

Learning to See: A Reflection on Intergenerational Experiences

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When I first came into the SIS Oral History class, I had little idea of what to expect. I expected to come away with a respect for oral stories and that I might even learn how to go about listening for them thoughtfully. Although not a required one, it was a class that I knew would be essential for any really thoughtful writing I might want to do in the future, as I hope to do research and journalism. I was secure in that this class would help me appreciate and develop an attentiveness for those stories that were not written, a legacy. I am a part of as a descendent of African slaves. What never crossed my mind, however, was the people. I did not really think thoughtfully about the sources from whence those stories might come. The elders, in particular, held no place in my thoughts.

With this class, I have come into much more than ideology and methodology. I have learned to see. Before, I think my appreciation for the oral story was too heavily rooted in what I could do with it, trying as I am to always work towards research and writing that will look good for graduate school. This is not to say that I was without empathy in my listening, but I was without stillness. In this current stage of my life, I often feel that I always am and always should be prepping for some obscure future. So, it is in those times when I am invited into moments of history and into the story of one's life that I am empowered with the ability to enjoy my present and more imaginatively contemplate my future.

I will share some things I have seen. My eyes have come to know the face of Erin Goseer Mitchell, an elder whose light frame and bright personality showed me that grace is not solely tied to youth, and whose book *Born Colored: Life Before Bloody Sunday* granted me some insight into the peacefulness and strength of African-American communities prior to one of the most volatile points in the nation's history.

And I have had the blessing to look upon the face of Mrs. Callie Terrell, a centenarian with beautiful hair and a wonderful sense of humor whose love of her family and friends have blessed me with wisdom and warm laughter.

I have also learned to be attentive to the faces around me, seeing those elder teachers, archivists, lunch ladies, and janitors on my campus with a greater desire to know them.

I can also speak of loss. There are many things that I did not get to experience in taking this class. There were lost experiences to travel and worship with other elder Black women, and losing a grandparent during this pandemic has made my ears all the sharper, more wanting of that time and stillness that elders with their wisdom can give. So, I am grateful for the women like Mrs. Mitchell and Mrs. Terrell that took the time to sit and share with me, for they remind me that I am still a collector of salvaged things. Their stories and mine will survive this moment and any future to come.

The difference in my looking for the story now is that I have a fuller understanding of why I want them. I have learned that I am looking for wisdom and stillness and glimpses into history that might inform the path I walk. The experience of the elder is one that is tied to history, to culture, and to phenomenal women with whose lined faces, all with their differing shades of brown, and whose knowledge root me in all planes of time. Past, present, and future.