet our oppressions are connected, similar, symbiotic.

In addition, Black feminist thought welcomes emotionality. Feelings are justified and act as integral components to every process of being. Thus, developing a capacity for empathy is necessary to valuing and caring for both the individual and the collective. Poetic inquiry is a tool that I use to access this emotionality, to develop empathy for both the insider and outsider as a researcher, and to (re)present voices from stories of history.

The fourth and final dimension of black feminist thought is ethic of personal accountability. As a way of validating and sustaining knowledge, an ethic of personal accountability places responsibility on all individuals to validate their knowledge claims (Allen 2009). The knowledge gathered and sustained through lived experience, dialogue, and with an ethics of caring, is a reflection of the self.

In sum, these four dimensions create Black Feminist Thought, an epistemology which centers Black women's lives. All epistemology "lies as the heart of power" (Collins 2015, p. 2352), and this epistemology is used as a tool for empowerment. In this research, it serves as a framework for centering the experiences and voices of the women in my personal family story.

my lungs fill
claim what is mine
what was yours
how we go, become gone
breath by breath
this one
here
is yours and yours
let us testify, prophesy
of one another

5. Genealogy

James "Long Jim" Roberts was one of the earliest pioneers of Roberts Settlement.

Long Jim Roberts
had William Wright Roberts
who had Charlotte Roberts
who had Dovie Woods
who had Betty Woods
who had John Robert Peters
who had me.

This simplified family tree is a representation of my genealogical relations through time (Nash 2017), and yet is also represents a family history comprised of a family story or a series of stories (Langellier and Peterson 1993) that describe and even constitute our lives. The lines between genealogy and family history are not so clear, as genealogy often stands for personal and historical narratives blended with statistics of genealogy, such as birth date and death year (Nash 2017). Genealogy, then, is a rendering of the past that can be both empirically and narratively based. Through the above genealogy, which I only recently discovered, I see a particular interpretation of the past. Kretsedemas (2017) states,

Genealogies mobilize fragments of the past to conceptualize the present (which always presents itself as a problem), and this process is part and parcel of the way that a thing manages to endure—which can be understood, ultimately, as the problem of life itself: how will a thing continue to go about the precarious act of living? (p. 2).

How will I go about living? How does my understanding of that representation above influence my life? And how might offering a different representation of my genealogy change my perception of my family story, and indeed, my own life story. This is just as true:

Vinis

had a daughter-in-law, Mary Jane Brooks
 who had Charlotte Roberts
 who had Dovie Woods
 who had Betty Woods
 who had a daughter-in-law April Peters
 who had me.

This is both the same story and a different story. The family stories that comprise this second history might look, feel, taste, and be unlike the first. In naming only the women, I pull them from the margin to the center ([hooks 1952](#)). Their stories become the focal points of the family narrative.

6. Family Story

What we know of Roberts Settlement is largely based on stories—the stories pieced together by records, told by historians, genealogists, members and descendants of Roberts Settlement, and created through artifact and monument. Family stories have been studied as communicative acts that help maintain group cohesion and establish group and individual identity, ultimately reflecting a family's soul ([Kellas and Trees 2013](#)). Stories play a crucial role in reconstructing and remembering a family's legacy, because “family stories affect and reflect family culture by communicating who a family is, its norms, its values, its goals, its identity” ([Kellas 2005](#), p. 366). Stories then help define who we, the Roberts family and kin, are.

[Conkling \(1957\)](#) noted that the Roberts' values included formal manners and courtesy, status, cleanliness, education, and morality. He emphasized that the group's cohesion was key to their success. They utilized stories as a means of self-definition by which they continually delineated themselves as something other than White people, enslaved Black people, or free Black people. This sense of family status and separation helped define the Roberts as a family that was distinct both socially and racially.

Family can take on various definitions, depending on many factors, including culture, standpoint, and personal experience. Family of orientation encapsulates families made by choice; extended families describes families that extend to fictive or legal relatives beyond the immediate family; and family of origin characterizes “relatives who are connected by blood or traditional sociolegal contracts” ([Segrin and Flora 2011](#), p. 5). Roberts Settlement encapsulates many of these definitions of family. Legally and biologically, many members and descendants are considered family, and some members may be viewed as family by choice. In addition, many family members perceive meaningful ties and share a feeling of kinship or belonging, even where concrete ties may or may not exist.

whose kin are you
 what blood is yours
 may we believe
 in our blood
 without splitting
 ourselves open
 to prove anything
 how you sound
 and move
 like kin

Power

Stories are powerful, and they help allocate and perpetuate power dynamics within groups. For example, [Langellier and Peterson \(1993\)](#) posited that family stories can act as a form of social control. Family stories privilege and marginalize people, (re)construct meaning, and enforce and reify

aspects of the collective identity of a family. Family stories reflect and help define the power structures within families.

Families, like all groups, contain power dynamics. While there are many ways to view power, I will briefly focus on the construction of power in families via family roles and social exchange theory. First, power in families may be delegated through family roles. In patriarchal families and societies, more power is given to male figure-heads, including fathers, grandfathers than to females, solely based on the designation of their sex (Segrin and Flora 2011). In patriarchal societies, economic and legal standards regarding men and women reinforce to power dynamics within families. For example, in the 19th and 20th centuries the Roberts family men secured and utilized their power through the ability to obtain free papers, buy and sell land, and be counted as heads of houses in registration and census records. These rights reinforced their roles as family leaders.

am I here
here?

are we here?

Secondly, social exchange theory, developed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959), may be used to describe how relationships are oftentimes viewed in terms of costs and rewards. Power, then, is designated based on the allocation of costs and rewards. While some resources are social, others are materials, such as money and services (Segrin and Flora 2011, p. 70.) In the Roberts family, and in most families at the time, the goods and services, or work, provided by men had higher value than those provided by women. As a result, history, records, and stories more readily remember the work of men. This work included working the land, which has traditionally been assigned as a masculine task. In noting the hegemonic masculinity of rural landscapes, Little (2015) noted that

Constructs of wild, inhospitable, and remote landscapes as masculine are constantly pitched against the gentler and tamer feminine spaces of the accessible countryside and urban . . . (and) . . . Farm and other resource based employment, it is argued, reinforces traditional masculinity through its valorization of bodily strength and in the ways it associates skill and success with tasks requiring physical prowess" (p. 112).

In other words, the rural, unsettled landscape of Indiana's frontier reinforced hegemonic masculinity, which inherently positioned females as subordinate. The lived experiences of the women are then devalued, and the result is a production of knowledge in which they are marginalized.

remember when they tried
to lynch each and every
one of us remember
when we were
lynched and then lived
remember when they tried
to lynch the memory
from us
and lynch away their memory
of us
remember?

7. Race and Space in Indiana

During The Great Migration, some six million African Americans moved from the South to the North and West in the early twentieth century (Wilkerson 2010). Scholars have widely studied this migration and its effect on American life—a sampling of these works include those by Grossman (1989),

White et al. (2005), Weisenfeld (2016), and Baharian et al. (2016). However, less scholarship has investigated the waves of free Black people who traveled North during the mid-19th century, before The Great Migration (Rowe 2009); and the majority of that scholarship has detailed the lives of free Black people in urban areas (Vincent 1991). But many of these early Black sojourners did not settle in the urban areas typically associated with African American emancipation diaspora—Chicago, Detroit, New York City, Pittsburgh (Vincent 1999). Instead, they built small communities in the rural Midwest in the Southern Hills and Lowlands of Indiana, the Till Plains of Ohio, or the prairies of Iowa (Schwalm 2009). The Midwest was still a relatively new frontier. Plenty of land was for sale, slavery was illegal, and communities of Quakers and other anti-slavery populations made the social terrain desirable (Conkling 1957; Vincent 1999). Combined with the border state status of many Midwestern states, it becomes clear why free Blacks chose the Midwest when emigrating from the South (Rowe 2009). Due to Black migration in both the 19th and 20th centuries, many Black family histories, family stories, and genealogies are critically centered on an exodus from the South. For my family, on both sides, that exodus was to Indiana.

In my hometown, Bedford, Indiana, you cannot drive without passing walls of limestone protruding from hillsides. In autumn, the creamy white stones rest beneath the sprawling orange and red bursts of leaves. And in winter, icicles shaped like upside down pine trees hang on the stone ledges, mirroring stalagmites in nearby caves. There, the rolling hills, sinkholes, caves, and jutting rock create a scene known as Limestone Country (Sanders 1985). The limestone continues to physically, socially, and culturally shape communities. It seems fitting, then, that the most foundational element of Bedford is white, because Bedford's White population is an overwhelming 96%, and the Black population is less than 1% (United States Census Bureau 2016). As a Black woman who grew of age in that racial environment, I live every day with the cultural dissonance of being a Black woman whose racial performance does not meet the standards associated with authentic Blackness.

ain't I a (sister)
woman
too?

Butler (1988) widely applied scholarship on performativity describes the way in which identities are created and maintained through the repeated performances of regulatory ideas. In describing how bodies act as centers of performance, Butler illustrated how people speak, relate, behave, and live in ways that create identities, which fit into pre-existing categories such as gender and race (Salih 2002). In this way, we construct our identities through the "intensely racialized practice of communication" (Martin and Nakayama 2006, p. 76) and through our "everyday enactments of self" (Lengel and Warren 2005, p. 2). The result of learning how to enact myself, to "do" my race and my gender in Bedford, is that I am often left in a middling position. I am often viewed as not Black enough—in the cultural, performative sense—and yet I am still Black. I have been viewed as too White to be Black, but always too Black to be White. During our two-hour conversation, Bryan and I both mentioned the challenges of growing up Black in predominately White rural towns in Indiana.

but I am
a black woman
I know because
I woke up today
in this body
and did life
with it

I do not live in Bedford anymore. My parents made the mini migration three hours north back to their hometown in Kokomo, Indiana a few years ago. At the time, I did not consider how my ancestors, too, had migrated north, generations previously.

Between 1820 and 1850, at least 30 mixed-race settlements formed in rural Midwest, most them in the lower halves of Ohio and Indiana (Vincent 1999). Some fared better than others. For example, bordering Bedford's Lawrence County is Washington County. There, an early Black settlement formed, prospered, and then rapidly vanished.

Act one:

I am here

then I am not

Though over 200 African Americans were living in Washington county by 1850, by 1870, only 18 remained, and for a century after, the number of Black residents remained in the single digits (Kunecke 2014). The flight from Washington County occurred after a successful Black man was murdered and pro-slavery sentiments began to rise after the Emancipation Proclamation (Trueblood 1934).

Act two:

I never was

White residents made quick work of paving over their presence. "The successful crusade to drive African Americans away was followed by decades of erasing away any sign they had ever been there" (Kunecke 2014, para. 4). Stories like this—of Black settlements forming and then disappearing due to anti-Black sentiments—are not uncommon throughout the Midwest (Cravey 2014).

I think of my hometown and how improbable it is that I was raised there when the history of my people in the area is so grim. I lived there for almost two decades and never once heard about the early Black settlements that once existed nearby. That erasure is no mistake.

8. Roberts Settlement

Yet, amid this racial violence, farther north, a rural community of free people of color flourished—Roberts Settlement. To get there from my home in Kokomo, it takes a thirty-minute drive down US 31, with flat fields of corn extending on either side seemingly into the horizon. Unlike Washington County's erasure of its early Black community, here, a chapel still stands, a narrow white, building with a high steeple. Inside, a few rows of dark wooden pews with curved backs face a small stage with a simple wooden cross at its focal point. Behind the church, the family cemetery's varying stone graves demarcate generations of familial ties. Nearby, a recently installed historical marker tells the story of free people of color who settled here in the 1830s. Elijah Roberts, Hansel Roberts, Micaja Walden, and their families traveled from the South to central Indiana where they built a community that flourished to over 200 residents on 1700 acres of land (Indiana Historical Bureau 2016).

8.1. Racial Identification

The Roberts and the families that joined them—some surnames, being Rice, Winburn, and Gilliam—were multiracial people. They were people of color, for people of color encompassed "all negroes, Indians, mulattoes, and all persons of mixed blood, descended from negro and Indian ancestors, to the fourth generation inclusive" (Revised Code—No. 2015), but they were several generations removed from slavery and had lighter skin than most free Blacks at the time. Conkling (1957) noted, "That these people are classified as Negro at all well illustrates the American custom which places all persons having any Negro blood in a single category" (p. 17). Elijah Roberts' freedom papers deemed him mulatto, racializing him while distinguishing between his racial identity and those African Americans with darker skin. Additionally, some on the settlement had very little if any African ancestry and were descended from Native Americans (Vincent 2014, 1999).

is this cabbage with sausage & onion

& garlic & salt & pepper & butter or just

cabbage with sausage & onion
 how do you decide this is there
 but not enough to be named
 how do you make a name
 for a thing without the name
 of a thing in it

Shortly after arriving in Indiana, Long Jim wrote to his cousin, Willis Roberts, who was considering life again in the South. In the letter, Long Jim warned Willis of the dangers of such considerations (Vincent 1999). He described the position of free people of color in the South as “trapped in between two fires” (Vincent 2014, para. 2). They lived neither as free as White people, nor as oppressed as enslaved Black people. And it seemed that the two groups of people and their struggles only interfered with their lives. Historians and descendants have repeatedly noted the uniqueness of the Roberts and their kin, as people of color with privilege in such trouble times (Vincent 1999).

Like me, the Roberts occupied a middling position. While my Blackness is questioned based on cultural expectations of performance, their multiracial identities were questioned based on cultural perceptions of phenotype and legal definitions. Today, we would most likely not identify the early Roberts settlers as Black, though they were identified and self-identified as Black at times throughout history. They exemplify the fluidity of racial categories and their changing definitions over time (Martin and Nakayama 2006, p. 76).

8.2. Racial Passing

Within the settlement, the Roberts had a distinct racial and cultural identity, but when they moved away, they were forced to take on either a Black racial identity or a White racial identity. While the later generations intermarried with darker free Black people and changed the family phenotype, the early Roberts were so light in complexion that many could and did pass for White, some permanently so (Conkling 1957). Passing for White was a feat of “complex self-invention” (Berry 2015, p. xxiii), and it often meant cutting ties with the settlement and family to avoid being discovered by affiliation (Vincent 1999). Conkling (1957) noted the difficulty in finding even basic information about members of the Roberts family who passed for White, since the process of becoming White required them to sever ties with their family at the settlement, (he even kept their identities anonymous when discussing them).

The stakes of passing were extremely high. Whole families at times had to move away from their longtime home to protect the identities of children who were passing. Dolphin Roberts III was enrolled in medical school in Kentucky until his racial identity was discovered and he was dismissed. Another Roberts man earned degrees in chemistry from Purdue University and University of Chicago while passing for White. When his identity was in danger of being discovered, he retired back to Roberts Settlement and took on his racialized identity once more (Conkling 1957).

The first time I looked through photographs of the Roberts family I squinted in search of any pigment on their serious faces. In some of the pictures, the white of their skin matches the overexposed rendering of their starched, white collars; their hair is straight and slicked back. In others, I see the cool tan of their skin, the curl of their hair, and in some, their skin is as dark as mine.

9. The Family Beginning

The beginning of the story is a phone call to my mom that I make every day. Today, I am asking for a bit of Black history to post on my Facebook wall, as I have been striving to do every day of Black History Month in 2017. I have posted about the Gullah–Geechee Ring Shouters of McIntosh County, Angela Davis’ talk at a nearby university, Ashley Bryan, the author and artist, and Sam & Dave, the R&B/Soul duo. The pressure to post something educational, meaningful, and obscure is already mounting, and it is only the sixth day.

“What about that settlement?” Mom asks.

“What settlement?”

“You know that settlement that your grandma’s family was a part of. It’s really close to your sister’s.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I say.

We spend the next few minutes gathering information from various sources online until we find the name: Roberts Settlement. I click on the website and become immersed in a story that I have never encountered, and yet, is somehow my own.

The beginning of the story is also Northhampton County, North Carolina. It is Anne Damron whose birth year and death date we do not know. It is her marriage to James Roberts and the nine children she bore: James, Jonathan, Kinchen, William, Elias, Watson, Claxton, John, and Charles.

It is Anne’s son, Elias, born in 1767. It is the wife of Elias whose name history has not remembered. It is the 5 children she bore, including Long Jim Roberts, my great-great-great-great grandfather ([Roberts Settlement n.d. n.d.](#)). And it is all the women who loved their children into life. It is their kin. This is the beginning, as it always is, a woman.

The Roberts family had definite privilege over free Black people, as James Roberts, the family patriarch, born in 1734, was a landowner who passed on a sizable family farm to his sons. ([Allen et al. 2013](#)). Though they were still oppressed because of their racialized identities, they leveraged what social capital they had, even intermixing with White people at times ([Conkling 1957](#)). Eventually economic and racial tensions drove them to the long trek from North Carolina to the new frontier.

we wear maps on our skin
this one says I may go
when I can I may leave
and become/make a new
landscape of myself

Many of their kin moved in the years following, into the mid-1830s, as racial relations in the South rapidly deteriorated. This was in part because in 1831, Nat Turner led one of the largest slave revolts in history ([Allen et al. 2013](#)). In October, after two months of hiding, Nat Turner was captured. ([Allmendinger 2014](#)). Turner knew that he would soon “atone at the gallows” ([Gray et al. 1831](#), p. 7) for his deeds, joining his followers who had already been killed. During a 36-hour insurrection, he and 60 slaves and free Black people killed at least 55 White people, including 10 men, 14 women, and 31 children ([Allmendinger 2014](#)). While violence against Black people was commonplace, violence of this scale against White women and children was unprecedented.

white women
do you die
better, harder than me?
do your babies
die worse, softer
than mine?

Turner told Gray that God had led him to revolt and had even endowed him with visions, one in which “white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle . . . and blood flowed in streams” ([Allmendinger 2014](#), p. 17).

how that
blood in Virginia
ran, seeped,
wept into North Carolina

Turner admitted to knowing nothing of the slave revolt in North Carolina when Gray questioned him (Gray et al. 1831), most likely because there was no insurrection of which to know. White people, caught up in mass paranoia after hearing the news of Turner's rebellion only a few miles away, formed mobs in both Virginia and North Carolina, murdered several slaves, and falsely accused, arrested, tried, and executed others (Allmendinger 2014). Governor Monfort Stokes of North Carolina wrote to Governor James Hamilton of South Carolina in the following month of November, stating, "There has been no insurrection of slaves in North Carolina . . . I am afraid, that among the negroes condemned and executed, some . . . were innocent" (1831).

In the aftermath of the insurrection, what little goodwill existed between the White elite and their racialized neighbors plummeted. The blood of White women and children enticed White men to vigilante and legal justice. Slave codes tightened across the South. These regulations ordered the lives of both enslaved and free people of color (Williams 2012, p. 121). In Virginia, the new slave code required free people of color be tried, convicted, and punished in the same manner as slaves (Chp. XXII). North Carolina also revised its codes.

Be it enacted
that each and every
negro mulatto or
person of colour
be

Among a litany of mandates, the code required that: an iron collar to be put on runaway slaves when hired out; no slaves were to go armed with any weapon; no slaves were to leave a master's plantation without written permission; no slaves were to teach another to read; no Negroes were to meet for the purpose of dancing without written permission; no slaves or people of color were to preach in public or teach in any prayer meeting; no free negro or mulatto was to migrate into the state; free people of color were not be vagrants; no free negro or person of color was to intermarry or cohabit with a slave; and free negroes and people of color were not to gamble with slaves or have them to their houses at certain times (Revised Code—No. 105).

don't speak
don't sing
don't preach
don't dance
don't

Free people of color, especially, were under greater scrutiny than before, because free Black people had taken part in Turner's revolt. Having lived before the change in slave codes, free people of color struggled to adjust to their newer, more precarious positions. An author for the *Niles Register*, a weekly register in Virginia predicted that "years, perhaps, must pass away before the people in the lower county of the south will feel that same confidence in the security of their wives and little ones . . ." (1831).

and what of my
blood
who live
as well
in fear?

10. A Growing Settlement

When Hansel, Elijah, and Micajah bought the land that would begin Roberts Settlement in 1835, they were in relative isolation. In 1830, the population of Indiana was less than 175,000, and most people were in the Southern part of the state near the Ohio River (Conkling 1957). Roberts Settlement grew with the newly formed hoosier state, with the incoming populations of both White and Black settlers, and with the rapidly shifting political, economic, and technological changes of the time. The settlement saw the railroad come to Indiana, the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. Some families remained on the settlement past both World Wars.

Racial Climate

While their position as free people of color in the North was better than living between the “two fires” of the South, the Roberts did leave behind their race or racial tensions in North Carolina. If anything, in Indiana, they had to simultaneously perfect and rework their performance of race. A new space, as they often do for us all, led to a new understanding of themselves and themselves in relation to others. Vincent (2014) reported how

“In 1841, a black settler in southern Hamilton County was kidnapped and sold into slavery; two years later abolitionist Frederick Douglass was severely beaten by an angry mob when he attempted to speak in Pendleton, twenty-five miles from Roberts Settlement” (Vincent 2014, para. 3).

Moreover, at the height of their prosperity, in 1851, the Indiana Constitution disallowed any “negro or mulatto” coming into the state, complete with articles that set fines for the violation and designated that the money be used to send Black people from Indiana to Liberia (In.gov 1851).

Through this, the Roberts strategically aligned themselves at times with other free Black people and with neighboring White people, choosing when and how to leverage their racial identities (Vincent 1999). They intermarried and conducted business with nearby mixed-race Beech Settlement, where many of their kin lived. Some Roberts members took active roles in the underground railroad (Conkling 1957), leading escaped slaves to safety. At times the Roberts children went to school with White students, as well. And the community had ties with both the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Wesleyan church (Conkling 1957; Vincent 1999).

All praise to our redeeming Lord,
who joins us by his grace,
and bids us, each to each restored,
together seek his face.

He bids us build each other up;
and, gathered into one,
to our high calling's glorious hope
we hand in hand go on.

(Wesley 1983)

The settlement grew as more families came North, bought land, and settled nearby and with them. The residents built a church and a school, and these institutions were at the center of their rural way of life (Conkling 1957). At the height of its growth in the mid-19th century, Roberts Settlement was home to some two hundred people who lived in log cabins, farmed, and lived a simple yet unusually prosperous lives.

Eventually, economic and social pressures caused the settlement to decline in the late 19th and 20th centuries. The price of farmland, overcrowding, high mortality rate, and search of better opportunity all contributed to more and more Roberts and kin moving away from the settlement. The Great Migration was beginning to draw Black people out of the South to bigger cities, where they were reshaping the racial politics of the North, and many Roberts were drawn to city life over the grueling work of 1800s farm life (Conkling 1957). Some residents moved on to lives outside of the settlement,

many moving to cities to become doctors, educators, and preachers in Black, White, and integrated spheres (Vincent 1999). Eventually, no one lived on the settlement anymore. The place was home and then it was not. The school was torn down, as were the log cabins. The old Roberts cemetery became overgrown and unkempt (Conkling 1957).

Residents of Roberts Settlement died of old age and other causes, and then those whose parents and grandparents lived on the settlement began passing away as well. The history was preserved in some family lines but completely erased or forgotten in others. In my family, the history was dangerously close to being lost, until just a few months ago. Now, I feel a responsibility to preserve this knowledge, as so many before me have worked to do.

11. Roberts Women

Throughout the history of the Roberts family, though the men's work is the most heavily recorded, the Roberts women worked equally as hard to maintain their way of life. Rugged farm life in the 1800s required a lifetime of work from everyone involved. Initially, when the men bought the land and were working to clear the forest to create farmland, the women stayed behind, took care of the families alone and prepared for the move (Conkling 1957).

we too bought with our labor
with our bodies we paid
in full are full
with paying still

When the women joined the men at the cleared land, they helped build homes and tend to the land on which they were completely dependent. The women helped with farming, especially during harvest, while also caring for their children, cooking meals, making clothes, soap, blankets, and other essential items for their everyday life (Conkling 1957).

Vincent noted that when the men of the settlement died, their wives maintained the family estate until all of their children had reached the age of majority. When Elijah Roberts, Wade Roberts, John Roads, Axsum Swear, Guilford Brooks, Dennison White, and Stephen Roberts died between 1848 and 1868, their wives, whose names are not listed, kept their farms going (1999).

Out of about 20 pages of accomplishments listed of the Roberts and their kin—including those who went on to be judges, lawyers, teachers, civic leaders, principals, administrators, scientists, and doctors—Conkling (1957) only mentions a few women who were teachers on the settlement: Maude Roberts, Elizabeth Rice, and Almary Roberts. Conkling also recorded a story of a Roberts woman whose son simply vanished from the settlement one day, mostly like to pass for White. Later, on a train, she thought she saw him again but could not approach him, because it might have exposed him for a person a color, and she lived the rest of her days in mourning (1957).

Other bits and pieces of the Roberts women can be scrounged from letters of correspondence between members of the settlement and their kin:

“Well Long James Roberts I may inform you that your sister Polly has been very poorly with a wind on her neck but the doctor has cut it and she is much on the mend.”

—Ransom Roberts to Long Jim Roberts, 28 April 1832 (Roberts 1832)

“Christmas is over with us and I have not heard of any accidents happening to any of our family except Cherry Roberts. She has had the misfortune to get in the family way and if it was not too short a time when she will have it, it might be laid to you or Elias as you were there so much and I could not have your company.”

—Hansel Roberts to Willis Roberts, 9 January 1831 (Roberts 1831)

“Your mother is in tolerable health at this time except pains and old age and remember her to you all.”

—Richard Roberts to Anthony Roberts, 6 September 1833 ([Roberts 1833](#))

I wonder what other stories, accomplishments, tragedies, and celebrations happened in the lives of these women. I wonder about how they raised children and how they slept at night when tuberculosis hit the settlement. I wonder how many of their sisters, brothers, and aunts they lost who permanently passed the color line. I wonder about those who passed the color line. When did they realize they were light enough? What did it feel like when they first entered a previously forbidden White space?

In the car with my mother on the way to my sister’s house, we pass the settlement. I let my imagination free, hoping that a daydream with enough detail, color, and vibrancy might for a second be true to the experiences of one of these women.

12. Homecoming

remember when we
were born and when
we became
and how we
are still becoming?

In African American Christian culture, funerals are called homegoings. At homegoings, large numbers of people, families and communities, real and imagined, meet to mourn and celebrate lives together ([Rosenblatt and Wallace 2005](#)). At homegoings, I marvel at the sense of community I feel and at how quickly *is* turns to *was*, the ease with which we become permanently past tense.

Act 1:

I am here
then I am not
I am Charlotte
I am Clara
I am Minnie
I am Dovie
I am Lucille
I am Kessiah

Act 2:

I always will be

Many Roberts descendants may not be socially or geographically close enough to attend each other’s homegoings, but many do celebrate homecomings. This diverse, multigenerational community has been meeting on Roberts Settlement since 1924 ([Indiana Historical Society 2016](#)). The small white chapel that was so central to life on the settlement becomes a meeting place once again. And unlike a homegoing, a homecoming is a joyous occasion.

I too will go home for this year’s homecoming. It will be my first time meeting Roberts descendants from near and far. Though we will remember our ancestors and honor their lives, the gendered power of family stories will continue to shape our knowledge and collective identity. We will talk of James and Willis, and I will speak of Anna and Mary Jane. Though the historical marker names Hansel, Elijah, and Micajah, I will name Dovie, Vani, and Rachel. If the stories descendants tell shape the family culture and its identity ([Kellas and Trees 2013](#)), I will tell the forgotten stories about the lived experiences of the women from whom we all came.

13. Conclusions

The remembrance of Roberts Settlement often begins with key male figures; however, the women of the Roberts family genealogy and history played large roles in producing and sustaining life on the settlement and beyond. In reclaiming their lived experiences in this small way, I aim to provide a clearer, fuller family history that works to empower the women of color whom it describes.

Roberts Settlement was a unique place in which the Roberts family enjoyed financial success and security in a time when many African Americans did not. Their marked prosperity and self-sufficiency (Vincent 1999) along with their close-knit and far-reaching kinship ties has created a rich family history that descendants use as a means of connection through annual homecomings.

There, on the same land on which Ruth raised her children and cooked food and harvested chicken eggs, there on the same land on which Nancy washed her best dress and pressed her hair for Sunday service, there where Eldora worked, where Priscilla became a girl and then a woman is where descendants from across the US meet again. Each year, they remember. They eat. They do their lives together, however briefly, as their ancestors once did. The genealogy of the Roberts family and the richness of our family history lives on through descendants, including me, who will not forget the labor of the women who, through every stage of the family history, have contributed significantly to the building of our family legacy.

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