New Kid on the Block

—JOANNE VEAL GABBIN

Everything I needed to know about negotiating the streets of the academy I learned when I was four. Well, almost everything . . . My family and I had just moved from 2019 East Chase Street in a predominately black neighborhood in East Baltimore to 1804 North Broadway in a neighborhood that was in transition from white to black. We were the first black family on the block of this tree-lined boulevard that the internationally known Johns Hopkins Hospital had made famous. My parents were proud of our three-story, red-brick row house with ornamental marble facades and marble steps. On any given day, my mother would be outside with her pail, scrub brush, and scouring stone making the blue-veined marble steps gleam. On one such day, after she had cleaned the steps and swept the sidewalk, she dressed me in one of those frilly little girl dresses with the crinoline attached, plaited my hair and put a pink ribbon on the top braid, and sat me on the front steps. Soon I moved from the steps to the tree in front of the house. It was not long before a little white boy came out of his house only two doors up the street from mine. He was taller than I was, with short brown hair and short pants. I was happy to see another child that I could play with, so when he came close to the tree, I said, "Hi, what's your name?" He said simply, "Wait right there."

I thought in my excitement at meeting the new boy that he had gone back into his house to get a toy or perhaps some candy that we could share. So when he returned with his hands behind his back and a curious smile lighting up his face, I could not have seen the metal pipe that he took from

behind his back and crashed into my head. It was hours later, when I awoke with a concussion at Johns Hopkins Hospital, that my mother and father told me what had happened. My head was bandaged, and I saw the blood-spattered pink and white dress on the chair next to the curtain petition. Daddy stood at the foot of the bed. I remember that his eyes were red and the lines in his forehead were deep and wrinkled. Mama rubbed my arm and squeezed my hand over and over again. Then we went home.

Shortly after the incident the boy's family moved from the house. I never saw the boy again, so I could not ask him why he had hurt me. Nothing more came of it. My parents never thought about filing a lawsuit. It was 1950, and they had not expected redress or justice. I healed, but the scar remains on a portion of my scalp where hair doesn't grow.

In 1969 when I realized that I wanted to go to graduate school, it did not occur to me that there would be any barriers that I could not scale. I did not have money to pay tuition; I had not been accepted into a graduate program; I did not even know where my education would lead me if I accomplished the other steps. However, I was determined to attend and convinced that I would be successful.

Perhaps my confidence issued from the optimism of an age in which idealistic men and women sought to better their society by holding it accountable to its Constitution. Perhaps my determination lay in my awareness that enough people had suffered and sacrificed to allow me and others like me equal access to education. Or maybe my youth convinced me that there was time enough to try this new experiment called graduate school. Whatever my reasons, I proceeded to the office of the secretary of the English department at the University of Chicago and said, "I want to go to school. Could you help me?"

A kind, officious woman by the name of Catherine Ham was on the receiving end of this question. She had worked at the University of Chicago for many years and had rarely encountered a black student in an advanced program in literature and languages. She was aware of the uneasy truce that existed between the university and the black people who lived in the communities bordering Hyde Park. She understood better than most the great psychological distance between those privileged, well-heeled intellectuals at the University of Chicago and the people who resided just across the Midway Pliasance in Woodlawn. Like many other whites from the

university, she avoided Woodlawn where burned-out buildings and business establishments evidenced the self-destructive fury that was unleashed just a year earlier in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King. The Black Peace Stone Nation ran Woodlawn; led by Jeff Stone, they controlled their turf just as surely as Richard Daley held reigns over the political and economic affairs of the rest of Chicago. I am not certain that any of this had any bearing on her response to me, but when I left her office I had her assurance that I would be admitted to the M.A. program in English with a full academic scholarship.

When I enrolled at the university in September of 1969, I was eager to learn and even more concerned about proving that what I was doing was relevant. "Relevant," that was an important word in the late sixties because so many of us carried with us the weight of being "firsts," and with that came the uncomfortable realization that we could not betray or forget those blacks who had paid very dearly for the benefits that we were reaping. The Little Rock Nine and Daisy Bates, the Greensboro students who endured the harassment and violence of hostile whites in nonviolent sit-ins, the Freedom Riders who rode from Alabama to Mississippi amid the threats of beatings and fire bombings were carried with me as I entered those classrooms where I studied Mark Twain with Hamlin Hill and made Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw a part of my vocabulary because of the incomparable teaching of Elder Olson. My already tortured sense of double consciousness received another jolt when shortly after I began my studies Fred Hampton, Mark Clark, and the members of the Black Panthers were brutally murdered in a predawn raid masterminded by the state attorney's police. The realization of these and other sacrifices kept me humble and vigilant.

I soon discovered that some professors did not know what to make of me. After my first semester, one man who acted as my academic adviser asked, "Why aren't you having trouble here?" His question not only registered his curiosity about my better-than-average performance but also his dismay. All that he knew about the superior education boasted by the university, all the assumptions that he harbored about the limited ability of black students from small, historically black institutions were being upset by what he saw as a troubling exception. Unfortunately, his myopia would not allow him to realize that I was not an exception. I had simply gotten a

good education at Morgan State College where my professors were excellent teachers and scholars. Nick Aaron Ford, who headed the English department at Morgan, was a noted critic of African American literature. Waters Turpin, who taught me the poetry of the Romantics, was a respected novelist and chronicled the lives of blacks living on the eastern shore of Maryland. I was also taught by Ulysses Lee who, along with Sterling A. Brown and Arthur P. Davis, edited the groundbreaking anthology *Negro Caravan*. Eugenia Collier and Ruthe Sheffey, challenging teachers, were making names for themselves as critics and scholars in the field of African American literature. This kind of education was outside of his understanding, and it was much easier to dismiss me, as well as my academic background, as a perplexing aberration.

In truth, the university was no less perplexed by the question of what to do with its black faculty. Its temporary answer to the problem of attracting black scholars was to bring one or two in for a semester or year. At the end of their visit these scholars would return to their colleges, and the host department would congratulate itself for having a black in its faculty, without making a long-term commitment to black scholarship. This certainly would have been the case for George E. Kent, the man who became my mentor, had it not been for a fortuitous string of events. George Kent had come to the University of Chicago in 1969 as a visiting scholar from Quinnipiac College in Hamden, Connecticut. His classes on the Harlem Renaissance, Wright, Baldwin, and Ellison, Faulkner, the writers of the Black Arts Movement drew students from all over the campus. His strong commitment to Black literature and his insistence that it must be seen in light of its ability to bear the full weight of Western culture and the Black folk tradition encouraged in me a deep respect for the discipline.

Therefore, when I heard that Professor Kent was nearing the end of his stay and realized that no one had offered him the option of remaining at the university, I was disturbed. I demanded to know why this man with impeccable academic credentials was not being considered for a full-time position at the university. After talking with the head of the English department, I knew that I was powerless alone to persuade him or the rest of the faculty to offer a position to George Kent. So I organized a petition campaign in which I got signatures from black students all over the campus. It really did not matter that they were not students in English. I convinced

students in the medical school, in business, history, religion, and social work that signing the petition would send a message to the administration that blacks demanded a serious commitment to black studies and to a black presence at the university. Needless to say when I met with the English department with petition in hand, we students prevailed. George Kent was offered the position of full professor with tenure. Now there would be a permanent scholar in Afro-American literature, making serious scholarship in the field possible.

This was the real beginning of my education at the University of Chicago. I began to take charge of my own learning. Although there was no black studies curriculum, I decided that I would be the architect of my own. Although the English department faculty suggested that I confine my study to courses in literature, I took courses from two outstanding black scholars who taught at the University of Chicago. I had a memorable class with historian John Hope Franklin, who taught a class in the Antebellum South. I remember this man, author of the monumental study, *From Slavery to Freedom*, coming into the class with a stack of legal pad pages. He would sit down and proceed to talk for an hour without one reference to his notes. With the most obscure dates at hand and with an uncanny grasp of the nuances of the psychology of the South, he held us spellbound with his insights. I also took a seminar with theologian Charles Long, whose classes were an incredible mix of sermonettes, homiletics, camp meeting drama, and hermeneutics. His witty and challenging style, combined with the energy produced by my fellow students such as Jeremiah Wright, McKinley Young, and Homer Ashley, made the class a model of what a courageous teacher could do when he or she trusted in the potential that resides in every classroom.

However, without a doubt, George Kent was the greatest influence on my development as a scholar. Under his mentorship I studied Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Sterling A. Brown. He not only encouraged me to read widely in the field of African American literature and folklore, but he also exposed me to the dynamic world of writing and publishing that flourished in Chicago during the late sixties. Through Kent I met Gwendolyn Brooks, the renowned poet laureate of Illinois; poet Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti), the founder and editor of *Third World Press*; Hoyt Fuller, the editor of *Black World*; Lerone Bennett, popular

historian and writer for *Black World*; and poet Margaret Burroughs, then curator for the Du Sable Museum. I found myself in the midst of a New Black Renaissance where artists, musicians, poets, and political theorists came together to produce an outpouring of literature that affirmed Black life and culture.

My forays outside the classroom inevitably led me to another kind of school, Operation Breadbasket, now called PUSH. Along with hundreds of other Chicagoans, I went each Saturday morning to a renovated synagogue to hear Jesse L. Jackson, the charismatic leader known as the "Country Preacher." As he intoned his "I Am Somebody" battle cry, those of us in the audience stood a little straighter and believed, at least for that moment, in the vision of this man who knew intimately of black struggle. "I am—black—beautiful—proud—I must be respected—I must be protected—I am—God's child." Whether he made parallels between Moses and Dr. King or talked about the patterns of sacrifice and nurture of black women, each Saturday we were convinced again and again of his extraordinary ability to articulate our most private pain, our fears, and our most expansive hopes and expectations.

It was also during this period that I got my first opportunity to teach. The civil rights movement of the sixties, the martyrdom of King and Medgar Evers and others, the national rage at rights long withheld and promises long unkept had begun to open many doors in the early seventies. One such door was to Roosevelt University. Students there were now clamoring for courses in black literature. I, a newly made M.A. in English, was hired to teach a course called "Revolutionary Self-Conscious Literature." Never having taught before, I found myself in a classroom telling my students—many of whom were older and far wiser than I—about the anger that was endemic in the works of Amiri Baraka, the principles of the Black Arts Movement espoused by Ron Karenga, and the works of struggle written by activists from Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X. While teaching at Roosevelt, I invited Gwendolyn Brooks to read her poetry. It was then that I learned that in 1962 Frank London Brown had tried to get her a teaching position at Roosevelt. Apparently, Roosevelt had considered her, had her fill out application papers, and then denied her the position on the grounds that she did not have a degree. This revelation led me to vow that no mat-

ter where I taught, I would invite Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize, to share her many gifts.

What I learned during my first years as a student at the University of Chicago provided me a lifetime of insights. I was one of the first fruits of the civil rights struggle, which opened the nation's universities to black scholarship. Never before, and unfortunately never since, were so many talented black students enrolled in graduate studies. I sensed even then that I was a pioneer, that what I learned, what I wrote, what I taught would have some significance.

Once I completed my course work and comps for the Ph.D., I achieved that expectant status called ABD. I was ready to take on a full-time position as an assistant professor. It was 1972 and the first crop of black scholars who had integrated the nation's universities was on the job market. At Chicago State University, students had protested the absence of black professors to teach Black literature courses. I am certain that my hiring was a direct result of their efforts. I came into an English department where I was the only black teacher. I developed the curriculum for a survey of black literature course, questioned the lack of inclusion of black authors in the American literature courses, and urged my colleagues to change the composition book that had no readings by anyone black with the exception of Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery.*

Although I had a real sense of accomplishment in this position, my tenure there was often disappointing. Colleagues appeared threatened by my relationship with the black students. They were suspicious of my meetings with them after classes. I knew that these students were excited to meet with me because I shared their culture and circumstance. I was a first-generation college student who modeled the success they saw for themselves. I was young and understood their rage. However, my colleagues read more into our meetings than was necessary. Where there should have been collegiality there were fear and suspicion. Because my colleagues had never had to think about mentoring a new black faculty member, they didn't. Not long after my first full semester, I really felt the disconnect with the department when one of my older students told me that he was surprised that I had accepted several thousands of dollars less than the department was prepared to pay me. Of course, that piece of information didn't help my

attitude. In hindsight, I realized that my studies did not prepare me for the politics that are a part of the academy.

When I began teaching at Lincoln University in 1977, I realized how fierce academic politics could be, even on the bucolic campus of the oldest black college in the nation. In the opening faculty meeting, Gladys Willis, the first black woman to graduate in English from Princeton and the newly appointed head of the English department, and I, her newest faculty member, became scapegoats in a nasty battle between the faculty and the president, Herman Branson. In retaliation for his threatened faculty entrenchment, the majority of the integrated faculty called for our resignation, and we had not yet set foot in our classrooms. The tumultuous times that followed could have broken the strongest resolve, but I knew that if I faltered and allowed political wrangling to break me, then I would not be able to raise my head to teach these students who needed what I had to offer. I taught at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania for eight years, developing the first courses in black literature and journalism, organizing a lecture series that brought Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, and others to the campus, and founding the Langston Hughes Cultural Arts Festival in 1980. It turned out to be a good place to grow culturally. Nothing came easy but the mission became the reward. My husband, Alexander, and I began a long teaching career together and Jessea, our daughter, grew up in the halls where Langston Hughes, Melvin Tolson, Saunders Redding, and Kwame Nkrumah had studied and new eager students were dreaming of a promising education.

In 1985, fifteen years after I took my first teaching job, I was again the new black kid on the block. As an associate professor with a Ph.D. degree from the University of Chicago, a recently published book on Sterling Brown, and several years of teaching behind me, I joined the faculty of the English department at James Madison University. I should have been suspicious when all thirty-seven members of the faculty showed up for my interview. I learned later that some of them resented the fact that the provost of the university had actively sought to recruit me, an African American scholar, to the all-white department. At the first department meeting, I came early enough to get a seat on the next to the last row in the classroom. Not long after I had taken my seat, a faculty member who reeked of cigarette smoke and bourbon came into the classroom and said to his

colleagues trailing him, "Let's go to the Jim Crow section." I was not prepared for such outright rudeness, but I remained silent. I was outnumbered. However, just before the meeting began, this same man shouted to the faculty members scurrying to find a seat, "Come on back here with us niggers." Well, that was enough. I stood up and cornered him. With years of rage that I had successfully contained, I lashed out at him, "If you ever say anything like that again in my presence, you will not only need a lawyer, you'll need a doctor." From that point on until he left the department, he took a wide berth around me. And others in the department were put on notice that this black woman would fight.

From a young girl, I knew the crashing sound of racism. However, many years of studying and teaching in the university have given me armor that protects me against a system that is still not fully open and egalitarian. I continue to offer my students a welcome, a green-tree lined street to discover literature. For the academy offers the best hope for a forum to advance reason and intellect to heal a divided society and a tense and dangerous world. I am ever mindful of the many children, the students, and the courageous adults who refused to stay in their places and thus made a place for me in the academy. My teaching is a daily testament to them.