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Becoming OpianChocTaliRican: A Black Man in a Multiracial World

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BECOMING OPIANCHOCTALIRICAN: A BLACK MAN IN A MULTIRACIAL WORLD

by

MICHAEL GERALD WILLIAMS

(Under the Directions of Ming Fang He)

ABSTRACT

This inquiry explores my journey of understanding my multiracial identity. Being multiracial by heritage, but identified and labeled Black socially and governmentally, contradicts my racial identities. Who am I? What am I? These are the questions that have plagued the back of my mind as I become multiracial, more accurately, Opianchoctalirican. I am mixed with racial heritages, partially Ethiopian, partially Native American, partially Italian, and partially Puerto Rican. I am OpianChocTaliRican.

Theoretically, I draw upon many theorists' work on the fluidity, complexity, and dynamics of racial identities (e.g., Baldwin, 2008; Bhabha, 2004; Coates, 2015; Fanon, 2004, 2008; Gaztembide-Fernandez, 2009; Ibrahim, 2014; Janis, 2016; Maalouf, 2012). I also draw upon a wide array of works on fluidity, complexity, and dynamics of multiracial identities outside the field of curriculum studies (e.g., Daniel, 2002; Gay, 1995; Korgen, 2010; Root, 1992, 1996; Spencer, 1999, 2006, 2011; Zack, 1995). These theorists dive into the identity issues of multiracial and mixed heritages in positive supportive ways while questioning the tenets of multiracial identity theory. Based upon my memories, I use fiction and poetry to represent my journey of understanding my racial identities in the world from kindergarten to my career as an educator with the intent to capture the contradictions, miscommunications, and misunderstandings about mixed race individuals.

Diving into my multiracial experience, I have made ten discoveries: (1) Multiracial identity, such as OpianChocTaliRican, is a complex issue that cannot be ignored due to its

pervasiveness in society. (2) Multiracial identity, that goes far beyond racial categorizations, is an act of continual becoming (Ibrahim, 2014). (3) There exists a natural yearning or desire to fit in or belong. (4) Recognizing and being comfortable with one's own mixed heritages fosters positive social interactions and cultivates a more peaceful society as opposed to violent and murderous one (Maalouf, 2012). (5) Fixation on phenotypes, colors, and race perpetuates the killing of Black bodies and other violence. (6) Since Black people tend to form collective bonds due to common struggles as a people (hooks, 1992), could mixed peoples also build bonds based upon their common struggles? (7) The notion of double consciousness can be expanded to multiracial consciousness for "triumvirate mental diaspora" where a multiracial person's thinking exceeds a dualistic way of thinking about the mixed identities beyond race and place. (8) OpianChocTaliRican is the race I have created for myself because my racial background is rooted in Ethiopian, Choctaw Native American, Italian, and Puerto Rican heritages. (9) Researching or writing about multiracial experiences evokes complexity and contradiction. (10) Diverse forms of inquiry and modes of expression, such as memoirs, fiction, and poetry, represent the experience of becoming multiracial.

INDEX WORDS: Multiracial, Multiethnic, Multi-race Bi-racial, Mixed Race, Identity Theory, Narrative Inquiry, Memoir, Fiction, Poetry

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DEDICATION

To my great grandmother, Edna Mae

To my great grandmother, Almary

To my grandmother, Katie Mae

To my grandfather, Joe D

To my mother, Geraldine

To my wife, Michelle

Each of you magnetizes my moments of multiracial recognition.

You place me in the folds of physical love and spiritual discernment so I am forever thankful
for your eternal presence in my life.

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I am ultimately forever grateful for the lived experiences I have had, positive and negative, because those experiences have shaped and formed my perspective on multiracial, identity, and how I fit into this world as a self-identified multiracial OpiianChocTaliRican individual human being.

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PROLOGUE

The development of this dissertation seeks to provide critical understandings of multiracial identity as it relates to me as a multiracial individual socially identified as Black or African American. Many multiracial people face challenges in dealing with their identity in a society that does not acknowledge them. I am a multiracial individual that grew up facing some of these same challenges. While discovering what my racial heritage was along the way, I struggled to identify who I am and was. My mother's mother was Ethiopian (Black) and Italian while her father was Choctaw Indian and Puerto Rican creating a rich amalgam of heritages for my family and me. My mother never placed any great emphasis on our mixed heritages. This complicated my perceptions of life and the world I experienced when she revealed the mix in my blood. Once I knew what my mixed racial makeup was, I felt proud on the inside. This was not always consistent. At times I felt ashamed and shunned because my phenotype did not clearly support any one portion of my racial makeup.

My bright skin, high cheekbones, squinted eyes, broad nose, full lips, and nappy reddish brown hair was clearly some sort of mixture but I was identified solely as Black and teasingly as White. Growing up multiracial was a complicated contradictory lived experience as I identified with what I thought my race was (black). Contrary to this, I was told I was white or acting white while learning that I was mixed but I didn't really understand what it meant to be mixed. It was like being constantly pulled toward and away from what I learned was my race only to be confused with the knowledge that I was more than just my identified race of black. Initially, at the beginning of my life story as a memoir, I wasn't even aware of my own black race. I oscillated between being black and being called 'white boy' without knowing what any of it meant. Additionally, I had no idea that some people who I thought were black were

actually white. Living in Chicago around a majority of Black people, White people were viewed as people that were on television as fictional characters. Growing toward an understanding of black and white, I was placed solidly against black involuntarily (this speaks to being socially labeled) as well as white because although I was teased by black kids about being white, white kids never saw me as anything other than black. It is my hope that this dissertation will help to educate people about multiracial identity and its significance in the field of curriculum.

Questioning Multiracial Identities

I am exploring multiracial identity theory as my dissertation topic, specifically seeking to understand my own racial identity. Identity can be a convoluted concept depending on your viewpoint. For me, identity connects you to your family heritage and ancestry in esoteric, existential ways. For others, perhaps it gives them a sense of worth and place in this complex society in which we live. Regardless of any viewpoint on identity, multiracial identity is becoming an idealistic concept stamped readily into the conscious minds of humans the world over thus, deeming such a phenomenon an important topic of discussion. Many, including myself, are asking who I am. What am I? And these questions are asked with fleeting answers on a large social scale but creative, imaginative answers are engendered from such questions by individuals who identify themselves other than through currently constructed racial paradigms. Since I have been studying curriculum theory at Georgia Southern in the doctoral program, I have recognized my racial identity as multiracial. I am part Ethiopian, part Choctaw Indian, part Italian, and part Puerto Rican. To self-identify, I label myself *OpianChocTaliRican*, which encompasses the four races flowing through my blood. Knowing this bit of information does not satisfy the answers to my questions of what am I or who am I, however, it is a foundation to my inquiry into multiracial identities.

The question of multiracial identities raises more questions than answers specifically when individuals attempt to identify as such on a larger social scale. This attempt at non-marginalized identity begs for a multiracial category on the US Census by the leaders of multiracial advocacy groups thus, making the subject one of a political nature. How would a multiracial category affect the current monoracial categorized paradigm in the U.S.? Would it delimit white supremacy as it currently stands or will it further ostracize the black race through oppression and reinforce the age-old hypodescent or one-drop rule? Would an inquiry into multiracial identities from an individual account add to the understanding of a marginalized race of people? How does choice enable others?

Maria Root's (1996) work, *The Multiracial Experience*, Naomi Zack's (1995) work, *American Mixed Race*, and Ranier Spencer's (2011) work, *Reproducing Race*, to name a few, raise these questions from outside the field of curriculum studies. Each of these theorists acknowledge and express valid concerns for the growing multiracial population in terms of racial identity, however, some concerns reach beyond the inception of the multiracial movement and pose questions relevant to society as a whole. What is particularly gained by the creation or adding of a multiracial category? Who ultimately benefits and who suffers since ultimately where there is someone benefitting someone is not? Since the inception of my inquiry into multiracial identities, the U.S. Bureau of Statistics has added a statistical account of people identifying as two or more races (U.S. Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

The major focus of my inquiry is my own mixed race heritage. What puzzles me about being of mixed race is how there can be so much racism in the world when we are all pretty much mixed up. The problem, as I see it, lies within the context of identity; specifically how we are identified. We can be identified racially through the group that we are most closely

associated with or through the labels that the government gives us. However, when it comes to being of mixed race we are identified through our physical features, which in most cases, mistakenly determines what race we are. I am partially Ethiopian, partially Native American, partially Italian, and partially Puerto Rican but I am identified as Black or African American. If I don't tell anyone that I am mixed then it is automatically assumed that, I am Black. This troubles me however; it has been a reality for the majority of my life. The government doesn't make the situation any better as it establishes categories to select from on official forms and applications to identify ourselves. What do you put when you are mixed? When I think about the racial prejudices that people have it bothers me because it's not necessary. Many people identified in different races are mixed but are either not aware of it or don't put any emphasis on the fact that they are mixed. Many more have simply accepted the labels given to them.

Could it be possible to avoid hate crimes committed against different races if there were some discourse that addressed the true identity of many people? Figuring out where people stand on the issue of race and what the problems are with racism may open the doors to learning more about how we can quell the discord among the races. Many mixed race people are left out of social circles because they don't fit in one identity category or another. More attention to their stories and my own memoir may expand the public space for discussion, problem posing, and problem solving. I am seeking to liberate myself from the mystery of my own identity and the struggles that come with being a mixed race person. In the foreword of Maxine Greene's 'The Dialect of Freedom', it is noted that "A free society needs freedom of inquiry in all its institutions and common rooms," (Greene, 1998, p. x). It is my intent to embrace this freedom in my dissertation. I digress to a time when my struggle with being mixed was very sharp but eye opening.

Not Black Enough

As I sat at the back of the shift commander's office of the prison I worked in, I reflected on the moments leading up to my current predicament. It was 10:27 pm on the night shift at the prison where I worked as a correctional officer. The shift briefing was brief for me, which was why I was sitting in the back of the shift commander's office. I was there for a minor verbal warning. Violation of the grooming policy was nothing to be fired over but it will be addressed verbally the first time. I knew better and had a very good excuse for violating the grooming policy. I was running late and didn't have a lot of time. Lieutenant Roberts accepted my excuse and told me not to let it happen again. I was relieved but very upset at what had happened. The problem was that I came to work with plats in my hair. These are small braids that would eventually grow down to shoulder length some years later. Nevertheless, this particular night found no place for the tradition of my ancestral roots.

I am partially Choctaw Indian and wearing braids is a way to take care of your hair. My hair was short at the time but a good friend of mine expressed an interest in taking care of my ethers so my ethers would take care of me. That was something my grandmother always told me. I found a connection with my hair and my ancestral heritage and it felt good to have my hair braided. In retrospect, I had found myself "straddling cultural expectations" (Prasad, 2006, p. 8). This was not uncommon throughout my life before and after I discovered my racial identities. I lost track of the time and realized I had to report to work on the night shift at the prison. I should have started taking the plats out a few hours prior to going to work but I thought better of that idea because I needed a nap so I wouldn't be sleepy during the eight-hour shift. A nap before an eight-hour shift over night is essential to keeping your wits and skills sharp when running a prison, managing inmates. It was a level six, maximum-security prison that had 6

armed towers and posted a three-perimeter security fence with the middle fence being electric. Needless to say, I was working around serious criminals that could kill you if you weren't completely aware of what was going on for the duration of the shift. The prison was named after an officer that was killed by an inmate. When I was training for the position, my training officer always said, "Pay attention and don't get the prison named after you!"

I knew how important it was to be well rested for this job so I took a nap instead. See, I thought I was smart. Part of the Correctional Officer I uniform was a cap, which I put on and it covered my head where the plats could be covered. This could have been a viable option for violating the dress code but I underestimated the childishness of Officer Thurmond. In the academy, he was the loud boisterous, overbearing, immature cadet that didn't know how to contain his childish antics. Everything was funny to him and he seemed to take life as a big game. I sat in the shift briefing that night with my hat covering my plats perfectly and this buffoon nonchalantly walked over to me and slapped the bill of my cap off of my head exposing my plats to every officer in the shift briefing. Everyone laughed except for Sergeant Brody who handed me a comb in the calmest manner imaginable. I expected him to explode but he didn't. While everyone laughed, Officer Thurmond commented, "A real black man would have ducked!"

He laughed from his gut and I laughed too to save face but on the inside, I was furious. I was trapped between being wrong and disgraced all at the same time. Root and Kelly point out through Heather Dalmage's perspective that it is assumed that "race is a concrete, objective, and static phenomenon" (2003, p. 19). I am sure this was Officer Thurmond's assumption as well. Not only was I humiliated but I was also made to feel less than what I have always been identified as – Black. I was given my post command but told to report to the shift commander's

office before reporting to my assigned post. Lieutenant Roberts smiled and asked, “What in the hell were you thinking about tonight?” I explained to him that my friend had put the plats in because she was practicing for her cosmetology class and I had waited too late to take them out so I was going to try and hide it with my uniform cap. He laughed and said,

“You should have tried to cover Officer Thurmond. He can be overbearing at times but in his own way he just wants every officer to abide by the rules.”

I felt like he was coming down on me for not being black enough and I explained this to Lieutenant Roberts. He told me the best way to get through this job is to be yourself and follow the rules.

“Now take those plats down and get to your post. There are inmates who would love to be able to get at you like Officer Thurmond did. Take it as a learning lesson and do your job.”

His words were somewhat comforting but confusing at the same time. Being myself and following rules were two conflicting notions that didn’t make much sense to me. I was being myself with plats in my hair but the rules stated I could not have plats in my hair, which ultimately negates who I am as a person. I was still furious with Officer Thurmond because he outted me. He exposed a flaw in me; my blackness, and my connection with my Native American side continued to be a silent portion of me that I would not talk about until some years later. The one thing I tried to take away from the experience was Lieutenant Robert’s words,

“The best way to get through this job is to simply be you...” and I wanted to apply that not only to a job but also to my life. It is my hope that “this experience represents the resolution of societal racial wars within the individual and allows for integrated, prideful identity” (Root,

1996, pp. xxv-xxvi). This, in my view, would be the only way I could really be myself in a society that preaches such sentiments.

Root (1992) states, “We shun the white-looking Indian, (in my case the black looking Indian), the high yellow Black woman, the Asian with the white lover... the uneducated” (p. 5). Why am I shunning myself? Mentally, I stepped out on a limb to express my Native American roots knowing I wouldn’t be accepted but I tried anyway. Discovering this was unintentional but nevertheless, my current reality. I want to embrace my identities and not deny them. The purpose of this study is to explore my multiracial identities through memoir, fictional narrative, and poetic inquiry.

Why is Multiracial Identity Theory Worthy of Theorizing and Living?

Multiracial identity theory is broad and complex. To delve into its tenets is a way to understand “the complex racial identities of a large and growing number of people in a world that is racially very complex” (Korgen, 2010, p. 206). I fit into that growing racially complex world. It is certainly not a new world as the constructed racial paradigms have always been extant in the United States and these constructed paradigms are not as simple as black and white linear models. To the contrary, “from the sixteenth century to the present, [they have not been] a bipolar continuum, but a multi-polar juxtaposition of several different racial groups” (Korgen, 2010, p. 209). Keeping this in mind, I feel it is important to reflect on my personal life experiences in order to understand how those experiences affect who I was, who I am now and how I interact with others in society (He, 2003).

The question for me as a mixed race person lies with specific identification of who I am. According to social and cultural norms, I am Black or African American because “It is certainly no revelation to most people in the United States that someone who has any physical features

typically associated with people of African ancestry will be regarded as black” (Root, 1996, p.16), however, society hasn’t always treated me as Black due to my failure to subscribe fully to Black culture. I experienced a lot of confusion and trepidation as I explore “my rememory” (Morrison, 1990 in Carlyle, 2010, p. 1) of experiences growing up in Chicago and the south.

Growing up in the Midwest, I was teased by being called ‘White Boy’ before I knew what ‘White Boy’ meant, because I had a very light skinned complexion with reddish-brown hair. Along with ‘White Boy’ I was called ‘High Yellow’, ‘Mutt’, and ‘Vanilla Oreo’ to name a few. I suppose my look needed some classification other than the brown and dark brown skinned classifications of the black race because it was different or unlike in some respect. By the time I entered Jr. High School, I believed I was black because that is how the kids in the predominately white schools I attended classified me. I went from the inner-city schools being called ‘White Boy’ and other names to ‘Black Boy’ by white kids, who I didn’t feel I looked like either, in predominately white schools. I also engaged in activities that most of the black kids participated in because even though they teased me I felt more comfortable in the black social groups. I suppose this was because in my household growing up there was a mixture of looks. My mother and baby sister are light skinned as I am and my brother is a shade darker than us. My oldest sister and father are dark skinned exemplifying the true tenets of what an African American looks like. Our eyes vary from beady to almond shape and hair textures vary from nappy to straight. My hair is nappy and reflecting back, I remember my best friend teasing me saying,

“You the only nappy headed white boy I know!”

I would get mad and call him an ‘African booty scratcher.’ Nobody liked to be called anything associated with Africa but he would just laugh and say,

“Aw don’t be such a crybaby. Let’s go up to the school so I can whip your butt in some basketball.”

I’d quickly suppress the emotional outburst building up from the repressed feelings I held inside because I loved playing basketball. When I was playing, getting my butt whipped all the while, I didn’t care about my hair, skin complexion, or even fitting in any particular group. Who I was in those moments was a basketball player and my best friend, being much larger than I, would dominate me in the game, pushing me to look for all kinds of ways to beat him. By the time I entered high school, I was good enough to make the basketball team. Making an all white team had its challenges as well. Out of all the black kids that tried out, I made the team. I was ecstatic but in my heart I knew many of the black kids were better than me. In fact, they were much better. Oreon Jackson reminded me on the bus ride home after the final cuts were posted.

“Man they just racist! You know I can school you any day on the court. My handles are better, my ‘J’ is always on point and you know my crossover will shake and break your ankles!”

I knew he was telling the truth and at the time I had no earthly idea how the coach picked me over Oreon Jackson. Nobody knew but Oreon had an idea.

“Coach picked you cause you damn near white accept for that nappy head you got. This way they can say they got a niggah on the team. Oh yeah you still a niggah no matter how ‘Vanilla Oreo’ looking yo dumb butt is!”

I stood up in my seat and yelled at him, “A man, I ain’t no niggah!”

He waived a dismissive hand at me, “Yeah whatever! You keep thinking that white boy.”

I turned around and sat down with burning tears in the wells of my eyes but I couldn't let them fall. I couldn't let them see me as a weakling. They already believed I was but shucks, I made the team. I pondered my place with the black kids after that and how the white kids on the team would receive me. I'm black, no I'm niggah, no I'm white, high yellow, vanilla Oreo, mutt, no, no, I'm me but who do I have to be to be free from the racial labels attributed to me? "All of us, whether we are conscious of it or not, compartmentalize people so that we can more readily place them along the continuum of what is personally comprehensible," (Prasad, 2006, pp. 7-8). This multiracial identity phenomenon is very personal to me, which makes it worthy of my dissertation inquiry. While the central focus of my dissertation inquiry is my own understanding of my racial identity, I think it is highly important to keep "questioning the impact of multiracial identities and the politics of the multiracial movement on racial justice pursuits in the United States" (Brunsma, 2006, p. 5).

Autobiographical Roots of My Inquiry

For a long time, I have inwardly dealt with feelings of fear, rage, anger, and deep sadness due to how I was perceived and racially labeled growing up. Kids can be cruel and unforgiving at times but those cruel and unforgiving moments I experienced affected me in ways I don't clearly understand. I have a volatile temper that fortunately has been placed in check from something inside of me I can't explain. I sometimes think it's the calming spirit of the Choctaw Indian in me or the benevolent spirit of the Ethiopian in me. This is not to say that the Italian and Puerto Rican in me are temperamentally volatile as they speak to me during other circumstances in my life. My inquiry stems from a plethora of feelings regarding race and how I was treated growing up, in college, working in the prison system, and law enforcement. Much of my inquiry stems from those feelings as I have suppressed many of them. Only since I have

been in the doctoral program at Georgia Southern University, have I revisited those memories. The curriculum studies program pulls at your consciousness in ways that are conducive to transformation. I have always struggled with my own identity as a mixed race person but society's identification of me as Black has caused me to hide my true feelings. They were hidden because I was not truly representing myself as an individual under the monoracial category, Black. Going through life misidentified creates negative feelings that can be all too consuming at times. I question why race even exists and why it should influence our view of each other.

My first semester of college at the University of Alabama was wrought with resistance to the black and white issues that many of the black students had with southern traditions of racism. I literally had to choose which side I was on according to some of my misguided fraternity brothers. I had known I was mixed for quite some time and knowing this caused me to go through my day open to all races that had likes and interests in common with my own the same as I did growing up. I minored in theater and most of my peers were white. I can clearly recall all of the black students in the theater group. There were eight of us altogether. I had no idea what any of their true racial make ups were and I didn't care. They seemed to be comfortable with white and black. I was comfortable interacting with either race not because I identified with being Black but because nobody seemed to care one way or the other. I emphasized their personalities, strengths, likes and dislikes because that was what seemed to matter most. I reflected back on a time when I was growing up listening to celebration speeches for the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday and it disturbed me to know that black people had to struggle at the hands of white people who meant to do them harm. I couldn't understand what the problem was with all the animosity towards Black people. What had Black people done to

White people that made them so hateful towards us? Other than being themselves, I couldn't see the reason for the hate. However, I could see why Black people didn't like white people.

I was walking down University Boulevard with my roommate the first week of school. He had been recruited to come to the University to run track as I had been. He was Black and so was I. I suppose I walked through life with blinders on because living in Chicago, I mixed and mingled with all races of people that would accept me and I didn't concern myself with what color or race they were. I was aware of racism but I didn't take it to heart because my view of racial slurs from whites was perceived as class warfare. If you weren't a rich kid then you didn't associate with them. There were a few rich Black kids who acted indignant and indifferent toward you or called you the same racial slurs that rich White kids did. This was rather confusing, but I knew my place. There were a few rich White kids that would associate with me as well as some rich Black kids but they were far and few in between and my black friends had them all grouped the same (stuck up kids) and shunned anyone who tried to cross cultural lines. I did anyway because many times I was teased about being White or a sellout even if I was hanging by myself. Those experiences numbed any hate I could feel for White people because racial backlash came to me from Whites and Blacks alike. That feeling changed the first week at school while I was walking down University Boulevard with my roommate. Initially, I was excited at the possibility of new adventures, learning, and life experiences. I wanted to excel as an actor, track athlete, and whatever major offered limitless possibilities.

The University of Alabama would give me such an experience because I had been prepped mentally for years by my best friend, whom I grew up with, about how great Alabama was. His family lived there and he would visit every summer, come back, and tell me of all the fun he had there. As my roommate and I walked down the Boulevard, a red pickup truck sped

by. It was full of White guys who were yelling at us. They were loud and rambunctious as they rode passed us screaming racial slurs from nigger and coon to spear chucking porch monkeys. I was too shocked to be angry or upset at the time. We both had expressions of disbelief on our faces. I thought it was over but the red pickup truck made a u-turn in the middle of the street and headed back toward us. They threw full cans of Budweiser beer in our direction nearly hitting us. I can still see the red and white cans spewing foam from hitting the concrete. Why hadn't my best friend mentioned the blatant racism that existed in Alabama? Later on, I found myself conflicted with feelings of hatred for a race of people.

I revisited MLK speeches and started listening to Louis Farrakhan. I even watched the movie 'Roots' and other things that placed attention on Black racial issues. Being identified as a Black person was not the catalyst that drove me to militancy in my college years. It was my deep disdain for injustice toward humans. I was not able to agree with all of Malcolm X's philosophy or the Nation of Islam or Black militant and Black Supremacy rhetoric because I always found myself questioning the Italian, Choctaw Indian, and Puerto Rican in me. I was conflicted feeling pitted against my family heritage based on a racial makeup that I couldn't identify as anything at the time. My passion flowed in the name of justice for people; good, kind, loving people. The other problem I was fully aware of was that not everyone in one particular race was guilty of mistreating me or doing me wrong. The more I found myself surrounded by Black people who didn't want to see White people as anything but evil, wicked, devils, it made it hard to enjoy the college experience. When I hung out with students other than blacks, I was considered a sellout, an Uncle Tom. I started to see that from many of my Black friends' perspective, race was an all encompassing issue and there were no exceptions. I wanted

to be the exception and many of the arguments I had with them surrounded ideas about unity and harmony of the races.

Today my views and feelings are still the same as I seek clarity on who I am as an individual within the context of multiracial identities. I hold an ever burning desire to seek justice for all humans. I have always had the propensity to see the good in everyone knowing full well everyone is not good. However, accepting people initially is a gold mine in terms of possibilities that might emerge from social interactions regardless of race or milieu. My passion for the topic of multiracial identity runs deep as a recently discovered label for who I am. I wasn't aware of the many issues facing multiracial people prior to attending Georgia Southern University or even the term multiracial. I oscillated my identification between other, Black, and whatever an application would allow me to check. Whenever someone would identify me as African American, in militant style I would say "no, just Black" wagging a shame on you finger at them for not knowing any better. I don't like the term African American because it reeks of the same political deviousness as Black History month. Why isn't there a European American identity for White people and which month is White History month? I am not questioning the fairness of these realities I'm questioning the necessity of them. For those that say White history is always being pushed in our school systems and seen in the curriculum, I beg to differ. That history is not accurate by any means. I got into a heated debate with a co-teacher about the subject of Black History month this past school year. She took great pride in being able to celebrate the accomplishments of Black Americans and their struggle to overcome slavery and oppression highlighting the instrumentality of the Civil Rights movement. I told her I could not justify taking away any credit from the points she made however, I do believe the efforts in addressing a history month for oppressed Black people in this country is limited, stagnant,

shortsighted, and offers no plausible solutions to the current predicament of Black people as a whole. She became visibly upset saying,

“You calling yourself multiracial, mixed or whatever but you just a confused light (skinned) wanna be ‘white negro’. Yeah, that’s right, you still a niggah to them so don’t get too full of yourself. At least I know who I am!”

I was boiling on the inside but maintained my composure. My anger stemmed from her missing the whole point I was making then turning to negative responses in ignorant fashion using the term light (skinned). I responded slowly but deliberately,

“When will Black History month teach us about the true history of Africa where we might gain strength as a people from the many exemplars Africa’s rich history holds instead of constantly being reminded of our struggle with oppression? When will Black History month teach us about white history giving us a bird’s eye view of how and why we were kidnapped, suppressed, oppressed, and ultimately depressed as a people in a nation far from where we came? And yes I am multiracial, possibly confused, but not about being mixed but about why you can’t understand that I am mixed.”

She laughed and put her hand up toward the ceiling,

“Lord. Be what you wanna be. Just don’t forget you Black and always will be Black!”

That is one example of why I am so passionate about the subject of multiracial identities.

People’s lack of understanding of multiracial issues intertwined with their lack of awareness of social and governmental constructions of race in this country is a complete block to realizing John Dewey’s dream of enabling “all human beings to lead long, healthy, active, peaceful, virtuous, happy lives” (Schubert, 2009, p. 9).

I strongly feel that bringing multiracial identity theory into academic discourses will enlighten people on positive means of diversity in their interactions with each other. Multiracial identity theory expresses the ideology that an individual that is comprised of two or more races has the right to identify with one or all of their entire racial heritages. Having the right to choose or self identify eliminates the fragmentation created through oppression by the current racial paradigm. Root (1996) expounds “If we resist this fragmentation, if we revolutionize the way we think about identity and the self in relationship to the other, we begin to free ourselves from an oppressive structure” (p. 14). With this at the forefront of academic discourses, perhaps people’s mentalities and perceptions of other people won’t be so judgmental and predicated on monoracial categories of identification.

Contested Multiracial Contexts

Being trapped between two races, Black and White is a struggle for most people because they cannot fully relate to one race or the other. Sometimes this is due to society’s rejection of them in either race and sometimes it is a feeling held deep inside and sometimes it is a combination of both. My issue is further complicated by the fact that I am not biracial but multiracial. I am part Ethiopian or as society and governmental institutions would identify me, African American or Black. I am also part Italian, part Choctaw Indian, and part Puerto Rican. I happen to have blood from four races running through my veins however, I cannot tell the difference between any of them. Due to many experiences I had as a young boy growing up in Chicago to adulthood living in the south, my racial identity has become a complex bundle of issues in terms of how I see the world.

Race is an entity that is used by the government to keep people divided and this is highly troubling to me. It is embedded in the fabrics of our society on multiple levels. The white race,

for instance, has been given the upper hand and is considered the privileged race. Many white people in our society hold fast to this notion and place themselves above people of other races. I understand this and agree with Joseph's stance on it to a great degree however, I am not attempting to fight the institutional racism that exists in our society. I am attempting to reclaim my identity as a mixed race person. Being an individual of mixed race has its challenges in terms of identifying who I am and how others see me. Joseph (2013) takes a peculiar position in reference to being mixed race. Identifying with mixed race does not create a third category of race nor does it help promote a healthy identification of the Black race, which is already suppressed by the White race. Opening the door to your mixed race identity only aligns you with the White race and that further exacerbates the Black race, which you are definitely a part of so it is best to forget about speaking of your mixed race in an attempt to transcend blackness. When Tiger Woods pointed out that he was of mixed race in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, it became a huge issue for society especially for people who identify with being Black. "Many African-Americans were not amused. They quickly denounced him: He's black. He's denying his blackness. He doesn't know who he is. He's confused," (Gaskin, 1999, p. 4). This societal thinking is what Joseph fears will happen if you identify with being of mixed race. She describes her experience about why she does not speak about her mixed race,

When I began to suspect that by doing so I was ingratiating myself to whites, I see the split-second adjustments they have to make, the searching of my eyes for some telltale sign. They no longer know who I am. Privately, they guess at my troubled heart, I suppose-the mixed blood, the divided soul, the ghostly image of the tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds. (Joseph, 2013, p. 161)

Most don't have to guess at my troubled soul because I wear four masks that hide my identity. Since starting the doctoral program at Georgia Southern University, I have awakened to my identity as an OpianChocTaliRican, which identifies the four races that run through my blood. Moya and Hames-Garcia (2000) speak to the legitimacy of my self-identification by noting,

If no one woman can know and represent the experiences of all women, on what authority can she speak as a woman? At best, she might be able to speak accurately on her own unique experience of being a woman... but then she would be speaking as an individual, not as a woman. (pp. 3-4)

This fully articulates the context of my study whereas I am speaking from my individual experience as a mixed race individual and not for an entire race or one aspect of my racial makeup. I could do just that however, many would perceive me as a confused and convoluted schizophrenic desperately needing the assistance of a couple of huge orderlies with sedative medication and a straight jacket. In some sense, I believe there is great beauty in the ubiquitous notion of filling the identities of all my racial identities but society does not appear to be ready for such a leap in understanding. While attempting to make that leap of understanding with my personal walk of life, I would like everyone to fully understand that,

I'm no poster child for interracial harmony, no model for miscegenated humanity. I'm not about messy mingling, and I'm not what's meant by the melting pot. I'm no jungle-fever rainbow baby, no icon for interbreeding. I'm not about trying to be better than anyone else, or trying to be different. What I'm about is being all of what I am... nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. (Gaskins, 1999, p. x)

In understanding who I am as a mixed race individual, it is my desire to grow as a fulfilled individual that can perhaps, lend strength to others who may be isolated within their own mixed race identity.

Why Multiracial Identities?

My experiences from childhood in the north to adulthood in the south give an individual perspective on multi-race as a racial category that is not fully recognized within governmental identifications of race or societal identifications of race. If it did, how confusing would it be with the plethora of mixtures? This study seeks to reveal clarity as it relates to my multiracial makeup and allow me to fully embrace all of my racial makeup. It also seeks to investigate the notion that identifying with mixed race identity ingratiates one to white people in society thereby transcending blackness in an unconscious effort to further marginalize the Black race. Moreover, this study seeks to give mixed race persons the ability to self identify with who they are as opposed to having to succumb to governmental and societal labels. It is my hope that Administrators, Principals, and Educators absorb the value of my research to stay ever mindful that mixed race children often do not openly express their feelings of angst and isolation due to being recognized other than how they feel and see themselves. Simply acknowledging them for who they are goes a long way in making them feel whole.

The intent of this inquiry is to discover my identity as a multiracial person. It seeks to open doors for freedom of self-identification for others who are multiracial but have been mis-educated by the government's goal of monoracial categories. "Despite the significant number of people of all colors who have questioned the validity of race and the way it is abused in this country, taxonomies and institutions,[sic] like attitudes, are slow to change" (Root, 1992, p. 9). At this point, the attitudes of change have still teetered along like a snail stuck in glue. The

institution of race has shaped and formed the thinking of society as a whole, hindering positive education on the subject. Most multiracial people tend to fall in whatever social class they fit in and stay silent about who they are. With the assistance of marginalized multiracial voices, a continued perpetuation of monoracial categories remains a reality for many. I can only imagine the number of people who are racially mixed and their feelings are repressed. This study will not only free me of my feelings of repression but also students in the school system. When they can see themselves for who they truly are racially, they can be free of social and governmental labeling. The institution of race is deeply embedded within our societal values and not easily penetrated with a story here and there. Root (1992) acknowledges this when she states, "If races were pure (or had once been), and if one were a member of the race at the top, then it was essential to maintain the boundaries that defined one's superiority, to keep people from the lower categories from slipping surreptitiously upward" (p. 15). This is why the government takes bold steps to keep the boundaries between the races prevalent. It ensures white dominance remains the status quo and this reveals that race is not about blood. "Race is primarily about culture and social structure, not biology" (Root, 1992, p. 16). It is time for society to be enlightened by this line of discourse so the social structure can change more rapidly and not perversely, as it is doing now. We see an extreme number of individuals who could classify themselves as multiracial or mixed and do not but if they did, perhaps, quite possibly it could bridge those racial boundaries created by the government. It could open the door to a more peaceful and humane existence. I am quite optimistic about this possibility and it is reflected in the undertones of my memoir as I navigate life as a black man in a multiracial world.

Deciphering an Unfamiliar Familiar World

It was critical that I spend much time with the data compiled and as I did so I discovered that I was the data past and present. This revelation was puissant for the analysis of my future existence. I recognized that this inquiry would not be a traditional study composed of five chapters thus making it difficult to organize. Outlining, summarizing, and categorizing have been a discomposed journey for me as someone who has always been afraid of being wrong, rejected in the realm of correctness. This further compounds being misidentified racially. My inquiry, told as a memoir, consist of stories of my life starting in 1976 in kindergarten. Each story, told chronologically, from kindergarten to working in the field of education, describe my view and experience with racial categories and conflict with such categorizations. There were many incidents and experiences to choose from as would be expected from one's journey through life so I had to tell the stories I felt related directly to my understanding of race, racial ambiguity, and conflict arising from my interaction with others in life. These relations draw attention to the knowledge of my own identity. My identity was a vapid ghost that proved very elusive to my social development due to contradictions, misinterpretations, and misunderstandings about race and social interactions altogether.

My growing understanding of my mixed race heritage was never fully realized and thus thwarted my social development to some degree. The organization of these stories are broken down into seven chapters, with chapters two through six showing growth within my understanding of who I am as a mixed race person in relation to societal and governmental constructions of race. I compose each chapter using myself as a multiracial protagonist who endures the bullying and intimidation inflicted by those who saw me as other than black and only black. Each chapter chronologically tells stories of growth, growth which is likened to a

caterpillar in a cocoon. What starts out to an on looker as a furry worm to be ridiculed, criticized, and even stepped on turns out to be, after hiding or self-reflecting in the cocoon, a beautiful butterfly even if only recognized by the ridiculed worm. This alludes to self-identification. The beginning of each story in each chapter will start with a poetic prelude which lays the groundwork for the ensuing stories told. In what I call poetic discernment, I theorize my narratives with connections to the poems at the end of each story to keep the reader informed contextually of the interactions between society and myself and the discoveries made from the experiences.

In utilizing fiction as an expressive component of my methodology, I conceal the names of characters in my memoir with pseudonyms. This was important to protect many individuals whose actions and beliefs may be perceived with prejudice or ill judgment by those who read my work. The stories are real with dramatic emphasis on the articulation of incidents revealed through telling my memoir. The impacts of these stories not only affect me but also other mixed race individuals who have endured similar experiences. These stories come from my memory and perceived expressions of them therefore I do not want to knowingly or unknowingly cause harm to individuals herein with regards to their current careers or reputation in the communities in which they live. In a further effort to protect individuals that are included in my memoir, many of the locations are fictionalized. This was necessary because details were too vivid and distinct to individuals' actions which could possibly put them in potential harm's way as they are unknowingly included in my memoir.

I tell my stories in chronological order because my first memory of struggling with being multiracial, however unfamiliar to me, was in kindergarten. The stories unfolded in my memory until I entered the second grade and I stopped writing contemplating various ways to

continue telling my story. After exhausting the various ways of telling my stories, chronologically, thematically, in vignettes, as episodes or scenes, etc., it dawned on me that my memory flows more fluently when I talk about my experiences from beginning to end. I checked with my siblings and parents to make sure that my recollections were accurate and they concurred. I also decided to use poetry as another way to express the emotions, thoughts, and feelings I experienced as I wrote my memoir. The poems give a brief summary of each story expressing my feelings while writing. The process of writing the poems served as a vehicle toward inward reflection and discovery of thoughts and feelings (Hanauer, 2010) that may have otherwise been lost and not readily conveyed through the memoir alone. The poems serve to take readers further into my world of experiences as a multiracial person because “poetry writing is a process in which participants attempt to make sense of their own experiences and express them in a way that other readers may have an insight into their own subjective interpretation of personally meaningful events” (Hanauer, 2010, p.31). At the end of each story, I will include a deciphering of the poems written by highlighting the meaning and understanding I discovered through writing my memoir. This will prove to be a complicated undertaking as it concurs with the nature of an exploration of multiracial identities as a fluid, dynamic and ever changing phenomenon.

Reading Chapters

My dissertation consists of a prologue, seven chapters (one introduction chapter, five story chapters and one chapter on reflections of my inquiry), and an epilogue. In Chapter 1, I start with a poem that expresses my views on the field of curriculum studies and education as a whole. Then I give an introduction to multiracial identity as it relates to the focus of my inquiry-who am I racially? I articulate the theoretical perspectives used to conduct my study and the

works of the scholars upon which I based my inquiry. I draw upon several theorists outside the field of curriculum to support the journey into multiracial identity and identity theories. I end Chapter 1 by describing the methodology used to navigate my inquiry into multiracial identity drawing upon several works that utilize memoir, fiction and poetry. I have drawn upon a vast array of researchers as lodestars to the implementation and analysis of my inquiry.

In Chapter 2, I discuss my early life starting in kindergarten. I talk about my experience of being bullied and teased about having a light complexion and my perception of the world around me as I interact with students, teachers, and individuals in a community which seemed to be against me because I was light skinned. This is merely my perspective viewed through a lens of innocent greenery. Initially, because I had limited to no knowledge about race, by the time my mother began to express things in racialized terms, I was already confused. A lot of what I knew about race came from misinterpretations and poor interactions with others. My knowledge of who I was racially grew in small increments however; I began to take people at face value rather than based on race. The various life experiences left psychological impressions upon me that began to mold and shape the way I viewed the world. There are 18 poems in this chapter that express a multitude of strong emotions and perspectives toward racial ambiguity and conflict.

In Chapter 3, I begin to realize my monoracial identity as black through my experience of denial and rejection. I begin to see racism in the educational setting from the teachers and students that were sometimes subtle and quite overt at other times. I struggle with lumping monoracial groups together based on individual actions specifically between whites and blacks. Competing intellectually with whites was a contention my black friends mistook for 'selling out' but for me it was my attempt to find place among races that treated me harshly and kindly.

There is a pendulum of indecisiveness with choosing to view the races in my life as nefarious pride stealers or good people that sometimes do not do good things. It was difficult to decide when my experiences show me as someone who is accepted and rejected by whites and blacks alike. There are 6 poems in this chapter.

Chapter 4 is entitled 'Fast Forward To Black' because being thrust into a larger population of different races in high school, I quickly accepted bell hook's (1992) 'Black Looks' notion that blacks gravitated toward each other due to common struggles. While I consistently allied myself with the black race my mind was always open to all races and this caused conflicts, within the dynamics of my experience. This chapter encompasses the mental as well as physical struggles I endured while attempting to maintain my racial status as black on through college. The buffer to these struggles was my participation in sports where I found refuge from the racial strife experienced albeit only in my mind. This resulted in my resistance to conform to racial norms. In my attempt to discover myself, I began to view racial ambiguity through rose colored lenses but my black friends always threw stains on those rose colored lenses pulling me back to accepting the fact that whites were not as accepting of me as I was of them. I was growing up and stubbornly holding on to my thoughts about whom I was but who was that? There are 10 poems in this chapter.

In Chapter 5, I transition from college into the workforce. My first professional career move was the prison system to street patrol where I learn valuable lessons about the nature and character of people which solidified my desire to identify as other than black. On most applications I checked 'Other' for race because I knew I was more than black or white but the treatment I received in the field of law enforcement was a constant reminder from the agencies I worked for that I was black, only black, and nothing but black. In this chapter I attempt to show

how the content of my character may have actually saved my life and it had nothing to do with being black, white, or other. There are 2 poems in this chapter.

Chapter 6, the final story chapter, begins with a poem entitled 'My Black People' which expresses my knowledge and affinity for black people. I recognize black within my racial makeup and I also recognize the other racial heritages within me as well, which forces me to see the world in other than black commonality only. This very short story highlights the confusion I've seen other black educators display over racial identity while I somewhat silently anchor my identity within a multiracial heritage. At that point in my life, I was still viewed as one who denies their black heritage in order to resist the common struggle blacks have endured over centuries. There is 1 poem in this chapter.

Chapter 7, the last chapter, is a mirrored image of the perfect storm brewing in the recesses of my mind giving the readers insight into how I make meaning out of this inquiry into multiracial identity. It is a difficult undertaking that requires recognition of multiracial identity and identity theories as more than a single area of study. Having drawn upon multiple theorists in and outside the field of curriculum studies, multiracial studies can only realistically be viewed as an interdisciplinary area of study. The complexity of its marginalized foundation seeks a voice as is evident by the growing number of multiracial people in America today. I discuss how I grew into an individual who identifies as multiracial utilizing memoir as methodology. This methodological approach does not attempt to circumvent any similar work in the field rather it is an optimistic attempt to invoke more study on multiracial identity within the field of curriculum studies.

CHAPTER ONE

FOUNDATIONS OF MULTIRACIAL IDENTITIES

The Intellectual Cypher

An intellectual, existential, esoteric cypher
 I write from the mind about things in a baby's diaper
 No riper than anyone who'd dare flow this cypher
 Cause my ego's subdued and what you say could be hyper

But if only they would allow true education to breathe
 Breathe the fresh air and let their souls no longer grieve
 And by they I mean them who suppress freedom of intellect
 They are them who would see your mind hung by its neck

Hung by the rope of standardization and common core
 Put on that horse and pony show with that ticket out the door
 Run your standards based classroom like a common street whore
 Don't you dare get creative and get pimp slapped by common core

Or the they that I speak of suppressing your intellect
 Stress higher order thinking through the web and internet
 What's funny but not really technology's killing us
 Students search for the answers no thinking it's a bust

What a shame their minds enslaved in this awful way
 What happened to Pinar and the thoughts on currere?
 Reflective, Progressive, Analytic, Synthetic theory
 Tap the inner souls of identity so all of you can hear me

If only for a moment I'm not marginalized
 My voice becomes centered that's the educator's prize
 And then I rise to find my students rising too
 Intellectuals abound mental freedom ringing true

What would that look like? A moment on the run?
 Movement from education that has become moribund
 Dead in its nature and attempts to reform
 The field of curriculum theory is now being reborn

Born beyond the period of reconceptualization
 Marrying practice and theory with no speculation
 About who's knowledge is right for every man and woman
 But for a curriculum that's sound for all of us to understand

See my eyes are wide open the task is at hand
 Students before me will learn to disband
 Unworthy educational practices that shatter their fate
 By looking within to determine their own state

Their state unrestricted by the government's control
 Because creative insubordination begins to take hold
 In their minds as they pull from the mental plane
 A common cure for those who are going insane

Due to the current state of our lackluster education
 Crying year after year because of low graduation
 Being blamed by the state for the failures and low scores
 Afraid of being fired and kicked out the door

I close my eyes and imagine higher levels of being
 Content in my stream of consciousness I'm continually seeing
 Autobiographical and fictional narratives used methodologically
 To inform and express the major components of my inquiry into multiracial identity.
 (Michael G. Williams, 2014)

Introduction

My research is guided by the question of who am I? It is my intent to delve into various topics of research on multiracial, mixed race, and identity theories in hopes of coming to some answer to that question. To ask who am I, is one thing whereby I can give many answers however, who am I racially poses a deep and sometimes disturbing question because in all honesty I view race as a reified notion. As such, I will identify as an OpianChocTaliRican, which is a multiracial mix of Ethiopian, Choctaw Native American, Italian, and Puerto Rican. Moreover, I will trace my memory narratively from elementary school to date in order to show how I came to self-identify as OpianChocTaliRican. My race of OpianChocTaliRican doesn't exist on the current governmental racial paradigm nor do social constructs support the idea of self-identification. Steps toward changing social constructs have been taken by advocates for a multiracial category on the U.S. census. There are certainly adversaries to this concept and they

are relevant to the discussion as they make cogent points for maintaining the status quo. It will be challenging to discuss my identity as other than black because I am already viewed as black by society due to my skin color and physical features, which in the minds of many, ingratiates me toward blackness. My own ideas about who I am racially have never added up to others' view of who I am. I will attempt to show how this contradiction of views developed throughout my childhood.

Boundaries of an Unknown House—Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework is multiracial identity theory. Its tenets contest the current U.S. monoracial paradigm currently in place. “It is confusing to our linear models of identity to consider that a multiracial Black-Indian-European person who looks African American self-identifies as multiracial, when someone of a similar heritage identifies as a monoracial African American” (Root, 1992, p. 7). Being of multiracial descent and identifying as such with Black features, I am automatically categorized as African American or Black. “The social understanding of race has allowed only one category of racial identification (a practice supported by the U.S. Census Bureau),” (Root, 1992, p. 8). In other words, societal constructs that perpetuate this type of thinking have been vigorously groomed by the government. The validity of my race is determined by the government and taught to society, who ultimately determine who I am. “To name oneself [sic] is to validate one’s existence and declare visibility,” (Root, 1992, p. 7). I am *OpianChocTaliRican* as a self-named Ethiopian, Choctaw Indian, Italian, Puerto Rican multiracial individual. This self-identification frees me from the limiting rules of classification that are placed upon me by society and government. Upon discovering who I am as a multiracial individual eradicates for me, the one-drop rule or the more technical term, hypodescent (Joseph, 2013; Root, 1992, 1996; Omi & Winant, 1994). This

rule deemed anyone with one drop of black blood as African American however; this becomes problematic for multiracial people because it delimits their true identification as mixed race people. It also causes one to ostracize their other mix leaving them in a governmentally produced monoracial category. Pinar et. al., (1995) note, “Racial categories, for all their historical pervasiveness, have not been fixed through time... The racial category of “black” grew out of slavery. Whites collapsed the diversity of African and native peoples into monolithic, racialized categories,” (p. 316). I have a difficult time navigating through life being identified monoracially because in my formative years I wasn’t accepted in any category, which created much confusion and shaped the way I view race as a whole. Perhaps we have embarked upon a time where racial categories have become even more pervasive in its non-fixed state.

While studying in the field of curriculum theory, I am currently at a place in my life where self-identification is important to me. Out of all the applications I have filled out, I have checked other or everything that applied to me as a way of resisting the assumption that I fall into just one racial category. To date, no one has questioned me about my choice. When filling out the birth certificate information for my daughter’s birth in December of 2013, there was a multiracial category and I checked multiracial. More recently, I filled out an application for a new position in the Georgia Public School System where I currently work as a teacher and it had a category for multiracial individuals. This stems from the efforts and work of Project Race here in the state of Georgia. “In the early 1990s, Project Race successfully brought about changes in several Georgia school districts and after a three-year effort, the Georgia legislature unanimously passed a law that requires a multiracial category on all state forms” (Gay, 1995, pp. 111-112). A multiracial category appears to be an inevitable consequence of consistent political lobbying of the state and federal governments by advocates for this new category. Ohio

and Illinois have followed suit with Georgia and other states have pending legislation on the issue (Gay, 1995). Seeing a multiracial category on the application gave me a sense of acknowledgement from the state and gave me confidence to reveal to the interviewing panel that I am part Puerto Rican while responding to one of their questions. Surprisingly, they weren't so much interested in my racial makeup as they were in my ability to *habla algo de Espanola* (speak some Spanish). Years prior, I would never have spoken up revealing the components of the usually checked 'other' category keeping my voice unheard due to fear and uncertainty.

I draw upon several theorists' works to frame up my study on multiracial identity theory and identity theory. Sonia Janis' (2016) work *Are You Mixed: A war Bride's Granddaughter's Narrative of Lives in-Between Contested Race, Gender, Class, and Power* provides a fresh theoretical perspective on multirace. Her narrative stories stress the impact of not fitting in any particular racial group due to being racially mixed. She describes her experiences as living in-between races and places. Janis' work gives a consummate view of my dilemma and inquiry into multiracial identity as she writes "These stories into my experience in-between race and place reimagine identity for others to understand themselves and one another" (Janis, 2016, p. xvii). Reimagining identity, I believe can help one to know themselves which is a key factor to building relationships with others (Brown, 2008).

Maria Root's (1992) work, 'Racially Mixed People in America' examines ideologies discussing race, race relations and the reconstruction of race through social science. Root's (1996) work, 'The Multiracial Experience' is a later work that highlights the works of many scholars from multiple fields who tackle the social, political and theoretical implications for embracing multiple ancestries. Naomi Zack's (1995) 'American Mixed Race' serves the

purpose of calling attention to the fact that the linear models of race that are in place in our society are damaging to many individuals who struggle with identity. G. Reginald Daniel's (2002) work 'More than Black' dissects the rise of multiracial identities in American society and analyzes the great lengths society went to develop boundaries in order to keep people apart. Those boundaries are proving to be dissolved with the rise of multiracial people; something unheard of at its inception as far back as the 1600s.

Kathleen Odell Korgen's (2010) work, 'Multiracial Americans and Social Class' frame the issues socially. Not only does it address socio-economic disparities but also issues of social justice which invokes inquiry on multiracial identity, politics, and theoretical perspectives of multiracial identity. Many of the theorists within my framework utilize the voices of multiracial people to express the struggles and lived experiences they've had dealing with being multiracial. My personal experiences will garner an understanding of my struggles as a multiracial person and give an inimitable view into the life of a multiracial individual (Janis, 2016). Multiracial identity theory provides a framework that gives remunerative information as to how multiracial individuals deal with identity of themselves and misidentification from others as well as institutionalized identification through governmental categories (Janis, 2016; Root, 1996).

Multiracial identity theory's cogent foundation is parallel to my own struggles with multiracial identity and provides understanding and solid discourse regarding the lived experiences of multiracial people. Lived experience and voice from those experiences are compulsory for inclusion in research based findings (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). While primarily focusing on multiracial identity theory, I support the framing of my study with identity theory by drawing upon the works of theorists inside and outside the field of

curriculum. Awad Ibrahim's (2014) work 'The Rhizome of Blackness' illustrates how identity develops roots when it comes in contact with blackness. In other words, blackness is something developed over time and recognition as in a process of becoming black. Ibrahim illustrates this by documenting several studies on immigrants from Africa who come to North America and develop a sense of blackness as their identity through Hip-Hop culture and language. Ta-Nehisi Coates's (2015) work 'Between the World and Me' brilliantly illustrates the struggles of being black or as he coins it, being in a black body, through several experiences in his personal narrative written as a letter to his young son. Coates tackles issues of identity, race, racism, historical transgressions of racial disharmony between blacks and whites and solutions to a better future for race relations. Amin Maalouf's (2012) work 'In the Name of Identity' revels in the ideology that identity is not defined by color alone. It is many things including our background, race, gender, affiliations in life and much more. Maalouf's intent in writing this book was to bring attention to the notion that our inherited conceptions of identity causes us to fail to fully recognize our individualism.

There are many theoretical ideologies surrounding multiracial identity and it's not particularly surprising considering the rapid growth of multiracial people in America. The racial paradigm in the 1990s was limited to five races however, America "seems to be quickly outgrowing this five-race framework" (Root, 1996, p. xvii) and it has given birth to a profusion of scholarly work on the subject. With a growing population of individuals identifying as multiracial, the impact on demographic race consciousness are inevitable. Janis' (2016) work is a budding example of this inclination. Her experience in the seventh grade of choosing a seat that clearly went against the rules of segregation highlights this point,

The other students in the class all sat at tables with students of the same race. They knew the rules. I was not following the status quo of social segregation according to race. The social segregation, which was limited to Black and White races, did not have a space for someone like me... Neither my ethnic identity nor my mixed race fit this new community, and this new community did not seem to fit me. (pp. 9-10)

Root (1996) states that, "Over time, the concept of a single racial minority group has expanded from a black and white model to a multiracial one," (p. 54). The past exhibits a monolithic racial paradigm predominantly focused on black and white while today race has become a kaleidoscope of color revealing "that monolithic concept [as] a myth" (Root, 1996, p. 54). This perceived myth allows for contradictions to a racial paradigm that placidly holds one hostage to mono-racial categories of identification. Without these contradictions, the reality of racial discernment is left to over emphasis on black and white only (Root, 1996) ignoring other races that may be apparent. Root (1996) points out that "Traditionally, races are viewed as distinct; boundaries between them are meaningful to both experience and how life is ordered" (p. 104).

This ideology complicates and contradicts the multiracial individual when viewed racially within a group or otherwise. A study conducted by Michael C. Thornton queried the idea of whether multiracial people maintained a single-heritage identity or a multiple heritage identity (Root, 1996). Some found it impossible to recognize multiple identities where others found multiple identities superior to single identities (Root, 1996). The themes that emerged from the study were inclusive of multiracial identity being problematic, multiracial identity being equal to Asian and Hispanic-American identity with "the primary concern being cultural aspects of assimilation" (Root, 1996, p. 110), and variations of heritage identification without identifying with cultures specific to multiple races (Root, 1992; Root, 1996; Zack, 1995). I

identify heavily with the third theme, variations, because I do not have cultural experience with Choctaw Native Americans, Italians, or Ethiopians. While I do have cultural experiences with Puerto Ricans, it is not extensive enough to claim any cultural association. This does not deter my desire to self-identify as OpianChocTaliRican because the four races are still very much a part of my heritage and I still acknowledge them. This is the crux of the iceberg in terms of discussing multiracial identity theoretically. Daniel (2002) discusses the story of Jean Toomer, a Harlem Renaissance writer, which describes the underpinnings of identifying with a multiracial heritage. Claiming seven racial mixtures, he attempts to, as he says in his own words, “strive for a spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling” (Daniel, 2002, p. 94). Undulating effortlessly between two racial groups, black and white, he lived his desire to “transcend racial categories altogether” (Daniel, 2002, p. 94).

Transcending racial categories is a desire I have held deep in my chest for many years because as a young boy I did not understand why the racial strife existed. As an older man today, I understand the historical reasoning behind racism and even the psychological subjugation that exists within human nature to some degree however, I have even more of a desire to be myself because of the bondage society has to racial strife. “Without denying a single element in me, with no desire to subsume one to the other” (Daniel, 2002, p. 94), I have recognized pure and simply that “Human blood is human blood. Human beings are human beings... No racial or social factors can adequately account for the uniqueness of each – or for the individual differences which people display concurrently with basic commonality” (Daniel, 2002, p. 94). Philippa Schuyler was a multiracial woman who was exposed to black African culture as well as Western European culture and traditions. Daniel (2002) explains that “Philippa experienced many of the ambiguities, strains, and conflicts that naturally surround

multiracial identity in a society that views black and white as mutually exclusive and hierarchical categories of experience” (p. 95).

In addition to individuals who struggle to maintain their identity as multiracial by blending in socially with black and white cultures simultaneously, groups have also done the same historically. The Manasseh Societies in the late 19th and 20th centuries, The Penguin Club, and Club Miscegenation were all started to support multiracial people in their efforts to acknowledge their white and black backgrounds (Daniel, 2002). I mention these individuals and groups to give a minimal historical background to the multiracial movement that occurred in the 1990s. This historical backdrop supports the understanding that theoretical foundations for multiracial identity theory have been extant for quite some time. The idea didn't just pop up out of the clear blue yonder. It does, however, show that multiracial identity has been a marginalized notion for far too long.

Interestingly, when voicing the sentiments of race as a concrete notion, one can only understand multiracial identity “as structurally fluid, complex, dynamic, and ever transforming” (Zack, 1995, p. 79). This is clear when we explore the social construction of race at its core. Research surrounding intermarriage of minority and majority groups lead Zack (1995) to expound upon Michael Omi and Howard Winant's ethnicity-based theory. Ethnicity-based theory proposes that race is a social category making it one way to define or identify ethnic groups out of many ways (Zack, 1995). “Omi and Winant suggest that the major dispute within the ethnicity-based theory revolved around the possibility of maintaining ethnic group identities over time,” (Zack, 1995, p. 158). Maintaining ethnic groups over time means exactly what in relation to multiracial identity? Being that it is complex, fluid, and ever transforming, maintaining ethnic groups would be impossible to do however, this does not change one's

multiracial heritage it only transforms it over time. Root (1992) agrees with this notion acknowledging that ethnic identity can be viewed as problematic for people that are multiracial. She also notes, however,

Ethnic identity, the identification of an individual or group of individuals with a particular group or groups, is particularly important to the self because it is a master status, an identity that overrides all others' judgment of self. (p. 51)

So in essence, some multiracial individuals identify with groups outside of their biological heritages, for instance Black, White, Asian, while others may identify with one group or multiple groups based on situations and responses to changes in their life over time (Root, 1992; Root, 1996; Omi & Winant, 1994; Korgen, 2010). While ethnic pluralists and those theorists that subscribe to assimilation argued that most multiracial people are more likely to identify with a single ethnic group, current research disputes this claim. Root (1992) highlights an empirical research study that suggests these theorists' argument is not quite accurate. In a study using three samples of mixed heritage students in Hawaii and New Mexico, participants were asked to name the ethnicity they used when filling out an application or official form as well as how they identified ethnically with family and friends. The last thing participants were asked to do was name which group they identified with most closely,

In all three samples of students, a multiple heritage ethnic identity was a common response to one or more of the five identity questions. Multiple-heritage ethnic identities were common even on the final question, which seems to demand a single-heritage answer. Among the Hawaii samples, a majority of the students gave multiple-heritage ethnic identities. Only 26% of the part-Japanese Americans and 11% of the multi-group

Hawaii sample gave one single-heritage ethnic identity response to all five questions.

(Root, 1992, p. 53)

The results of the study clearly show how non-objective ethnic identity is and how many mixed heritage people identify with multiple ethnic groups as opposed to single ethnic groups. In 1997, widespread attention to multiracial identity was gained when Tiger Woods announced that he was Cablinasian after winning the Masters Golf tournament (Korgen, 2010; Joseph, 2010). Since then, more research has come out regarding multiracial individuals and how they self identify. Korgen (2010) investigated the influence of social class on racial identity by using data from interviews “from forty black-white biracial adults from a larger study investigating identity negotiation” (p. 53). Viewing racial identity as multifaceted, the study defined and measured identity in two ways, “(1) as a public identity and (2) as an internalized identity... a public identity refers to the way in which respondents label themselves to others, while an internalized identity refers to how one internally identifies” (Korgen, 2010, p. 55). Based on various findings of the study, Korgen (2010) argues “that social class has the potential to influence racial identities among black-white Americans. To the extent that biracial [and multiracial] people conflate culture and class, their own social class background is likely to be important in influencing their racial identity (p. 66). Conflating class and culture directs us toward an even more complex notion of race because as Ibrahim (2014) warns us, “Culture... is a field of strategic possibility that is ever-changing, dynamic, interdependent, and complex” (p. 37). This further complicates the exploration of multiracial identity which in and of itself is an ever-changing, dynamic fluid, and complex phenomenon.

Maneuvering Through the Unperceived—Methodology

I chose to use an autobiographical, fictional narrative coalesced with poetry because it is fulcrum to the understanding of my multiracial identity. Moreover, these three methods have the potential to allow people to begin the process of understanding multiracial issues personally, socially, and educationally beyond its marginalized scope. It is my objective to reveal an inquiry into multiracial identity embedded in lived experiences, which can also be found in changing social, cultural, and political contexts (Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2005).

Methodologically, I draw upon several theorists in and outside the field of curriculum studies (e.g., Coates, 2015; Doll, 2000; Douglass & Bligh, 2003; Fanon, 2004, 2008; Garvey & Blaisdell, 2004; Hanauer, 2010; He, 2003; Hooks, 1992; Joseph, 2013; Pinar, 1994; Said, 2000; Williams, 2004, 2014). Shubert, Shubert, Thomas, and Carroll (2002) point out that there were various forms of research in curriculum theory in the 1980s. One such form was autobiographical reflection which “provided personal insight into the scholarly discussion that has taken place on curriculum for much of the twentieth century...,” (Shubert et. al., 2002, p. 277). “The act of autobiography... as creation and as recreation, constitute a bringing to consciousness of the nature of one’s existence, transforming the mere fact of existence into a realized quality and a possible meaning,” (Pinar, 1994, p. 58).

I mirror a telling of my story which “[represents] an economy of the self wherein the narration of [my] story functions to preserve [myself]” (Pinar, 2004, p. 49) as a memoir. Doll (2000) states that, “fiction disturbs the status quo [and] peripheral imaginings begin to take root [where] one can, indeed, learn a tremendous amount from fiction” (p. xi). In Heidi Durrow’s (2010) ‘The Girl Who Fell from the Sky,’ memoir and fiction are creatively fused together to express Durrow’s dualistic world. She blends her feelings of struggles and emotions as a mixed

race person with a real newspaper story she read years prior to penning the novel. “Durrow has often felt like she’s had to straddle two worlds” (Durrow, 2010, p. 271). My experiences are similar except I don’t feel like I am straddling two worlds but more like attempting to run with no legs. Often I would walk on my hands to feel the blood rush to my face and head because that feeling always seemed to separate me from my feelings about everything good or bad. When I got back on my feet my brother would always say, “Look, you’re red now!” For some reason, and only momentarily, that would make me happy.

Broyard (2007) risks revealing similar feelings about her racial background in ‘One Drop’ stating, “I thought, conveniently, of identity as a board game, where solving the mystery of my father would allow me to move forward onto the next level of discovery” (p. 11). Ralina Joseph’s (2013) ‘Transcending Blackness’ poses challenges for expressing the feelings, emotions, and struggles multiracial people experience through memoir and fiction because it contests the idea of blackness altogether. She postulates, “Transcending Blackness largely advance the idea that mixed-race identity formation, characteristically marked by struggle, takes place in isolation; such individual and personal experiences are thought to be antithetical to a larger group or community sentiment” (p. 2). That larger group happens to be the African American group that I am automatically governmentally and socially placed into because I have black characteristics. I suppose, in the interest of the black community, I should put aside my thoughts, feelings, and passions about my racial makeup and just accept being categorized as Black or African American. Forget about an “epistemological curiosity in inquiry and life to foster critical consciousness to comprehend and act upon the often contradictory and contested real life world” (He & Phillion, 2008, p. 3). That attitude would not be antithetical but one of

conformity which would never spawn any changes in our society and oppression would be easier to levy upon people as resistance to it would be null and void.

Ultimately, I feel similar to my racial makeup as Lorde does when describing her longing for feeling whole. She writes, “I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me-to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks” (Lorde, 1982, p. 7). What positive, progressive expressions could come from an individual who conforms to themselves completely? Utilizing poetry, memoir and fiction narrative will allow me, a multiracial voice, to express the meaning of self-identification and why it is important. I will tell about the use of autobiography for the sake of narrative writing and because it is closely related to memoir. Pinar and Grumet introduced autobiography as a discourse in the field of curriculum studies in their work ‘Toward a Poor Curriculum’, however, it did not gain attention until the 1990s (Pinar et. al., 1995). “In the 1990s... Autobiography [had] become [so] sufficiently important to the field that the Cambridge Journal of Education devoted a special issue to the topic,” (Pinar, 1994, p. 1).

Autobiography or memoir is important for telling one’s story from an inward personal perspective. Knowing one’s intricate feelings on a subject gives a clear concise intent behind their desires and even objectives. It tells you what matters to them as a whole, authenticated human being. In He’s ‘A River Forever Flowing,’ Wei describes her feelings about being Chinese. She states, “Of course. What’s wrong with that? Although now I am wearing Parisian perfume, a Japanese watch and Italian shoes, I keep my hair like a Chinese country girl. I can’t let my Chineseness go. I am Chinese. I am proud of being Chinese,” (He, 2003, p. 15). In like manner, I can’t let go of the mixture in me. I am mixed however, the current political stance

against the multiracial movement make it hard to be openly proud to be mixed. It is like being forced into a box where three other boxes belong to me but I am not allowed inside of them. Therefore, I delve into an inquiry of multiracial identity theory, mixed race theory, and identity theory using a memoir and fictional narrative method coalesced with poetry. Short (1991) reminds us that it isn't possible to approach every research question in the same manner. For my purposes, autobiographical writing will be a more focused method. Short highlights an autobiographical piece by Conle in 'Forms of Curriculum Inquiry' to show that "what Conle draws attention to is the ways in which her experience shapes her interest in, and ways of constructing, particular research and teaching interests" (short, 1991, p. 133). In using fiction I hope to concur with Doll's belief that "It is the purpose of curriculum... to engage the imagination, such that it is possible to think more metaphorically, less literalistically, about one's world and one's presuppositions about that world" (Doll, 2000, p. xi). This is not in contradiction to the memoir portion of my method of inquiry rather it is in conjunction with it as Doll (2000) ignites irresistible reasons for utilizing fiction,

First is the material itself. Fiction's world is unfamiliar... Second, is a teaching method for fiction probably not favored in survey courses: slowness... A third characteristic of fiction is its fluidity. Fourth, fiction is food. Fiction feeds the soul's hunger; words are like food for starved souls. (pp. xv-xvi)

I have been writing stories since I was in the second grade. Writing is the one activity that has always freed me from the feelings I hold regarding my identity, thus fiction sets me free, however, this is the first time I have ever engaged in writing a memoir and it poses some challenges for me in terms of expressing a voice, which focuses on my experiences past and present. I am finding it to be a very difficult process. The first novel I published in 2004, 'An

Extension of *Time to Die For* was fiction but similar to a memoir in some instances as some of the characters and events reflected portions of my life and experiences even though I'm not specifically mentioned in the book. For instance, when James Alexander Hopper is murdered by the Grim Reaper, it was a retelling of how my own uncle, whom we called J. Hopper, was murdered at his home in Bolton, Mississippi (Williams, 2004). Ironically, as I told the story from a first person point of view, many who read the book wondered if I was the main character, Alfred Hopkins, who was telling the story.

In my second fiction novel, *'Black Widow'*, I tell a story about a woman, Lynn Beaumont, who goes to great lengths to save her brother from the mafia (Williams, 2014). My father was nearly killed by the mafia in the early 70s because he asked questions about his brother's whereabouts when he returned home from the war in Vietnam only to find out from the mafia that they were responsible for his murder. It appears to me that reality is embedded in fiction and fiction is embedded in reality depending on who's telling the story. It seems fitting for me to methodologically probe my inquiry into multiracial identity theory using memoir and fictional narrative.

I also use poetry as a method of expressing and in some cases, clarifying my recollected sentiments. Aesthetically using spoken word and free verse allows me to incorporate thoughts and feelings, which may otherwise be suppressed. Poetry is a vehicle that can simulate the significance of the memoir and fictional data used to give my perspective on being multiracial. This exigent method further supports my desire to understand my identity as a multiracial person. "The process of writing a poem is also one of reflection, discovery and expression of personal experience, thoughts and feelings," (Hanauer, 2010, p. 31). The process of writing poems is inextricably connected to writing a memoir. It is an effective way to clarify my

emotional connection to being multiracial and others' perspective on my circumstances as well as their own. Hanauer (2010) agrees with this assertion as he acknowledges, "poetry writing is a process in which participants attempt to make sense of their own experiences and express them in a way that other readers may have an insight into their own subjective interpretation of personally meaningful events" (p.31). I have witnessed readers gain this insightful subjective interpretation from other works I have completed. One instance in particular comes to mind whereby Calvin Midland, the producer of the audio book for my first novel, *Extension of Time to Die For*, connected the events of a poem in the story with events in his own life and deduced from his interpretation that his experience was worthwhile after all. While recording in his studio, I did vocal parts for all the characters and this impressed him. Alfred expresses his love for Maylee in the story by writing her a poem,

To my darling Maylee, I love you to the moon. My darling love you were sent from above, to me in the rough days and spread your love in many ways. So I'd definitely dare to show you I care with words from my heart and true love from the start. You're all I think and all I dream every night and every day. So I always seek another way to say I love you and show you I care as I get warm feelings from your beautiful stare. The emotions I have I hold inside but the love we share goes far and wide and when you tell me you love me I know it's true. I want to hold you tight and never be blue. Sure times can be easy and times can be tough and the love we share can sometimes be rough. But we take time together and never hesitate to always love each other and communicate. This helps us to understand, understand each other; so arguments cannot lead our love to another. So as you brighten my day with your lovely smile and you're looking so good all the while; it gives me insight to give love to an angel from above, as I find a way,

another way to say I love you this very day. Maybe I love you and you'll see it soon. I love you sweetheart all the way to the moon. (Williams, 2004, pp. 50-51)

When the recording session was over for the evening, Calvin looked at me and asked how I could come up with so many voices. I told him I hear voices and I just imitate what I hear, sucked my teeth and winked at him. We both laughed and I left. At the next session the following weekend, he said he had something he wanted to tell me. I was curious to know what it was and secretly hoping he was going to ask me to write a song for one of the many high end artists with whom he worked. No such luck befell me. He told me he listened to the poem in the story five times and figured he was the reason he and his wife were having marital problems. They were on the verge of divorcing and the poem helped him realize that he needed to be a better man, to do more effort wise for their marriage. He was glad he experienced the downs in the relationship but he was going to work on finding a better way to love his wife. At the time, I was at a loss for words because I didn't know about his marital problems and certainly did not see a poem in a story written by me having any affect on anyone's life but the characters in the story. Remarkably, today, Calvin is still happily married to his wife and a child resulted from his better way to tell his wife that he loved her.

Faulkner (2009) illustrates a need for using poetry by citing Jane Hirshfield (1997) who "believes poetry has an ability to clarify and magnify our human existence" (p.16). "The power of poetry lies in its cultural marginality and how it resists itself; [and] the fact that poetry resists means we can experience wonder, rediscover pleasure in our ability to make the world intelligible" (Logenbach, 2004 in Faulkner, 2009, p. 16). It's quite astounding how poetry can make our inner world clearer and give readers a knowing that was unknown prior. The unknown is the writer's abode whereby the "reader comes away with the resonance of another's world"

(Neilsen, 2008, p. 96). This can be likened to Doll's (2000) view of curriculum in that "curriculum is a moving form, running with experience as it is lived by both researcher and student" (p. xii). Poetry, as an aesthetic form of inquiry, must be circumscribed into the field of research as it has been too narrowly included up to this point (Beyer, 2000). Poetry as a method allows for self expression of my experiences as a multiracial person as well as self reflection by readers for knowledge gained from my experiences and their own enlightenment for their walk of life as they relate to the poetry on various emotional levels. This is possible because many times a reader interprets the work of the writer and views it as their own (Faulkner, 2009). Poetry also helps me to harness the fear that I experience when addressing the issues of multiracial identity.

I have embarked upon a topic that requires inner strength to write about and discuss among others however, Anzaldua's (2007) *Borderlands La Frontera*'s passionate and moving content has expanded my thinking in many ways but also stimulated a fear that has to be extinguished within myself in order to continue exploring my multiracial identity. Fear denotes uncertainty, doubt, apprehension, or trepidation. For me, it haunts my ability to fully express my thoughts and views on my own identity as a multiracial person. Having my identity pointed out to me in the past and being ridiculed by others has created a psychological stain within that I am working to wipe clean. Without stating that I have a fear of addressing my identity openly to others, I am able to mask it however, Palmer (2007) reminds me that it is most likely arrogance that is causing my fear. I'm not sure of what I have to be so arrogant about but I have been told on more than one occasion that I am arrogant. I don't mean to be and in retrospect I realize it is most likely due to fear of letting others into my multiracial world.

I believe poetry as a method is one more form of representation that can capture what I am attempting to express in my research. “As such, a poem is qualitative data which presents personal events and the specific ways the writer understands and feels their significance. It is this aspect of poetry writing that makes it a valuable tool for qualitative research,” (Hanauer, 2010, p. 31).

I tell my life stories starting in the 1970s, my experience from elementary school through college, and teaching career. I tell my story as a memoir, in order, using fiction to engage the reader’s imagination. I also use fiction to protect the identity of those who have passed on and those who may not desire to be known in my dissertation work. This is difficult because while my character reflects me and my experiences, anyone who knows or knew me could clearly identify the fictionalized characters if I only fictionalize the names and settings. For example, Kathy Smith at Green elementary might be Brook Dawson in the suburbs in voice and action and vice versa however, their names are pseudonyms and as such, one would have to read my work with an inspecting eye to unravel the puzzle.

To protect my characters’ identities, I create composite characters throughout my memoir. I begin each chapter with a poem that describes complicated thoughts and feelings I have been experiencing throughout my life. These poems represent my contradictory life experience as a multiracial person as I navigate in a world where I am viewed as only Black. Being viewed as only black complicated many aspects of my life early on but the complications became lessened the more I outwardly accepted the title black. I want to use poetry as that space where I identify it coming into being by specific racial identity. In other words, a poem may be developed by the Puerto Rican in me or the Ethiopian perhaps. My own clarification of the racial representation of these poems helps the reader understand my feelings on being identified

solely as black. Poetry allows for complex and a sometimes contradictory explanation of one's coming into being. Van Manen (1990) argues, "[It] is inappropriate to ask for [a noncomplex] conclusion" (p. 13) when seeking answers to questions for research using poetry as method. My desire is to use my memoir coalesced with fiction and poetry from the viewpoint of a multiracial individual to expose the idea of race as nothing more than a reified notion used to keep the human race separated. The memoir enlightens the reader on my individual division from all races and its impact on my ability to teach and serve in the educative process/community.

Through this narrative journey, I seek to raise questions about my own identity and who I have become racially. Is race an important factor with regards to teaching and serving in the educational community? In this study I propose to question how belief in a racial paradigm constructed governmentally and promulgated through societal constructs impacts my ability to navigate through life without experiencing issues with racial identity. Conflicts with racial identities not only impact one's individual experiences but also the experiences of others that they come in contact with. Schubert (1986) similarly agrees as he articulates, "the personal beliefs of all engaged in the educative process invariably affect the experiences that bring learning in schools," (p. 101). I would like to think of the impact my experiences may have brought to learning in the schools as positive and beneficial as my experiences were not always so positive.

My interest in multiracial identities came about sitting in a doctoral class at GSU. My teacher was Chinese and everyone else was white with the exception of a couple of black students. I often wondered how the white students perceived me racially. During a presentation I was giving, I blatantly asked the question, "What do you see when you see me?" And the room fell silent momentarily. A white student finally responded, "I see a coach, a friend... a

fellow classmate.” So careful he seemed in not mentioning my race. What was he feeling? Tension? Embarrassment? Giddy at the idea of answering correctly, even though there was no correct answer? He spoke up but I could only image the responses from the others, ‘A black man, I don’t know. What do you mean? Can you be more specific?’ were the answers circling in my head as I moved forward in the presentation.

On one hand, I was comforted in the one student’s response. On the other hand, I was distrusting of the response because it was a safe answer. It avoided the all too familiar racial response while at the same time building a positive connection between him and me. I had spoken with him on a few occasions and he divulged some of his likes and interests. Surprisingly, he was highly interested in rap music. He knew more about Kanye West’s new album and lyrics from a Jay-Z song than I did. In my head I assumed he perceived me as a black man because that is what most people assumed. I pretended to know about rap as well and named a couple of other artists he might not have been familiar with like Two-Chains and Wocka Flocka Flame. He was familiar but didn’t care too much for their lyrical expressions. To me he appeared to be interested in what they were saying and not so much their race and genre of music. This I silently stored in my memory archives as ‘white guy who gets it.’ In other words, he wasn’t prejudiced or bigoted in my mind. So later when he responded in class, it solidified the comforting feeling I got when he said, “a friend.” It’s not like we hung out or called each other daily to talk about our day but he was open to the possibility and that mattered to me. It is my intention to tell a story inspired by my personal experiences interacting with students past and present as well as teachers, principals, and educational staff alike. In the process of narrating my story I would like to entertain the question of Black as a race. Have we been duped into accepting black as a category of race for ourselves when clearly the majority of

us are mixed, black and white people? I plan to write my memoir using poetry to describe thoughts and feelings about my racial identity that would otherwise be too lengthy or complicated to express narrative wise. That is to say, some poems are used to summarize thoughts and feelings about my own racial identity. Until brown skin people or those classified other than white realize they are racially mixed, the ignoring of those who do realize it will continue.

In my view, utilizing memoir, fiction, and poetry as methodology lends itself to circumventing the notion that identity is stagnant and unchanging. It is not. It is dynamic and fluid in nature, constantly wavering in its position for solidification. This requires a methodological approach that correlates to the pendulant essence of identity. Stories created via these methods lead “readers of the narratives [to] identify with the account and see its relevance to their own situations” (McNeil, 2009, p. 382). Furthermore, this is a process of communicating and “as communicating humans studying humans communicate, we are inside of what we are studying” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 216). This deepens the validity and meaning behind the research process. In using memoir, poetry, and fictional narrative Short reminds us that narrative “brings theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on... experience as lived” (Short, 1991, p. 125).

While I narrate my life story, I keep in mind that “The tendency to explain through stories can easily be misinterpreted as establishing causal links in narrative inquiry” (Short, 1991, p. 131). To help avoid this negation of inquiry, I will focus on the whole of my inquiry which seeks to clarify my own multiracial identity. As I tell my story, it is my desire to share, with the readers, what I did from my perspective. Moreover, “My ideas are candidates for others to entertain, not necessarily as truth, let alone truth, but as positions about the nature and

meaning of a phenomenon that may fit their sensibility and shape their thinking about their own inquiries,” (Short, 1991, p. 135). Coates ennobles poetry as a writing tool for unlatching the gate to the war taking place inside. He posits, “Poetry was not simply the transcription of notions – beautiful writing rarely is. I wanted to learn to write, which was ultimately, still as my mother had taught me, a confrontation with my own innocence, my own rationalizations” (Coates, 2015, p. 51). His premise for writing, for writing poetry no less, sparks my own passions for writing in like manner. To see the words unfold upon the page to create something coherent and connected is quite invigorating and scary at the same time. Fear causes my heart to quicken as the poetic verses leave my mind and fall to their new home, a page waiting to be discovered, interpreted, and even argued for their meaning, their truth. Poetry and writing in general has always been “the processing of my thoughts until the slag of justification [falls] away and I [am] left with the cold steel truths of life” (Coates, 2015, p. 52). Those truths are found in my dissertation work on multiracial identity.

To write my memoir, I find myself in a quiet place away from the noise and distractions of the world specific even to my own home. I start by taking deep breaths inhaling slowly and exhaling all the same. When I feel a tingling sensation caressing the top of my head I sit in deep thought for a few minutes envisioning events of the past, listening to the voices of people I had experiences with recalling specific actions and feelings at the time. This is no easy task as many of my memories tug at my emotional centers begging for answers to questions I’m not addressing in my current work on multiracial identity theory.

It would be as Angela Davis said in her political autobiography, “I was... unwilling to render my life as a personal adventure” (Davis, 1974, p. x). Her motivation to write stemmed from her sense of identity, which was heavily connected with blacks’ struggle against racism

and poverty (Davis, 1974). While organizing rallies to fight against injustice toward blacks, she writes about traveling to Salinas, Monterey County to speak at a protest for the Soledad brothers. “As I drove through the streets of this city, my eyes instinctively searched for Black faces in the cars and among the little groups of sidewalk strollers” (Davis, 1974, p. 261). Instinctively, Davis automatically looks to find common connections racially but finds none. The lack of commonality found made her feel as though she had entered ‘enemy territory.’

In Frantz Fanon’s work, ‘The Wretched of the Earth’ he was clear about his identity and with whom his allegiance lied. He advocated for the people, fellow nationals. Anyone else was a purveyor of subjugation and past colonialism in his eyes who didn’t deserve the same treatment as fellow nationals. He has blatantly said before, “for the people only fellow nationals are owed the truth” (Fanon, 2004, p. ix). His argument was staunchly political and supported national liberation. To be able to self-identify in the U.S. today lends itself towards national liberation. However, self-identification would have to be defined and everyone be treated and identified as humans first. Fanon (2004) notes that today’s resistance to the aftermath of colonial subjugation “is grafted onto a protean, unbalanced reality where slavery, bondage, barter, cottage industries, and stock transactions exist side by side” (p. 64). A complicated quagmire of such existence certainly complicates the notion of identity in any sense.

In Edward Said’s memoir, ‘Out of Place,’ he found no connection to his English given first name and Arabic given last name. Neither did he feel a connection to his parents and sisters. He states, “I seemed to myself to be nearly devoid of any character at all, timid uncertain, without will [and] yet the overriding sensation I had ways of always being out of place” (Said, 2000, p. 3). His feelings of not fitting in produced anger and objection toward anyone who was against Palestine and good will towards those who sympathized or directly

helped them. He writes about his feelings of anger and resentment toward prominent political figures like President Truman and Martin Luther King. However, his favor for Eisenhower only rose in his heart due to “Eisenhower’s resolute position against Israel in 1956,” (Said, 2000, p. 141).

Ironically, Said’s distance from Palestine quelled his hatred for America but he still carried a passionate disdain for President Truman because of “his crucial part in handing Palestine over to the Zionists” (Said, 2000, p. 140). He attributed being distant from Palestine and his family there as the reason for his diminished feelings of anger toward America. Going to school in America and influence from his mother’s strong opposition to Palestine and politics helped curb his anger, which he didn’t really understand, toward America as a whole (Said, 2000). He despised politicians for their actions against Palestine, which he encompasses within the whole of humanity. Said even loathed Martin Luther King “who [he] had genuinely admired but was unable to fathom (or forgive) for the warmth of his passion for Israel’s victory during the 1967 war” (Said, 2000, p. 141).

In some ways I have had similar experience of identities as what Said has gone through in his life. Coming to America Said gained a new identity, a new sense of self that pulled him away from his original identity that was formed from his past unresolved feelings. This helped spark the desire and possible need to write his memoir. He was at odds with himself and his inner loyalty to Palestine perhaps caused feelings of being out of place. I believe there are feelings held deep within regarding your attachment to people, places, and things. As a mixed race person, I hold onto my heritage within even if it is just a knowing or even a picture that connects me to my heritage. I asked my mother recently for a picture of my great grandmother who was full blooded Choctaw Native American. Her first response was; “I don’t think I have

any” and my heart sank because the only picture I had of her was a mental memory. I can still see her face clearly as her long reddish-brown braids relaxed on both sides of the white shawl she always wore. At the time, I wasn’t fully aware of what a Native American was let alone a Choctaw. Grandma was just grandma. My grandfather would tell me sometime later in my young life. All I knew was that she was the grandma who used to give me that peppermint candy that dissolved in your mouth and she would sit at an old out of tune upright piano and pat her leg with a smile and sparkle in her eyes, “Come on here boy. Let Almary show you some music.”

I never imagined seeing music but when she played even on the old out of tune piano, I would swear you could see the notes floating up from the keys and vanish into the air. My mother called me a couple days later and said she had found two pictures of my grandmother. My heart raced to the top of my throat and butterflies turned flips in my stomach. I was elated to hear we had photographed memories of my grandmother. It meant a great deal to me to have them. In the ‘Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,’ Douglass describes how the slaves sang about going to the ‘Great House Farm.’ In the quote that follows, we get a sense of the meaningful feelings garnered from his experience as a slave. In the songs that were sung,

Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek. (Douglass & Blight, 2003, p. 51)

My life's trials and tribulations in no way possible compares to Douglass' life as a slave albeit, the feelings felt, no matter how deep, are the connection between the two. I sit and close my eyes listening for what a wild howling tone might sound like coming from a human being broken under the yoke of subjugation and bondage. And when I finally hear it after strong contemplation and concentration, I find that same expression of feeling filling up in the wells of my eyes as my thoughts flit between African slaves and Native Americans. To simply acknowledge just how unfair that was for people to have experienced such horror does not resolve the feelings of anguish and pain felt by them and those who consider the horrors experienced with all of their heart. In writing my memoir it is my intent to show these meaningful feelings through events, character actions, and dialogue. It is also my intent to show this through the perspective of one who is viewed as black but in actuality multiracial. My heritage stamps my identity as multiracial but my phenotype drives society to derive at blackness for my race.

In 'Black Looks' Bell Hooks states that "It is only as we collectively change the way we look at ourselves and the world that we can change how we are seen" (Hooks, 1992, p. 6). I'm seen as black in society and after much time and research spent on the subject, I still have unresolved feelings of anger toward some blacks and some whites. As I read 'Black Looks,' those feelings are stirred by notions of this nature. "If the many non-black people who produce images or critical narratives about blackness and black people do not interrogate their perspective, then they may simply recreate the imperial gaze – the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize" (Hooks, 1992, p. 7). For me, Hook's statement is two-fold in that it addresses blacks being identified by non-blacks and implicitly addresses those people deemed black and their lack of awareness of self. Who is truly black, one might ask? But regardless of

who is truly black the real problem is the image and representation placed upon the notion of blackness. When we, as Hooks suggest, collectively change the way we view ourselves, how we are seen will change as well (Hooks, 1992). At his juncture, I can speak for myself collectively, only in the sense that my Ethiopian, Choctaw, Italian, and Puerto Rican bloods speak for me making me multiracial.

Broken Bridges

One of the most complicated points of contention with regards to identity for me is the inception of the given title Black or African American. This very deep rooted contention is what drives me to question my own identity. My memoir will delve into lived experiences that possibly address the root cause of my desire to be identified as OpianChocTaliRican, which is to say creatively, multiracial, as opposed to just Black or African American. In Bob Blaisdell's 'Selected Writings and Speeches of Marcus Garvey,' Garvey tells about his life and struggles of leading a movement for Negroes worldwide. It is no surprise that in his lived experiences and struggles he comes to the conclusion that the black man is his own worst enemy. He recognizes that black opposition to his movement is based on lack of education and experience abroad in the world. Having traveled the world and seeing no black leadership anywhere Garvey asks, "Where is the black man's Government? Where is his kingdom? Where is his President, his country, and his ambassador, his army, his navy, his men of big affairs" (Garvey & Blaisdell, 2004, p. 3)?

Garvey's inquisition of the matter led him to start a movement called the 'Universal Negro Improvement Association' whereby he sought to give blacks a greater sense of pride and dignity in who they were as a people. However, most of the resistance to the ideals of his movement came from blacks themselves who ingratiated themselves toward whites and the

white establishment in one way or another. Many gave reasons such as being called Negro was beneath them yet they were called Negro by whites and themselves regularly (Garvey & Blaisdell, 2004). Garvey was even accused, by blacks of being a part of the Ku Klux Klan because part of the principal ideals of the 'Universal Negro Improvement Association' movement was to allow "well-disposed and broad-minded white men [to] aid" (Garvey & Blaisdell, 2004, p. 8) them with their movement. Light skinned blacks didn't feel a man as dark skinned as Garvey should be the leader of such a movement and black politicians thwarted his efforts in any way they could.

Booker T. Washington likened this loathsome mentality of blacks to 'crabs in a barrel' whereby when one crab looks to make an effort to get out of the barrel the other crabs will pull it back down into the barrel (Washington, 1986). Garvey's whole objective was to give the black man a place on the planet, a solidified and dignified identity as the Native Americans once had and the Africans once had. Any retreat toward the reestablishment of identity was halted by a mentality of ignorance. For instance, the argument was made that Garvey wasn't born in America so how could he fight for blacks' struggle for freedom in America? He eloquently points out, and this somewhat parallels my thoughts on identity, "You know the history of my race. I was brought here; I was sold to some slave master in the island of Jamaica. Some Irish slave master who subsequently gave my great grandfather his name. Garvey is not... African" (Garvey & Blaisdell, 2004, p. 11). He goes on to point out identity wise, that the names we identify ourselves by are not African but French, German, Irish, British etc. Ironically, we are identified in name by European heritage but nationally identified as African Americans. It is a contradiction at best that clearly parallels my argument regarding my own

identity. How can I be identified solely as black when I am more than black? It is ultimately a contradiction within a contradiction as it relates to identity.

I am identified as a black man with a European name (Williams), in a land that is currently white but formerly Native American, truly multiracial, with a distinction regarded less than white. My name alone seems to symbolize that I am still property of some white slave master who dictates and determines my true identity in a nation of people whose identities have been lost under the weight of white dominance. Homi Bhabha recognizes that identity for nations are always in transition. In his book 'Nation and Narration' he speaks for those who have not found their nation within these contemporary transitions and question why as they see themselves as worthy people on the planet as well,

Their persistent questions remain to remind us in some form or measure, of what must be true for the rest of us too: 'When did we become "a people"? When did we stop being one? Or are we in the process of becoming one? What do these big questions have to do with our intimate relationships with each other and with others?' (Bhabha, 1990, P. 7)

To iterate, illustrate, and express the many aspects of identity that exist through my own lived experiences, I will write a memoir using fiction and poetry in an attempt to capture the many expressions and nuances that can come from exploring my own racial identity. My reason for writing my memoir is to spark questions in those who struggle with their identities and embolden their desires to think more in depth about who they truly are as individuals in a mixed and contradictory world. In 1902, Garvey gave this urgent caveat to his followers, "If you follow me down the ages you will see within a hundred years you are going to have a terrible race problem in America, when you will have increased and the country will become over-populated" (Garvey & Blaisdell, 2004, p. 11).

Since then, we have seen the terrible race problem at what appeared physically at its worst during the civil rights era however, the current racial dilemma has, in my view, imploded upon itself making the worst times yet to come where an entire race of people have not a clue as to who they are. They lack identity and knowledge of any historical roots that might reconnect them and they ascribe to the contemporary labels and titles attributed to them by their capturers of old. The excuse for such a tragedy is that is just the way it is. We have gotten away from what it really means to be black, black based on our roots engendered from our historical past. This departure from blackness is apparent today as Hooks (1990) states, “Teaching Black Studies, I find that students are quick to label a black person who has grown up in a predominately white setting and attended similar schools as ‘not black enough’” (p. 37). I experienced the same accusations levied upon me in my life. Is there some measure of black that brings one into partial or full blackness? I’m certain there is not but there is the notion that one may have a “different black experience, one that means they may not have had access to life experiences more common to those of us raised in racially segregated worlds” (Hooks, 1990, p. 37). I was brought up in both worlds and shunned in both at different times by whites and blacks leaving me confused, angry, and lost to my own identity. It is not my fault I was born who I am and in the environment I was raised.

While writing my memoir I keep Janet Miller’s words in the forefront of my mind. “I also must acknowledge that in all remembering, there is forgetting. Thus, this is a partial history – partial in terms of preference and commitments as well as gaps, warps, slants, and silences” (Miller, 2004, p. 27). My memoir will be written as fiction to create scenes, locations, and dialogue that expresses my thoughts and feelings at the time. I desire for these expressions and

feelings to take the reader away from themselves and into a realm of inquiry. My experiences should invoke questions from the reader and not necessarily solutions to the problems therein.

Mary Aswell Doll's book, 'Like Letters in Running Water' illustrates how fiction writing, storytelling can offer much more than textbooks, which limit the scope of imagination (Doll, 2000). The creative articulation of words reflected on a page work to spark the imagination and touch the soul. It also allows for deep self-reflection beyond the rote method of acquiring information and re-dispensing it in linear fashion. Doll reasons that fiction's "function is not to guide but to shock, not to explain but to question, not... to offer recipes but to ask questions" (Doll, 2000, p. 29). These are places I am often reluctant to journey toward because those unfamiliar moments of space are surprising.

To illustrate a moment of space I am referring to, I digress briefly to when I was fifteen years of age. There were a set of twins in the neighborhood, Danny and Donnie, who had moved there from the Beacon Hill community, which was a rough neighborhood. They were gangster disciples and took great pride in gang banging. Gang banging in short, was a way to commit senseless crimes and terrorize citizens in the community. The more a gang member gang banged the better their chances of moving up in the ranks of the gang. Danny was nice and got along with most everyone in the neighborhood. Donnie, on the other hand, was the spawn of Satan himself. He was always angry and willing to hurt you if you got in his way. One Saturday afternoon, I and two other friends were playing basketball at the elementary school. Marcend was losing at our usual game of Hustle where individual players worked to earn 21 points before anyone else (also known as 21). Marcend was light skinned like me but he had a temper. He didn't like losing at Hustle because he always boasted about how good he was at the game. On this particular Saturday I wish he was as good as he claimed to be. Perhaps the outcome of

the day might have been different. My best friend Payton Washington dominated us both in the game. He was bigger and stronger and would later play as the star fullback on our high school football team.

“21 bums!”

Payton yelled with his hand raised in victory. Marcend threw a fit cursing and ranting about how we cheated and how unfair the game was because the ball was slightly warped. We just laughed because it was typical of Marcend to behave that way. During his hellacious ranting and raving, Donnie approached us from behind.

“Quit your bitchin punk! I got next court!” Donnie exploded.

We turned around to see that it was the devil’s spawn in the flesh but in all Marcend’s ranting and raving I don’t think he realized it was Donnie who had made the comment. I believe he thought Payton or I had and he turned around with a snap remark of his own.

“Yo mama black ass chump!” He responded, but quicker than a flash Donnie had him on his back with a .22 revolver pointed at his nose. He pressed the gun so hard into Marcend’s nose that a single tear found its way down his cheek. “I’m sorry man. I am so sorry. I ain’t know...” he whimpered through his eyes simultaneously with his voice.

Payton and I stood petrified watching Marcend on the ground with his hands in the up position. The next thing that happened burned an image into my mind that I still see clearly to this day. A pop sounded and a yelp followed soon after. Donnie had shot Marcend in the hand.

“I can’t stand yellow bitches,” Donnie said through gritted teeth with his hand tightly wrapped around the small .22 revolver.

He pointed it toward Payton and me as we backed up slowly. Payton dropped the basketball and another pop sounded from the gun. The air squiggled from the basketball as it

went flat. We wanted to run but couldn't because everything was happening so fast. He pointed the gun in my direction.

"Please man, please," I begged.

In the moment I wasn't sure of what I was begging for; perhaps for the sky to open up and drop fire rain down on Donnie's head.

"You a yellow bitch too," he said and squeezed the trigger.

The gun made a loud clicking sound and nothing happened as my feet went numb and my heart nearly stopped. He frantically waived the gun at us yelling, "Open your mouth and you dead! I promise you..."

He threatened us as he ran off the court and into the neighborhood across the street from the school. We helped Marcend to his feet. He was crying harder than I'd ever seen anyone cry before. His hand was covered in bright red blood.

"Let me see it," Payton asked anxiously as we walked toward his house.

He extended his trembling hand and exposed the hole in it with dark black residue around his thumb and palm. My stomach was in knots. Not only did my friend get shot in front of me but we couldn't tell because telling meant dying.

Marcend's mother was frantically hysterical at the site of her only child's hand. The piercing screams and dry heaves that came from her had curdled the blood running through my veins.

"What the hell happened," His father asked while dialing the police?

My breath was taken by his question and I could tell Payton's wasn't in normal rhythm either by the tears in his eyes and look of horror on his face. Marcend surprised both of us with what came out of his mouth.

“Some black boy shot me,” he winced.

“Who, Who shot you?” His dad asked infuriated.

“I don’t know him. Payton and Michael found me on the court and helped me home,” he lied for us.

He knew the consequences as well as any of us standing in his front living room. He was a living example of that consequence.

“You guys didn’t see or hear anything,” his father asked?

Payton and I put our heads down shaking them ‘no’ slowly. The police arrived fairly quickly and received the same story. We were sent home and Marcend was taken to the hospital. The next day I stayed in the house too afraid to go outside. I called Marcend and Payton on the phone to confirm the story we would stick to. We were deathly afraid to go to school the following Monday but Payton and I went anyway. Marcend had an excuse to be out for a couple of days while he recovered from his wound. On the way home on the bus, Danny and Donnie and several other gang members were waiting at my stop. I convinced my brother Charles to ride up to Payton’s stop with me and walk the long way home on the other side of the neighborhood. I was so terrified that I lied to my brother about the detour.

“We need to get ready for track this year so let’s jog home,” I told him.

He bought the lie and jogged home with me. About a week later, my mother told us about one of the kids in the neighborhood being arrested for murder. She was reading from the local newspaper.

“Donnie Wells of 293 Craig Drive has been arrested for the murder of a convenient store customer (I don’t remember the victim’s name). If convicted he could receive a minimum of 30 years in prison,” she explained.

As she read details from the article, it was like the sun came out from behind a very dark cloud. I was free and could hardly wait to call Payton and Marcend to tell them the news. To this date, Donnie should be getting out of prison in a few months. Recently, I accepted his twin brother, Danny, on Facebook but I haven't gotten up the nerves to ask how Donnie is doing. To my surprise, I was actually concerned about his well being. Having worked in the prison system before and knowing the horrors that could be experienced there, I felt bad for him. I think I became thoughtfully aware of his well being when his brother caught up with me on Facebook. Years later, other experiences and time away from the harsh streets of Chicago has turned me away from hateful thoughts I had for a kid who would've most likely shot me had there been another bullet in the gun. It actually terrifies me to feel this way because I don't know where the feelings came from nor do I see a cessation of the feelings being drummed up from writing about my past. It sparks questions for me and I hope it does the same for the readers of my work.

Explorations into a Multiracial World – Literature Review

Multiracial identity theory acknowledges the individual races within a person and how they impact their lived experiences. My dissertation work on multiracial identity theory comes from a wide array of literature that is laden with debate from scholars and laypersons from different fields of study therefore I will draw upon several traditional works outside the field of curriculum theory. Theorists such as (Brunsma, 2006; Daniel, 2002; Frazier, 2002; Gay, 1995; Korgen, 2010; Root, 1992, 1996; Spencer, 1999, 2006, 2011; Winters & DeBose, 2003; & Zack, 1995) expound on the dynamic and fluid issues surrounding multiracial identities. These theorists purport the issues of multiracial and mixed heritage in positive supportive ways as well as ways that question the tenets of multiracial identity theory. Maria Root was the first theorist

to objectively attempt to assess our understanding of multiracial issues with ‘Racially Mixed People in America’, published in 1992, roughly 23 years ago. Prior to 1992, “scholarship was far from objective in its attempt to unravel the issues surrounding racial identity and multiracial individuals” (Brunsma, 2006, p.1). Understanding the need for an objective and diverse perspective, Root (1992) notes, “As multiracial and multiethnic people become more prevalent in society, the need for theory that can describe their experiences becomes increasingly important” (p. 25). The central question multiracial identity theory seeks to answer is who am I? It seeks to gain an understanding of how multiracial individuals negotiate their varied racial makeup, how they see themselves, and more importantly, how they develop their identities.

Root’s book, ‘The Multiracial Experience’ discusses the rights multiracial individuals have by highlighting a bill of rights for racially mixed people and revealing governmental classifications of multiracial people. Gay’s book, ‘I Am Who I Am’ concurs with Root’s work and identifies organizations working toward helping mixed people feel comfortable with identifying as multiracial through change in governmental laws. Root and Kelley’s book ‘Multiracial Child Resource book’ attempts to create a society that redefines race and diversity by helping multiracial people develop racial identity. Zack’s ‘American Mixed Race’ captures the essence of why multiracial people have identity complexes and shares the ills of the one drop rule in five chapters that revolve around autobiography, social science, and identity theory.

While these theorists shed light on multiracial identities and its effects on multiracial people, Winters and DeBose’s book, ‘New Faces in a Changing America’ illustrates the reasons for lack of progress in determining multiracial identities. They make note of the fact that the one drop rule still applies for reasons of civil rights compliance monitoring. Spencer’s books, ‘Spurious Issues,’ ‘Challenging Multiracial Identity,’ and ‘Reproducing Race’ give new

meaning to the cons of a multiracial movement. While Spencer is also a multiracial person, he reserves the right to express grave concerns over a multiracial movement. He is probably the most diligent at highlighting the need for developing multiracial identities while at the same time cautioning the move toward a multiracial category on the U.S. Census. Daniel's book, 'More Than Black,' questions the possibility of what a new racial order may bring focusing optimistically on the idea that a multiracial category will only transform our current mindset about race. This transformation, Daniel writes, "can increase our understanding not only of trends in black-white relations but of similar trends in other groups as well" (Daniel, 2002, p. 13).

I want to be accepted and validated in society as a person, human, not Black, White, Indian, or Latino. I don't attempt to ingratiate myself or blend in with any race or social culture because I am a fluid, dynamic being that is forever changing and evolving. I am an individual with variegated tastes, passions, and desires. I'm comfortable in jeans and t-shirt or suit and tie. I play basketball, football, tennis, soccer, baseball, track, and golf. I love to read, write, ski, bowl, and play spades, dominos, Black Jack, and chess. I eat chicken fried or baked, provolone, Swiss, or American cheese, soul food (no pork please), Indian, Italian, Mexican, Chinese food (I'll try almost anything). I have traveled to Europe (France, Germany, Belgium), Mexico (Tijuana, Costa Maya, Cozumel), and the Caribbean Islands (Aruba, Puerto Rico, Bahamas, Freeport, Cayman, Jamaica, St. Lucia, & Dominican Republic). These are just a few examples of who I am as an individual past and present. Since I was a young boy, to this day I have always been described as a 'Jack of all trades'. I attribute this recognition to my multiracial heritage.

The framework that will guide this study is multiracial identity theory, mixed race identity theory, and identity theories. Multiracial identity theory acknowledges the individual races within a person and how they impact their lived experiences. Multiracial identity is a complex ideological construct largely finding its way into empirical research. While still in its developmental stages, multiracial identity theory is laden with debate from scholars and laypersons from different fields of study, however, it is not widely known in the field of curriculum studies. To link multiracial identity theory to the field of curriculum studies, I examined the works of Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (1995) who, through race theory, suggest that a healthy identity is paramount to overcoming repression and incompetence. In terms of identity, race theory argues that, “a fragmented self...represents a repressed self. Such a self lacks full access to both itself and the world. Repressed, the self’s capacity for intelligence, for informed action, even for simple functional competence is impaired” (Pinar, et. al., 1995, pp. 327-328). Castenell and Pinar (1993) acknowledge that identity is linked to knowledge of self however; current educational practices fail to adequately address identity. “If it is true that identity is central to understanding who we are and what we know, but not synonymous with either, then current approaches to multicultural and anti-bias education are simplistic and flawed” (Castenell& Pinar, 1993, p. 287). William Ayers (2004) discusses identity as an inevitable question that everyone asks of themselves every day:

All students, from preschool through adult education, bring two powerful, propulsive, and expansive questions with them each day into every classroom. Although largely unstated and implicit, even unconscious, these questions are nonetheless essential. Who in the world am I, or who am I in the world. (p. 32)

While Ayers' notion of the essentialness of identification is placed contextually within the education arena, I submit that it equally flows through all arenas of life. After I graduated from the police academy and I was assigned to patrol, I constantly asked myself 'who in the world am I'? Not only that but what in the world am I doing here? I had always wanted to be a police officer growing up but when I became one I questioned who I was as a police officer. I had joined a predominately white police force in west Alabama and initially my assignments were patrolling businesses and traffic enforcement but eventually I was assigned to patrolling black neighborhoods and housing projects. Captain Westfield would always ask me, "are you sure this is what you want?" He was referring to being a police officer. I would quickly respond, "Yeah Cap, I am a police officer," but in my mind and heart I'd be asking myself 'who are you, what are you doing here?' I found myself arresting some of the kids I worked with at the Boys and Girls club years prior. In the community, I still gave them words of encouragement and gems of knowledge about the vices in society they might face but it never seemed adequate enough as a teaching tool for me, which is what I desired to do.

Parker J. Palmer's book, *The Courage to Teach*, explains my dilemma simplistically. Palmer (2007) states, "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from identity and integrity of the teacher" (p.10), which is the premise of the book. I was trying to teach outside the education setting and found myself still arresting kids I attempted to teach quite possibly because I was not completely transparent about my identity. How can one truly teach without knowing themselves or allowing themselves to be known? I struggled with accusations of sounding white by the very kids I attempted to help. I hid my feelings on the issue and became cynical and rigid toward kids breaking the law. I viewed all incidents as black and white (no pun intended). There were no excuses or explanations once the handcuffs went on

the wrists. “Tell it to the judge” I would say. I became known as Robocop on the black patrol beats. I was fine with the nickname and I wore it to mask my true feelings. I could now articulate as clearly as I wanted and it didn’t mean I was sounding or acting white. My identity remained solidly within as a person doing my job.

Another book linking multiracial identity theory to the curriculum studies field and perhaps more cogent than others previously mentioned is Craig Kridel’s *Encyclopedia of Curriculum Studies*. Under the section entitled identity politics, Katie Monnin reminds us of the basic goal of identity politics in curriculum studies. Curriculum studies seek to limit domination by one group on curriculum so as to give representation and voice to as many groups as possible. She asserts, “Scholars of identity politics feel that the curriculum should be questioned and should be socially dynamic and multidimensional, representing as many different identities and their political beliefs as possible” (Kridel, 2010, p. 460). This challenges the field of curriculum studies to view issues pertinent to the pursuit of a just, democratic society from multiple perspectives and anyone who does research with this level of integrity advances the field toward the realization of that goal.

A wide array of works (Pinar et al., 1995; Castenell & Pinar, 1993; Ayers, 2004; Palmer, 2007; & Kridel, 2010) have been instrumental for my research interest and desire to advance the field of curriculum studies however, there is no explicit theoretical framework that I could find for multiracial identity theory therefore it was necessary for me to draw upon a wide array of theorists outside the field of curriculum theory. What has brought about the notion of multiracial identity is the “biracial baby boom” (Brunsma, 2006; Korgen, 2010; Parker & Song, 2001; & Root, 1992).

Rising Mixed Race

Multiracial identity theory supports the idea that all individuals of mixed race heritage have the sovereign right to self-identify and with the repeal of anti-miscegenation laws in 1967, society began to accept racial mixing more so than in the past creating an influx of multiracial children. “The contemporary presence of racially mixed people is unmatched in our country’s previous history,” (Root, 1996, p. xiv). Since 1996 the multiracial population has been steadily growing. Parker and Song (2001) make note of this rising mixed race population in ‘Rethinking Mixed Race,

In the past decade and a half, a multicultural movement has emerged in the USA.

Although the movement is most active on the West Coast where it has taken organizational forms as the Association of Multi-Ethnic Americans, Hapa Issues Forum and Multiracial Americans of Southern California, multiracialism has in fact become a national movement. Responding to years of intense lobbying, the US Office of Management and Budget decided in 1997 to let people check more than one racial box on the 2000 census, in recognition of the desire of some people to acknowledge multiple ancestries. (p. 76)

Sundee Tucker Frazier, a multiracial woman, wrote ‘Check All That Apply’ in an attempt to overcome her struggles with being mixed. She acknowledges her need to belong, which I think is a reality for most people; however, racial ambiguity pits us as pariahs in the places we dwell either socially by others or in our own minds. Frazier (2002) addresses the hegemony that politicians utilize to further confuse and affect multiracial individuals’ ability to choose their identity:

In spite of the fact that most multiracial people see themselves as ethnic minorities, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) opposed a multiracial category on the census. So did the National Council of La Raza, the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium and the National Congress of American Indians. Why? Because it was unclear how the change would affect political redistricting, the enforcement of antidiscrimination legislation or the money given to programs aimed at reversing the effects of historical racism. (p. 28)

“Groups with social, economic, and political power construct racial categories that privilege members of their group and marginalize outside racial groups. Race is consequently a major variable used to determine the allocation of resources and benefits within societies,” (Root & Kelley, 2003, p. x). Politically, multiracial identity theorists seek to create a multiracial category on the US Census (Root, 1992, 1996; Gay, 1995; Korgen, 2010) while others are cautious in taking that step. They contend that the idea of a multiracial category, due to the objections mentioned above by Frazier (2002) as well as what the lack of knowledge for a multiracial category means for the already existing racial paradigms in this country, does more harm than good (Spencer, 1999, 2006, 2011; Brunnsma, 2006; Daniel, 2002; Winters & DeBose, 2003; &Korgen, 2010).

Kathleen Korgen’s primary goal in her book, *Multiracial Americans and Social Class*, is to discern the implications social class has for racial identity. In the process of analyzing these implications she notes that multiracial individuals have the middle to upper-middle class multiracial population to credit for giving them “the confidence and means to effectively advocate for the abandonment of the single-race racial categorization system on the U.S. Census” (Korgen, 2010, p. 5). Korgen’s notion is good to keep in mind so as to see an issue

from more than one perspective, as well as provide an intricate scaffold to understanding multiracial identity. This would indeed continue the rich traditions of curriculum studies by creating a discourse readily aligned for complicated conversations.

The dichotomous nature of multiracial identity theory encompasses two sides of a perplexing discursive. One side, which grew from an individual inquiry of ‘who am I’ to an all-inclusive ‘who are we’ seeks to be able to self-identify based on their racial makeup. They are a comprised mixture of the U.S. single-race, racial paradigm, which consists of Black, White, Asian, Indian, and Hispanic. I fall into 4 out of the 5 categories being that I am Ethiopian, Choctaw Indian, Italian, and Puerto Rican. On the other side of the argument, theorists express caveats and strong concern over a multiracial category due to its potential social and political implications. I am not certain I am ready to give into potential implications just yet because as Grant-Thomas and Orfield (2009) reminds us of contested racial actions of the past in their book, ‘Twenty first century color lines: Multiracial change in contemporary America.’ “It seems a world gone mad, where the courts that were for too brief a time indispensable instruments in the dismantling of Jim Crow are now flirting with blatant obstructionism on the path toward multiracial equality” (p. x), it reminds me that small steps can be taken toward much larger social issues.

In light of the 1997 decision by the OMB (Office of Management and Budget), the 2000 US Census provided respondents the ability to (MATA) mark all that apply. This appeared to be a win for the advocates of multiracial identity and one step from an all-inclusive multiracial category however; OMB determined how multiple responses would be counted (Spencer, 1999). For instance, “black/white multiple responses would be counted as black for the purpose of civil rights compliance monitoring,” (Winters & DeBose, 2003, p. 100). This surreptitiously

invokes the one-drop rule on those seeking the freedom to self-identify racially. The one-drop rule or hypodescent has been extant for centuries (Root, 1992, 1996; Zack, 1995; Omi & Winant, 1994). The American (U.S.) tradition of hypodescent, also colloquially known as “the one-drop rule has distant roots in the anti-Roman traditions of northwestern Europe, principally among Germanic populations” (Root, 1996, p. 16). Root (1996) states, the Germans were resisting Roman invasion to their territories and this tradition flowed into North American colonization where colonists came with their mates or chose mates among their ethnic group already there. “Thus, at the beginning, there was relatively little chance that any significant numbers of people of a mixed descent would emerge and hence no need to have any particular terminology for referring to them” (Root, 1996, p. 17). Clearly the government aims to continue the age old monoracial paradigmatic system with an attempt to assuage multiracial people with (MATA) on the US Census. The information gleaned from the theorists herein informs my inquiry into multiracial identity theory socially, politically, and educationally by highlighting the issues multiracial individuals face and the opposition to a multiracial movement. What stands out to me the most is the fact that there is a multiracial explosion threatening to change the racial face of America today but fear and opposition to it raises necessary questions and debates just as the curriculum studies field experienced its debated changes over the years.

The problem of race in the U. S. stems beyond black and white however, it is consistently addressed as a black and white issue. What about the Native Americans and Puerto Ricans? If we simply say White, are we dismissing the Italians? If I am addressing Ethiopians, do I categorize them as Black or African or Black African or Black African American if they are from the United States? I am part Ethiopian, part Choctaw Indian, part Italian, and part Puerto Rican, which further complicates the questions previously asked. Having grown up in

the north and living in the south, I have had to struggle with my own racial identity. As a mixed race individual, I often find myself feeling repressed in my thoughts and emotions and at times question my intellectual ability. Working as an educator, I contemplate the number of students in my class that have the same feelings inside due to their mixed race heritage. It is my intent to extend the understanding of multiracial issues into the academic field, which may subdue the conflict between black and white. The framework that will guide this study is multiracial identity theory. There are several bodies of literature relevant to my research inquiry.

As I reflect on my life, I think about my temper, my personality, and my identity. It is in conflict with who others say I am supposed to be. Living as a black person, forgetting the other portions of myself makes me question who I really am. I have been confused about who I am and as difficult as that is to say, I am troubled over revealing that part of my inner feelings. I put up a defensive wall to hide those feelings from myself. When I look in the mirror, the reflection I see does not project a race it is only a reflection of me. To have a simple conversation about my identity would be more than welcome only if it weren't so complicated. A complicated dialogue is necessary to uproot the source of my confusion and agony over my racial makeup. Not only do I have to deal with my own identity I have to deal with society's portrayal of me. I also have to try to understand society's portrayal of me because their perception is solidly constructed by the goal and aims of the government to produce monoracial categories, which divide and separate us. Identified multiracial categories or mixed races ultimately bring all people together under one racial category and that is the human race. There is nothing wrong with identifying with a particular race or ethnicity but that identification becomes terribly wrong when it divides us from each other.

Nothing is more important than the recognition of human beings for the betterment of humanity. Each human being on the planet has the right to identify with their race and ethnicity without being classified under one race by force. This type of thinking will bring together streams of thought from different cultures, backgrounds, races, and heritages to be shared by all as humanistic entities that will propel our world into a future of better understanding and tolerance of human capabilities and possibilities. Just as the curriculum field experienced paradigm shifts in the past, it is inevitable that it will fail to escape change in the future. Multiracial scholarship will be the validating variable for this future shift. Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (1995) point out that “Paradigm is a general “mindset” or perspective which dictates, for example, in which directions research might go, what constitutes legitimate knowledge, and who is a legitimate speaker for the field” (p. 12). Many marginalized multiracial voices are more than qualified to speak on culture, identity, and social injustices as legitimate discourses in the field.

This inquiry will center on my struggle with identities while focusing on people of multiracial backgrounds and their struggle with being mixed. It is my intent to clarify my own struggles with identity through the connected ideas of other multiracial individuals thereby finding commonalities among our struggles with being multiracial. It is my belief that a struggle with multiracial identity creates an unfulfilled individual and ultimately forces a person to hold back on their true potential to succeed in life. For me, success in my ability to teach well has yet to be realized due to my own lack of fulfillment as a multiracial person. Finally, it is my contention that once a multiracial category is implemented into the government census, many people will discover that they are of mixed heritage and will change the scope and lens of curriculum theory exposing its dialogues, discourses, and content to differentiate thinking,

learning, and knowing. The discovery made will be due to the valid attention placed on the subject of multiracial identity theory. As Hillis and Pinar (1999) state “knowledge becomes a protection against insecurity and fallibility” (p. 384). In our current status as a race conscious society, many are either too focused on their own racial identity to see other racial identities thereby closing the door to possibilities of thinking that actually matter, or they are too focused on what your race is keeping the governmental influence on division highly perpetuated.

It would be idealistic to banish or eradicate race altogether however, that is most likely unlikely to happen any time soon. Advocates for awakening the world to a new type of thinking about race would hold fast to the idea of multiracial people as a racial category but non-advocates would cringe at the idea, suffocating under the hegemony of fear securely masked in the projection of black pride. I believe this is deeply rooted in politics in which I have no faith. ‘Poli’ means many and ‘tics’ are blood sucking insects so in essence you get many blood sucking insects in the game of politics. Joseph (2013) postulates that the term “post-race” somehow implies that race does not matter. She uses the Obama presidential election to illustrate the point that the use of “post-race” only eradicates the black race and ennoble the white race. In her words, Joseph (2013) describes the damage done when using the term,

“Post-race” is used to show that race does not matter and is not a part of any equation of life chances and voters’ choices. “Post-race” denotes a genealogy of racial progress... When Obama is coded as post-racial it is as though he chooses not to make such a big deal about race, and chooses not to make such a big deal about black American issues. Being painted as post-racial means that he is a new model minority, one who embraces traditional ideas of self-help... and does not seek out state help, through... policies addressing structural inequality (e.g., affirmative action). (p. 166)

Joseph relies on the politics of race to counter the idea of transcending blackness. The first problem is that we cannot continue to “think simplistically about complex relationships [that have] resulted in dichotomous, hierarchical classification systems that have become vehicles of oppression” (Root, 1992, p. 4). This only exacerbates the human conditions that currently exist. There are more people on the planet than black and white people and while the roots of mankind fall into 3 racial categories, Negroid, Caucasoid, and Mongoloid, there has been hundreds of years of mixing between these 3 races creating many new racial groups that are not fully recognized. The second problem is class warfare, which Joseph (2013) sees as a problem however, she seems to be willing to marginalize mixed races in order to preserve the black race. Joseph (2013) continually advocates for de-centering the mixed race in favor of the black race because the mixed race is viewed as bridging a false gap toward the white race, ingratiating themselves to whites but unfortunately in vain,

Perhaps nowhere is the phenomenon of post-race and post-feminism more clear than in popular representations of multiracial African Americans, who in their imagined hybridity symbolize the hope that this millennium will not be encumbered by uncomfortable demands for equity and justice. Since mixed-race African Americans were created by merging the two racialized poles of black America and white America, to many, their bodies portend racialized unity. (p. 167)

These ideas exhibited by Joseph lend themselves to structural and institutional racism that are embedded in our society. To dismiss mixed race as a tool to fight against the systemic racism that exists today only marginalizes an entire group of people and further aggravates already highly polarized racial tensions. As a multiracial individual, I cannot fight that system alone. I also cannot deny my racial makeup. I am part Ethiopian, part Choctaw Indian, part Italian, and

part Puerto Rican. I am viewed in society as Black or African American and I cannot deny that because “It is certainly no revelation to most people in the United States that someone who has any physical features typically associated with people of African ancestry will be regarded as “black” (Root, 1996, p. 16)

The Colorblind Fallacy

People choose to see color when it suits them while at the same time boasting colorblindness. I, too, am guilty of this when I see a black and white couple on the streets. My first thought is ‘wow, couldn’t they have chosen their own? Then it hits me like a ton of bricks, you are white and black too! You have dated white and black too! What drives me to this type of thinking? Perhaps it was my absorption of Alex Haley’s *Roots* as a young boy or all the times I was called nigger at school or even the influence of the many books I read on black supremacy by Malcolm X and others. I believe it is the tutelage of the government silently embedded in the construction of society as a whole. The racism exists even when we are unaware that it is there.

In Heidi Durrow’s (2010) *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, Rachel questions her grandmother’s display of white, blue-eyed angels during Christmas. To be such an advocate for blacks, her own kind, and the civil rights movement, it appeared to be a huge contradiction to Rachel. Her grandmother’s response was, “Angels ain’t people, she says. Then Grandma makes a humph sound and leaves the room” (p. 60). It bothers her grandmother to have this contradiction pointed out because when she talks about her Aunt Loretta reading big books and wearing fake pearls while watching television, “Grandma calls it ‘High Falutin’ and then she calls it ‘white’” (Durrow, 2010, p. 33). Well, what’s wrong with white from the black perspective and what’s wrong with black from the white perspective? It is a matter of people contradicting their true emotions about whom they are and whom they would like to be based

on society's portrayal of their character and actions. Whether we identify ourselves monoracially; bi-racially, or as multiracial; our concept of self-identity has already been tarnished. Gay (1995) speaks about Francis Wardle's perspective on multiracial issues as a family psychologist,

The Wardles believe, as do many other parents of bi-racial children, that they have a right and moral duty to challenge society's narrow definition of the racial identity of their children... In Wardle's view, an inclusive definition of identity...[helps] children develop a stronger, more cosmopolitan, and richer sense of self-worth. (p. 70)

However, this stronger sense of self-worth is negatively countered by images and messages in the media. The depiction of mixed race relationships in films usually entail mixed characters being "abandoned, exploited, ostracized by family and friends, subjected to racial hatred and violence, or driven to emotional turmoil or suicide because of their forbidden love" (Gay, 1995, p. 75). Durrow's (2010) *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* is a national best seller but is chocked full of emotional turmoil, suicide, racial hatred, and violence. The story, set in the 80s, tells of a mixed race child named Rachel who survived a fall from a two story building in Chicago after her mother of Danish descent commits suicide, taking her own life and Rachel's other siblings' lives. She lives with her dad's mother who is black and struggles to find wholeness in her life as a mixed race child. Frazier (2002) agrees that we all struggle to find wholeness in our lives. We are constantly trying to measure up to what or who others say we should be and are constantly criticizing ourselves when we fail to meet the expectations of these critical messages. "For a multiracial person, these messages often take on a racial and ethnic cast... you're a fake" (Frazier, 2002, p. 146). Instead of succumbing to our own criticism and criticism of whom

others say we should be, Frazier suggests that we work on becoming whole. Therein lies the problem.

Being partially Ethiopian, partially Italian, partially Choctaw Indian, and partially Puerto Rican make it extremely difficult to be whole especially when everyone only sees the black part of me. They ignore my reddish-brown hair, light skin, high cheekbones, and slightly slanted almond shaped eyes. They see my nappy hair, broad nose, and full lips, which are indicative of black people as a whole. As a mixed race person, I often find myself feeling repressed in my thoughts and emotions and at times question my intellectual abilities. Prasad (2006) talks about the story *The Color of Water* by James McBride; emphasizing why his book was on the best sellers list for two years and her book, *Black, White, and Jewish* was not. She states, “McBride had the luxury of cultural cohesion. Because his mother pretended to be African American, he always thought of himself as black,” (Prasad, 2006, p. 14). She describes his mono-identification as whole as opposed to ‘fragmented and heartbreaking.’ This suggests what wholeness looks like in the eyes of other people in our society. To assimilate culturally toward blackness makes you black even if you appear to be white. In *Mixed Race Literature*, Jonathan Brennan illustrates this point clearly, when he asks was Roxy black in Mark Twain’s story, *Pudd’n head Wilson*. In the beginning of the novel, Roxy’s diction is equal to that of a black slave as she enunciates words like frustrate as ‘fustrate’, something as ‘somp’n’, with as ‘wid’, then as ‘den’, and associating as ‘sociatin.’ One would assume she was black by her use of poor diction but this is not the case for Roxy. She fell under the one-drop rule as,

[Only] one sixteenth of her was black, and that sixteenth did not show. She was of majestic form and stature; her attitudes were imposing and statuesque, and her gestures and movements distinguished by a noble and stately grace. Her complexion was very

fair... To all intents and purposes, Roxy was as white as anybody, but the one sixteenth of her which was black out voted the other fifteen parts and made her a negro. She was a slave, and salable as such. (Brennan, 2002, p. 71)

The Ever Enduring One Drop

How is it that Roxy is considered black when only one sixteenth of her racial makeup is black? If this logic were allowed to dictate race (and it did during the one-drop rule era) I could be considered Black, White, Native American, or Latino, but which one should I choose? There has been a concerted effort by the government to portray people's identity as black in the past and this continues today. Edward Windsor Kemble illustrates Roxy as a heavyset African American woman in the 1899 version of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* while Louis Loeb depicted her as Twain described her in the original 1893 version of the novel. Why did Kemble part from the novel's true depiction of Roxy? The reason is because "he set down the accepted fictions, the orthodox opinions governing turn of the century identification of inferior racial types" (Brennan, 2002, p. 72). In other words, he bought into the governmental idea of black washing races that were not purely white. Zack (1995) points out that "In colonial America and later in the United States, the dominant rule that developed during slavery for black-white miscegenation was the hypodescent or 'one drop' rule" (p. 115). This rule deemed anyone of mixed descendant as black and viewed in society as a slave. Even after slavery, the U.S. Supreme Court and Louisiana's State Supreme Court continued to uphold the one-drop rule as late as 1986 when a white woman discovered she was 3/32 African (Zack, 1995). This one-drop rule dates back to "the anti-Roman traditions of northwestern Europe, principally among the Germanic populations who were most resistant to the Roman Empire's invasion of their territories, a resistance that continued in the guise of the Protestant-Catholic conflicts across

Europe” (Dickens, 1966, in Root, 1996, p. 17). This historical mentality of mistrust has crept its way into contemporary thinking perpetuated by our government, who may possibly fear repercussions for the treatment of nonwhite people,

The one-drop rule has had various applications historically with respect to other non-European ethnic groups in the United States, even as it came to be largely shaped by the dictates of the black-white racial dynamic (as in all matters racial). In a few states, discriminatory laws considered any nonwhite ancestry as proof of nonwhite status.

(Root, 1996, p. 23)

Being associated culturally with Black people and outwardly possessing black features ‘black washes’ me even though the hypodescent or one-drop rule is no longer law, even though I am partially Italian, European, White. I am also partially Native American, Choctaw, and Puerto Rican through my mixed bloodline. I did not grow up with my biological father so I am unfamiliar with the possible mixture of blood on his side of my heritage. It is quite possible that there is some mixture there but the only fact that clearly stands out is that they are black washed as well. I have a complicated love hate passion for the black and white in me. My sentiments parallel Teresa Kay Williams’ in Zack (1995) when she states “...I deconstruct the notion that races are rigid, unequal, and oppositional and argue that biracial identity can only be understood as structurally fluid, complex, dynamic, and ever transforming” (p. 79). ‘Ever transforming’ is an excellent way to describe the tumultuous internal consternation that exists within my mind. A constant fear of rejection plagues my mind as I attempt to self-identify. My self-identification is multiracial however, I am hard pressed to identify solely as Black. There is an affinity for your own race above all others. My mother-in-law identifies solely with being Black. While discussing the low mental state of people due to the erosion of education and ever increasing

governmental control with her, I noticed she was firmly concerned with, as she put it, “our people.” A twitch like feeling clicked inside of me that turned into a full-fledged rushing of blood to my temples and down the sides of my cheeks. I, too, feel for “our black people” but a sense of neglect invades my spirit as it dwells in an unfamiliar space; a space in between. The cells that make up my body will not allow me feel solely for blacks as they are deeply constructed of black, white, red, and brown formations and secretly I have a deep affinity for them all. Teresa Kay Williams in Zack (1995) attests equally to the fact,

many people I have known and loved as...multiethnic [people] in this society are most often monoracially and monoculturally identified by reactionaries and progressives alike, who have espoused or internalized the racist invention of race and uncritically adopted America’s rule of hypodescent or the one-drop rule. (p. 80)

You are either White or Black or some mixture that links you to black and that ultimately makes you black.

Linear Models of Identification

While other people can assume that I am Black, I do not always feel black. Anzaldua (1990, p. 143) in *Root* (1992) observes,

The internalization of negative images of ourselves, our self-hatred, poor self-esteem, makes our own people the *Other*. We shun the white-looking Indian, the “high yellow” Black woman, the Asian with the white lover, the Native woman who brings her white girl friend to the Pow Wow, the Chicana who doesn’t speak Spanish, the academic, the uneducated. Her difference makes her a person we can’t trust. Para que se “legal,” she must pass the ethnic legitimacy test we have devised. And it is exactly your internalized whiteness that desperately wants boundary lines (this part of me is Mexican, this Indian)

marked out and woe to any sister or any part of us that steps out of our assigned places.

(p. 5)

With the boundary lines solidly in place, there is no room or space to give attention to everyone's desire of who you should be. Root (1992) states "It is confusing to our linear models of identity to consider that a multiracial Black-Indian-European person who looks "African American self-identifies as multiracial, when someone of a similar heritage identifies as a monoracial African American" (p. 7). Herein lies the problem with Joseph's view in *Transcending Blackness*. She is viewing race under the scope of linear models instead of models of kaleidoscopes. Her single lens creates thought patterns that suggest marginalizing mixed race people. This may not be her intent and she expresses such non-intent by stating, "The incredibly pervasive representations in *Transcending Blackness* belie the true complexity of race, African Americans, and mixedness. Such essentializing denigrates blackness, delimits mixedness, and ignores hybridity" (Joseph, 2010, p. 169). She falls into the number of people that Root (1992) states, "will be challenged to consider that the multiracially identified person is liberated from oppressive rules of classification rather than confined by them if they do not fit his or her experience" (p. 7).

Joseph's experiences did not liberate her from oppressive rules of classification. Her experiences plunged her into the roots of class oppression rules. Joseph is a mixed raced person who describes experiences that do not offend the portions of her non-black heritage but inflames her passion for her black heritage. A complicated dichotomous dilemma she alludes to in the telling of her experiences. In college, she had, however, chosen her identity as multiracial, ingratiating herself to the mixed race population under the learned term multiracial, which as she articulates,

I soon learned of the term multiracial as an “us” term, one applied by mixed-race people in the process of self-identification. To me it quickly meant community; it meant not having to define myself further; it meant having a safe space to collectively articulate my frustration with the outside world’s confusion about my phenotype. (Joseph, 2013, p. x)

She has the right to feel comfortable in her own skin about who she is as a person determined by her multiracial makeup. Resistance comes to mind when I think about Joseph’s reaction to her own racial makeup. She attended an Ivy League school in the 90s and worried that her multiracial background would be grounds for her dismissal. Avoiding talking about class and race were the architectural foundations of her life. She narrates that her “racially ambiguous but clearly nonwhite looks made [her] hypervisible, and before going to college [she] bobbed and weaved the ubiquitous “what are you?” questions, to save [herself] from having to reveal what [she] shrugged off as [her] race story” (Joseph, 2013, p. ix). She eventually resisted her own racial makeup and denied it in an effort to unite with one portion of herself. It is her right to do so. She attempts to resist her multiracial heritage in nonviolent ways by “challenging a status quo that perpetuates race wars and violates civil rights” (Root, 1996, p. 6). She also has the right to be free from her own repression. As much as I love the black part of me, I also love the Choctaw Indian, the Italian, and the Puerto Rican parts of me as well. They are all parts of me and I cannot, in good conscience, deny any portion of me.

The Rights of a Multiracial Individual

As I wander through life exploring the beneficial possibilities for my life and those around me I can’t help but find myself adapting to people in different situations. Root (1996) describes this as “situational ethnicity,” which is misinterpreted most times. It is frustrating to

me when I am misinterpreted as trying to be something I am not when in fact, I am. I am just being myself but it is interpreted as being other than me, which makes me question myself. Root (1996) points out that “This changing of foreground and background does not usually represent confusion, but it may confuse someone who insists that race is an imperturbable fact and synonymous with ethnicity” (p. 11). Teaching students and dealing with co-teachers stir up disagreement about race to the point that I become a sellout or I am trying to act white. I don’t know how to act white I only know how to act. From my black students I sometimes get the “you talkin’ like uh white boy” and it confuses me because I don’t know about which white boys they are speaking. Some of the white students they attend classes with have less diction and articulation than they do but I am accused of sounding white. It is these instances when “situational ethnicity” is not applied and I just try being myself. It is uncomfortable because I don’t like a lot of attention on me and this certainly causes a lot of the focus to be thrown my way. I also have to use the governmental lens for race to situate which me I’m going to be. “Situational ethnicity is a natural strategy in response to the social demands of a situation for multiethnically and multiracially identified people,” (Root, 1996, p. 11). Joseph (2013) has a different take on “situational ethnicity.” She joined a group called Brown Organization of Multi- and Biracial Students (BOMBS) while in college. It was a support group for mixed people who had been placed in a position of compliance in terms of identifying one portion of their identities. She takes note of the fact that there was no place for multiracial people on the government census forms prior to 1967 due to anti-miscegenation laws.

Our category on the census form and other documents that ask for race began to include other but this wasn’t enough. Because there are more multiracial people in existence now than ever before, the government has been forced to sit up and take notice of us and eventually they

will have to create a category on the census form to represent multiracial people. These were the views Joseph strongly believed in as a college student but years later, those views changed. She states, “Reading these words so many years later, I can see how this racially provocative organization spoke so eloquently to kids like me, the multiracial awkward soul wading through late adolescence in the early 1990s” (Joseph, 2013, p. xiii). Under Root’s (1996) Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People, Joseph has the right to “create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial, to change [her] identity over [her] lifetime-and more than once, to have loyalties and identify with more than one group of people” (p.7). She is even within her rights to give up on the idea of creating a multiracial category on the government census form because she believes the notion of multiracial is positioned to transcend blackness. Being multiracial and not acknowledging it to preserve a monoracial status lends itself to the rule of hypodescent or the one-drop rule. This rule deemed any person with one drop of black blood as African American. In the “19th century there emerged various race theories that lent a “scientific” gloss to European-and specifically Anglo or “Nordic” –claims of superiority, including the idea that racial mixture resulted in debilitation and regression” (Gossett, 1963 in (Root, 1996, p. 22). These ideas bred a concerted effort to maintain white racial purity by segregating biracial people from whites. The one-drop rule becomes problematic when applying it to multiracial people because as time goes on eventually all will be mixed. With this projection in mind, the attitudes and perspectives of people in this country are slowly changing. However, the government continually and specifically categorizes the population as monoracial. This is unfortunate and negligible at best because,

The Census Bureau does not acknowledge multiple heritages, despite the following facts: Currently, it is estimated that 30-70% of African Americans by multigenerational

history are multiracial... virtually all Latinos and Filipinos are multiracial, as are the majority of American Indians and Native Hawaiians. Even a significant portion of White identified persons are of multiracial origins. The way in which the Census Bureau records data on race makes it very difficult to estimate the number of biracial people, let alone multiracial persons, in the United States. Any estimates that have been made are conservative. (Root, 1992, p. 9)

This opens the door to multiracial people as the new millennium in racial views and attitudes.

Black, White or Other?

What difference does race make in our society? In the early 1900s, biological views on race hampered a more social scientific approach to the study of race. It would make more sense to view race from a social scientist's perspective rather than biologically because "race is an ideological construct" (Zack, 1995, p. 57). It does not exist biologically or even genetically. As Zack points out, race is an 'ideological construct' that has a specific reason and purpose. "It is an arbitrary categorization that attempts to divide a people with the intention of retaining power in the hands of a few," (Zack, 1995, p. 51). I concur wholeheartedly as we face the sour reality of a government that is vastly controlled by people of white Anglo Saxon or European heritage. Even president Barack Obama is considered the first black president however, he is actually biracial, white, and black, but he is rarely referred to as a biracial person. Some black citizens want to refer to him as a black man only because in the history of the presidential seat there has never been a racially mixed person to hold the seat. White people who want to display their prejudicial pride in less intelligent ways point out the fact that he is part white to slight black people's pride in a black president however, they rarely refer to him as biracial. President Obama refers to himself as Black. This conflict is sewn into the fabric of society's mental

processing. Theoretically, Barack Obama is black and white but he does not have stripes like a zebra therefore we have a problem when trying to categorize him as one or the other.

Omi and Winant (1994) postulate that “challenges to the dominant racial theory emerge when it fails adequately to explain the changing nature of race relations, or when the racial policies it prescribes are challenged by political movements seeking a different arrangement” (p. 11). Indeed, the political movement of the past five years has most certainly sought a different arrangement. Is the government attempting to prepare for the onslaught of citizens to begin self-identifying as multiracial? The state of Georgia is already preparing for the multiracial change due to political movements started less than 25 years ago. In the early 1990s, Project RACE successfully brought about changes in several Georgia school districts, and after a three-year effort, the Georgia legislature unanimously passed a law that requires a multiracial category on all state forms” (Gay, 1995, pp. 111-112).

I was thrilled to know that because I am black, white, yellow, and brown. I am mixed and I identify myself as multiracial. I am not a race. I respond better to heritage. Inwardly, the resonation of my cells is vibrant, as I understand the difference between race and heritage. This understanding erases the need to identify with black, white, or other. “While race suggests a strict biological division of groups, one that is certainly fictional in our society, heritage suggests a combination of biological and cultural factors that are the actual components of our designations of race and ethnicity,” (Root, 1996, p. 50). Here in this world, I can escape the inward feelings of being in between. “I live in a multidimensional one,” (Root, 1996, p. 50), which suits my mental capacity perfectly. I have always adapted to life and people around me in various ways. The reason for my distinct adaptability is possibly due to the fact that “there are

no such things as pure races, technically we are all interracial. Therefore, the significant distinctions among racial groups are socially constructed artifacts,” (Root, 1992, p. 322).

Indeed, race is truly a phantom phenomenon created for a diabolical need to control society. I naturally resist this unjust control. My own thinking suggests that analogously, we are told race exists when it is identity that needs to be clearly identified. However, identity is an ever changing phenomenon and never clearly articulated even when analyzed down to a fraction of its core. Simplistically, it is likened to your five senses, they being hearing, tasting, seeing, smelling, and touching. In actuality, they are one sense and that is the sense of touch. In order to hear sound, vibrations must touch the cochlea. In order to taste, something must touch the taste buds. In order to smell, fragrances or odors must touch the olfactory nerves. Identity is more common place to that which is never fully explained – your four higher senses, which are psychometrics, intuition, clairvoyance, and telepathy. These senses are much more fluid and dynamic in nature.

The Complexity of Mixed Races

If we were to look at race from a biblical perspective, we would find that God made all men of all nations of one blood “on all the face of the earth” Acts, 17:26 (King James Version) however, some people’s interpretation of God’s admonishment of Solomon tells of a God who hates the mixing of races. This notion is simply not true. The reality behind God’s denial of mixing races lends itself to the same principle governments past and present hold steadfastly to and that is the preservation of their status, power, and control over people. In 1 Kings, chapter 11, God is angry with Solomon for marrying outside of his faith and belief, not race. Solomon chose to ignore God’s commandment of not consorting with the women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, Hittites, and the daughter of Pharaoh. These women had faith

in gods other than Solomon's god, the god of Israel and God knew they would turn his heart away from him. God's commandment to Solomon was based clearly on his fear of losing Solomon's loyalty. "Of the nations concerning which the Lord said unto the children of Israel, ye shall not go into them, neither shall they come in unto you: for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods" 1 Kings, 11:2 (King James Version). Ultimately, Solomon had his heart turned away from the god of Israel so God gave his kingdom to Solomon's servant as a punishment for not obeying him. Solomon's negligence in obeying God sparks a necessity on God's part to keep people divided in order to secure loyalty.

Root (1992) partially agrees with Acts 17:26, which states we are all one blood by noting that everyone belongs to one of three racial groups. She states, "We are all regarded as members of only one racial group. You are, for example, Black or Asian or White," (p. 322). I refer to these three race categories as Negroid, Mongoloid, and Caucasoid. The globe presents the majority of these races geographically in Africa for Negroid, Asia for Mongoloid and Europe for Caucasoid. The rest of the planet is a mixture of these three races, which causes mass confusion in relation to racial identity. This mixing also caused the formation of ethnic groups, which further complicates one's identification of self. Root (1992) contends that common people believe ethnic identity is viewed as an objective process however; it is far from an objective process. "Individuals with the same biological heritage often have different ethnic identities... [and] some individuals identify with groups from which they are not derived biologically" (Root, 1992, p. 51).

This complicates my own self-identification because although I am Ethiopian, Choctaw, Italian, and Puerto Rican, I don't identify with the people or cultures of any of them. I have been falsely identified with whom the government regards and classifies as Black or African

American. A complicated problem manifests itself in light of the information presented here in terms of my identity. Due to the government's social construction of the measures that determine racial identity, society blindly places themselves and others into one of the three racial categories; Negroid, Mongoloid, or Caucasoid. Even with the multitude of mixing taking place, an old adage formerly deemed law continues to extend its controlling tentacles, the one-drop rule. No matter how often or loud I say I am mixed, others still say "but you're black." Even my wife says to me on occasion, "but you're mostly black so that makes you black." The thinking is solidly embedded in the mentalities of people in society.

In Broyard's (2007) *One Drop*, she recalls staying in New Orleans and discussing research on the *Plessey v Ferguson* case with the owner of the guesthouse she stayed in, Keith Weldon Medley. They would drink wine and discuss their research. When Keith's friend, Beverly, joined them one night, Broyard got a glimpse into why black people deny mixed race heritage whether the mixed person appears white or black. They discuss a female writer from New York that was doing research on her own identity. She had recently discovered a new identity. Beverly expresses her thoughts clearly when she states, "This chick finds out she's got a little black blood in her, and suddenly she's black. This, I've got to see" (p. 179). Apparently, the woman was white and this upset Beverly for many reasons I heard growing up among others. Having the appearance of blackness and then having the audacity to claim a multiracial heritage enrages black people who identify monoracially. I gather that they feel your sense of loyalty is tarnished just as Solomon's was when he disobeyed God. I have always been chastised or admonished for not standing up for blacks because I look black and culturally I associate with blacks so damn it, I must be Black!

Broyard (2007) continued her discussion with Beverly expounding on her feelings about her own mixed racial heritage. Beverly let it be known that she found their obsession with skin color irritating. “In San Diego, where I’m from... nobody cared if you were yellow or brown; you were the same black motherfucker.” Bev was medium brown and petite, with short dreadlocks...” (Broyard, 2007, p. 179). As I stated earlier, blacks don’t care if you appear white and are claiming black or you appear black and are claiming white. Both entities are taken as a slap in the face toward black loyalty. It is a slap in my face when I deny loyalty to who I truly am. Broyard expresses a simple answer to this question after Beverly berates her father’s actions for not owning up to the black in his blood and facing the challenges that black people faced during the Jim Crow era. She tells why Broyard’s father makes black people angry. “...your dad just glided on through without having to deal with Jim Crow or desegregating the schools or any of that. And he didn’t do anything to help the people who were stuck on the other side” (Broyard, 2007, p. 181).

Broyard shares black people’s anger but Beverly asks why. “Because he cut me off from knowing about my history, my family” (Broyard, 2007, p. 181) she told her. That is exactly how I feel about my Italian grandfather. Due to the taboo of racially mixing in his day, he cut the black side of our family off from the Italian side and the black side, to this day are dead quiet about the Italian side. In my writings, I am solely the loudest and most vocal about my racial heritage. In analyzing Beverly’s position on mixed race, I question the status quo of blacks today. They are not fighting miscegenation and Jim Crow laws and desegregation today. Today it is a quiet, fruitless battle against white supremacy, which surreptitiously and psychologically denigrates people of brown races. It is found embedded in the institutions of our society and we are helpless in fighting against its furtive measures. Poverty and social injustice affects all races

that are not in the elite class albeit some more than others, thus, the racial mentalities incurred through the assumption of loyalty are an articulated factor in racial division perpetuated by the government. It is socially unjust at its roots and causes consternation and angst in the hearts of multiracial people.

Power and Control through Monoracial Categories

Lower socioeconomic class status is largely equated with brown and black skinned people. “Approximately three-fifths of all Puerto Rican migrants to the United States have had some visible African ancestry and have therefore been perceived on the mainland as blacks” (Zack, 1995, p. 119). However, in Puerto Rico, many of them are considered white and are perceived as Spanish and Hispanic or Latino. The designation of black is mainly prevalent in the United States. A primary reason for this color distinction came about during slavery when the term mulatto actually acknowledged black and white parentage. Mulattoes escaped the stigma of the one-drop rule in the south until the mid 19th century. “Sexual contact between black men and white women... was absolutely forbidden” (Zack, 1995, p. 121) even though white slave masters could have sex with black slave women by force or other means. The children white men produced were enslaved thus “Another mixed child in the slave quarters was an economic asset, but a mulatto child in the big house would threaten the system” (Zack, 1995, p. 121). A threat to a racist slave system that upheld the sanctions for poor treatment of blacks and now anyone considered mulatto or mixed, was the great fear that whites had during the Civil War era. This is what forced whites to categorize anyone with one-drop of black blood as black. It was to preserve their bloodline and way of life without turmoil and rebellion from sympathizers of blacks. Whites did whatever it took to preserve their status in life.

In Williams' (2013) *The Odulawak, Captain Fischer* was willing to face and take on the powerful, spiritual ancient African tribe, the Odulawak, even if it meant death. Historically and today, in the U.S., preservation of the bloodline of the white race is done through governmental legislation. However, during the slave trade, one way whites' bloodline survived was off the sweat of black slaves. Williams illustrates the white man's tenacity for survival even after the Odulawak destroyed Captain Fischer's, ship and crew. An Odulawak tribesman speaks to him among the wreckage. "Discovery of your dead crew and splintered ship will be a mysterious warning to them never to return... Captain Fischer had one thought running through his mind as he lay face down on the deck, "the love of the bloodline" (Williams, 2013, p. 58) and he reiterates this love to Arias, the last surviving crewmember before he takes his last breath and dies.

History post Civil War era shows this same love for the bloodline, however, blacks and whites express it. Whites protect their bloodline to maintain their privileged status quo and blacks protect theirs in hopes of rising above the oppression dealt to them by the white race (Dalmage, 2003). There is a power struggle between different races and the one race that creates categorization of those races can eliminate the power struggle for themselves. This creates power in itself as we recognize that there is a close affiliation between power and categories; categories that create boundaries and borders. These borders are "created to protect resources such as goods and power [which] are kept in place by laws, language, cultural norms, images, and individual actions...[and] people are raised to understand their world through borders" (Dalmage, 2003, p. 34). However, understanding the world through 'borders' is one thing but as Trend (1995) Postulates, "paraphrasing the words of Brazilian expatriate Paulo Freire, hooks has stated that we cannot enter the struggle as object, in order later to become subjects" (p. 117).

In other words, our struggle as any identified race cannot be viewed objectively lest we've already lost the battle and fall among the ranks of voices marginalized and unheard save they are heard in subjective isolation with no meaning given to them.

Cons to the Multiracial Movement

This crushing blow is dealt to the multiracial community every time one fails to stand up and articulate the necessity to self identify. Winters and DeBose (2003) expose a contradiction in multiracial activists' desire for a multiracial category on the U. S. Census count by asking pertinent questions on the subject. "Precisely what kind of counting was it that multiracial activists actually wanted? In what sense did they envision multiracially identifying respondents being counted?" (p. 101). Winters and DeBose (2003) go on to argue that the census count is done primarily to guard against racial discrimination by schools and businesses and while their statistical findings are not conclusive or definite, it gives them a starting point to begin honest investigations into racial discrimination. Therefore, when multiracial organizations respond to being allowed to "be counted definitely as multiracial," Winters and DeBose (2003) suggest this indicates "quite frankly, a gross lack of understanding both as to why federal racial statistics are collected as well as to how they are in fact used" (p. 101).

Dalmage (2003) points out that "without an antiracism agenda, multiracial organizations seem to be distancing themselves socially and politically from blacks, creating one more layer in the racial hierarchy in which whites remain privileged, blacks disadvantaged, and multiracials somewhere in the middle" (p. 139). Why shouldn't the formation of a middle race, multiracial be created? We are not accepted by whites in many cases and shunned by blacks in many cases. Who gives anyone the right to question a new racial category in a world where plenty of them exist? This marginalizes an entire race based on passed etiquettes of governmental race

construction. I personally would like to distance myself from the racial disharmony that causes blacks, whites or any other race to fail to accept you as a human being with feelings and emotions. I would hope that a multiracial category would help to serve as a bridge between the black and white races.

However, Rainier Spencer (2011) finds this notion to be mythical in nature as he argues, “another major analog to the discredited mulatto myths of the past – and, also, yet another super power – is the notion of modern-day multiracial persons serving as bridges between the races” (p. 183). To call it a myth diminishes any hope for fixing the problems of racism in our society. He goes on to say, “Racial mixing and hybridity are neither problems for, nor solutions to, the long history of ‘race’ and racism, but part of its genealogy” (Spencer, 2011, p. 183). These assertions Spencer makes lends credence to Derrick Bell’s notion that race is permanent. It is here and will remain here even if as only remnants in the face of its abolishment (Bell, 1992). “The first point that must be made about the notion of multiculturalism is that it is in no sense new,” (Spencer, 1999, p. 87). It has a specific aim of separating or eliminating the notion of biological classifications in favor of social grouping, which identifies multiracial make ups in a more clear and understandable way. Spencer (1999) argues that the aim of multiracial categorization contradicts the reality of biological race,

The apparent move away from biological race does not eliminate the logical problems inherent in this enterprise, however, but merely hides them temporarily. Dressing the mythology of biological race in the garb of socially designated race is a transparent artifice that does nothing to resolve the fact that the socially designated racial categories are precisely the same as the biological classifications upon which they are based. (p. 90)

Spencer (1999, 2011) Winters and DeBose (2003) also contend that advocates for a multiracial category will not see the new category as a bridge between races or a buffer to smooth the archaic tensions that still exist today. Dalmage (2003) supports their argument by suggesting that a new multiracial category will only further distance themselves from blacks without a campaign against racism, leaving whites in their current privileged status. But are we, as multiracial people, looking to fight the current status of the white race? Are we seeking a place opposite of the White and Black races? Are the goals of multiracial people situated to fight racism? The arguments posed here require further research to provide more of a factual basis for their implications. Spencer's critique of Root's notion that socially designated racial groups are highlighted over "any connection with biological race" (Spencer, 1999, p. 90) is grossly misapplied to the true aims of her work. Chapter two of Root's (1992) 'Racially Mixed People in America' devotes copious research on race as a biological category to, in fact, highlight the notion that race categories were created to keep lower race categories from moving up and "The boundaries were drawn on the basis not of biology – genotype and phenotype – but of descent" (Root, 1992, p. 15). Heritage overlaps into social and biological categorizations of race so it would be absurd to suggest that multiracial identification could only come from 'socially designated racial groups'.

The topic of multirace is a complex and confusing one. Looking at academic discourses on the subject of multiracial identity theory can help to clarify some aspects of its tenets but also create more inquiries into its unique and indelible existence. Identifying as a multiracial person means taking on the task of removing social injustice and accurately identifying yourself. It also means advocating for marginalized voices in a growing field of academic discourse. The curriculum field is missing an opportunity to explore a burgeoning component of multiracial

identity theory as it opens the door to a new understanding of human interaction, race relations, and self-awareness. Without challenging the racial construct, as we know it today, we are destined to create another racial category that further divides us. To legitimize multiracial identity theory as an academic discourse further, more research is needed on the effects of a multiracial category as a distinct racial group and the effects of multiracial persons failing to be accurately identified within monoracial categories. Moreover, biological, genetic, and social factors need to be reassessed in determining the accurate designation of race to people without the added component of a hierarchy system. In terms of racial mixing as a whole it is important for humans to realize there are no pure races in existence. Due to the interactions humans have had for millennia, “we are all one... The bloodline is now mixed... we will never be the same” (Williams, 2013, p. 60)

Finally, Root (1992) elucidates a problem of institutional racism, which exist for the maintenance of white racial purity but is quickly being outgrown by the very population it wishes to oppress. More focus and attention on multiracial people as a race category will not transcend blackness but conjoin blackness with whiteness and any other race in existence. Looking at the significance race has played throughout the history of the United States, it is easy to find anti-multiracial category advocates’ views valid, and relevant however, it is not easy to accept them as a multiracial individual. As a multiracial individual, I view the world and the races in it a bit differently than monoracial individuals. I have a great affinity for each part of my multiracial makeup and I cannot deny any portion of myself in that matter.

A multiracial individual has the right to self-identify with any portion of their racial makeup without being forced to choose according to society’s labels or governmental labels. They have the right to exercise “situational ethnicity” and give attention to each portion of their

multiracial makeup if they so desire. They also have the right to attempt to fight institutional racism perpetuated by the government by denying all portions of their multiracial makeup except for the black portion but I have yet to see any battles of that nature bring Blacks any closer to the privileged status of Whites. “Perhaps we can reconsider the subject of racially mixed persons in a less biased and less hostile context” (Root, 1992, p. 9) by just being ourselves and fighting to be recognized as such.

Developing Identity

Within the pursuit of understanding my own identity, I have questioned the need for a multiracial category on the US Census, the societal construction of race, and I have been critical of the government’s construction of the racial paradigm that currently exists. The questions and criticisms have served merely to broaden my perspective on my own identity which is still currently a major point of inquiry for me. Therefore I feel it quintessential to expand my framework to include identity theory concomitant with mixed race and identity theories. I draw upon several theorists inside and outside the field of curriculum studies (e.g., Amin Maalouf, 2012; Awad Ibrahim, 2014; Bell Hooks, 1990; Frantz Fanon, 2008; Homi K. Bhabha, 1990; 2015; James Baldwin, 1998; Jodi A. Byrd, 2011; Paul Gilroy, 1991, 2000; Ruben A. Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Ta-Nehisi Coates, 2015; and Welsing, 1991). These theorists give a perspective beyond multiracial identity theory thus complicating and contracting the facile inquiry of who am I. When speaking about my own race, I can recall early on in life when it became a point of variance for me. I was around 6 or 7 years of age and I had a problem with being light skinned. Because of the teasing I had experienced, I desired to be the color of my older sister and father. They were dark brown and it was beautiful to me; like a cup of coffee steaming on the living room table. I would watch my mother stirring the black out of the coffee

after mixing it with sugar and cream. After stirring it with her teaspoon, she would sip it ever so carefully because it was hot. I'd tell her I wanted some and she'd reply it was too hot, besides it would make me darker.

“How mama?”

She would begin to explain putting her newspaper down momentarily to entertain my question.

“Well you wait until it cools off cause that's the best way to drink it,” she instructed me looking directly into my eyes as if it were the God honest truth.

“But you drink it hot and you're not darker,” I analyzed the logic thrown at me.

“No, I sip it hot. Now listen,” she continued.

I believed almost anything my mother told me so I was all ears.

“When it cools off go and sit on the front porch in the sun and you will get darker,” she said as a matter of fact and picked up her paper to continue reading.

I did as she told me and never saw myself as getting Black. I wanted to be darker in complexion. After all, I didn't know what it meant to be Black. Awad Ibrahim (2014) discusses coming into blackness in his book “The Rhizome of Blackness.” In it he illustrates how African immigrants to Canada and U.S. became Black. Succinctly he states, “They see themselves mirrored in relation to African American cultures and languages, thus becoming Black” (p. 14). Once they arrive in the U.S. they are viewed as black, however, because they do not view themselves as black they are forced into choosing a place in their new society for representation of who they are identity wise. Ibrahim does a good job of articulating how they became black by pointing out that Black Popular Culture as a unique whole began to translate or negotiate what “was happening to the cultures, languages, histories and memories they brought with them

from their homelands” (Ibrahim, 2014, p. 15). It is interestingly noted by Ibrahim how African immigrants become black however; the reverse of his notion can be partially attributed to blacks in the U.S. because they too are equated with Africa except they have been torn away from their African languages, cultures, histories and memories.

African immigrants may not have identified as black prior to their arrival here in the U.S. but neither did blacks who are here now and absorbed into Black Popular Culture that is used to represent and identify blacks. Ibrahim states that it is African immigrants’ desire to belong and be represented thus, “It is their way of saying, “We too are Black!” and “We too desire Blackness” (Ibrahim, 2014, p. 15)! It is clear that an already constructed societal influence, Black Popular Culture, has injected an installed mentality into the minds of African immigrants. Ibrahim’s work helps make this more visible and understandable than viewing this notion from blacks already born into Black Popular Culture. Would it not be more interesting if African immigrants and African Americans could find their history and culture in other than Blackness? Black was derived out of slavery and African immigrants coming to the U.S. identifying with Blackness via a translation of their own homeland culture is no different than the embedded identification of blacks who are already here. I point to Ibrahim’s notion of coming into blackness because I don’t think I ever fully came into blackness. I’m not sure that was or even now possible because of my experiences growing up being black but not quite black enough.

In their article, “Co-Teaching: Making it Work,” Powell and Powell (2016) discuss identity in the classroom as something that has to be developed. A teacher in the classroom enters with no status and progresses to low status then develops a sense of belonging, which changes their status to acceptable by their students and peers. “Status [is] the perception of

where one stands in relation to others in a social group... [which have] negative effects...[and] are well documented” (Jensen, 2013). A teacher has to actively broaden their identity in the classroom in order to be more effective as teachers of children because their identity works in conjunction with their ability to make decisions (Powell & Powell, 2016). A partially developed identity can only serve in a limited capacity toward effectively working with their students (Powell & Powell, 2016). I adverted briefly to Powell and Powell’s (2016) article not to highlight educational poignancy but rather to illustrate the intricacy of the notion of developing identity. It is complex and branches out into race, classification, physiology, biology, geography, language, community, organization and more.

Dr. Frances Cress Welsing’s (1991) “The Isis Papers” allude to race, classification, geography, physiology, and biology in ways that show one race’s need for domination over all other races on the planet. Through Welsing’s Color-Confrontation theory, it is noted how White Europeans responded to their own lack of pigmentation producing melanin with psychological defenses. These psychological responses were in response to their own minority status around the world and feelings of inferiority about lacking color. This placed them in confrontation with the majority of the world’s people thus causing a “psychological response, [that] revealed an inadequacy based on the most obvious and fundamental part of their being, their external appearance” (Welsing, 1991, p. 5). Due to this fixated reality, Welsing suggests that “Whites defensively developed an uncontrollable sense of hostility and aggression... [towards] people of color” (Welsing, 1991, p. 5). Welsing’s intellection draws me back to a painful memory that is substantiated by this notion.

Be Careful What You Wish For

I have never wanted to hurt anyone by words or action but once we moved to the suburbs and I became comfortable with many kids in the neighborhood, I was still uncomfortable about my light skinned complexion. I didn't like wearing shorts and could count on one hand how many times I wore them in elementary school. By the time I was in the fifth grade I remember coming home from school one hot afternoon and my brother and sister raced into the house to put on shorts. They wanted to go back outside and play but my mother told us we couldn't go out to play until we finished our homework. I didn't have any because I finished mine at school. To this day, I cannot tell you what possessed me to put on shorts. Perhaps the 'Monkey see monkey do' syndrome clouded my judgment. My older brother and sister were wearing them so I should be wearing them too. I put on the only pair of light blue shorts I could find. I looked down at my colorless legs and became uneasy at the sight of them. Impatience and haste overrode my urge to change back into my pants so I headed out the door. Several kids were playing 'Red light green light' next door and I eagerly jumped in to play. Everyone was so caught up in the game that they didn't seem to notice my two-toned complexion my brother and sister pointed out to me on my way outside. My face and arms were high yellow and my legs were even lighter. I was so caught up with playing that I didn't pay it any attention. Scarlet Hyman said the game was short of players and we needed another person to make it even more fun. Winston Parks jumped on his bike and raced around the corner to find more participants. He returned with news that Malcolm Mitchum who lived in the third house down was around the corner and wanted to play.

"Well duh, tell him to c'mon," someone said.

Winston sped around the corner and returned just as quickly with more news.

“He said he changed his mind,” Winston said out of breath.

“Tell him c’mon before his dad calls him into the house,” I said trying to get Malcolm to come and play.

Winston sped off once again but took longer to return this time. When he did return, Malcolm was with him but so was Bodie Richardson. I had run ins with him before. He was a bully and liked to be in control of everyone.

“Who talkin about my daddy” he blared?

Everyone got silent and stared at him. He was older than all of us by two years maybe more. He walked up to me with his chest out and as he did, everyone’s eyes seemed to be riveting on me and my legs. I felt naked in front of all my peers as I stood there trying to figure out what he meant by talking about his dad.

“Oh, no, I was talking about Malcolm’s dad calling him to come home,” I said feeling completely embarrassed by now.

“Nah, that meant me too,” he said clearly looking to fight someone and I was the most convenient candidate.

“No, I don’t even know your dad...” I tried to reason with him unsuccessfully.

He shoved me to the ground and slapped me in the head as he stood over me and unleashed a fusillade of insults ranging from my nappy hair to my high yellow skin color. When he got off of me, I was enraged to no end. I wasn’t able to physically beat him in a fight but I closed my eyes with my heart pounding as though it were coming through my breast plate and wished he would die – just drop dead right there in the middle of all of us! My anger stemmed from feeling inferior to everyone else in that I was not black like many of the other kids and certainly not white like the majority I was surrounded by in the suburbs. To make matters

worse, my feelings of inadequacy and not fitting in were exacerbated by the fact that no one came to my aid or asked me if I was alright. I sat on the ground in my shorts with my knees pulled to my chest while my arms were wrapped around them in a futile attempt to cover them up. The game was ruined for that day as everyone dispersed to various other outlets in the neighborhood. In my head I could see Bodie lying lifelessly on the ground, dead because I wished it were so and while I truly didn't want to see someone die, those were the thoughts that consumed me as I sat alone on the ground. I assume this is the same feeling that whites had upon becoming aware of their color inferiority, which cause them to use psychological defense mechanisms against non-white people. Welsing opines that "This attitude has continued to manifest itself through the history of mass confrontation between whites and people of color" (Welsing, 1991, p. 5). Sadly, a year or so later, Bodie was struck by a drunk driver and killed in the downtown area. In the wake of the news, my only solace was that I didn't yell out what I was thinking as I wanted to at the time. My heart sank to lows I couldn't begin to describe.

Resolutely, my identity was intact only by my presumptions of what others thought about me and what I thought about what others thought about me. I was clear about what distinguished me from whites. My nappy hair, full lips, and broad nose took care of that. What distinguished me from blacks were my skin color, lack of rhythm, and at times my speech. Having money or the lack there of had very little to do with my identity because there were rich whites and blacks and poor whites and blacks and rarely did the two mix. Even in junior high and high school, the rich kids were always careful about their exposure to the poor kids. It appeared that rich black kids could mix and mingle with rich white kids with no problem. They had the same likes, wore the same preppy style clothing, and equally turned their noses up at you if you weren't well to do. It is probable that I missed the reality rich black students

experienced in their rich white world due to my having been ostracized from both sides of the isle.

Ruben A. Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009) illustrates my omitted understanding of the relationship that existed between rich blacks and whites in his book ‘The Best of the Best: Becoming Elite at an American Boarding school.’ Fernandez’s study on an elite New England boarding school gives an unwanted view of how social inequality is derived at between whites and non-whites. One student, a black male named Darden Pittard, expresses his thoughts to a Hispanic student on how to survive at the boarding school where both only felt apart of when they were away from it. “Black people who live in a white world learn to be careful... you learn not to make waves... Because once you do, that’s it. You’re a trouble maker, and they never think of you any other way” (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009, p. 159). Clearly, Darden strives to predicate his thoughts and actions based on his white peers’ thoughts and beliefs about him. He has to walk on eggshells in order to keep up acceptable appearances by his white peers. This divides him from his own feelings and he begins to develop an identity based on his desire to succeed at an elite boarding school.

Ta-Nehisi Coates’ work, *Between the World and Me*, speak to this idea of developing identity based on the world you choose to live in and experience. He describes his awareness of this fact as he narrates his life story to his son,

And looking out, I had friends who too were part other worlds... I saw that what divided me from the world was not anything intrinsic to us but the actual injury done by people intent on naming us, intent on believing that what they have named us matters more than anything we could ever actually do. (Coates, 2015, p. 120)

He speaks to identity from a non-biological point of view and more toward an experiential view point. “In America, the injury is not being born with darker skin, with fuller lips, with a broader nose, but in everything that happens after” (Coates, 2015, p. 120).

Garbner and Seligman (1980) loosely agree as they discuss the social learning theory, locus of control. This theory makes a connection between a person’s actions and experiences (Garbner & Seligman, 1980). A person who becomes aware of specific events and how they occur in their lives are beginning to develop their identity. The outcomes experienced by some are dependent upon the work they put into their endeavors and they “believe that [those] outcomes are generally contingent upon the work put into them” (Garbner & Seligman, 1980, p. 247). Darden explored the rich white world of an elite boarding school and due to the work he put into succeeding there, he felt he had to protect it and share his source of protection with others he identified with in order to protect his identity developed outside the world of the rich white kids at the elite boarding school. Coates adds another perspective to this notion of experience developing identity by stressing the awareness of experienced events beyond race and choosing those experiences. Darden appears to be trapped by his choice to pursue success at an elite boarding school whereas Coates appears to be free upon recognizing specific events in his life and choosing his reaction to them. These two ideas about identity lead us away from the common thought that it is situated solely in race.

While Amin Maalouf’s book, *In the Name of Identity*, discusses identity as a racialized notion he is careful to note “Identity can’t be compartmentalized. You can’t divide it up into halves or thirds or any other separate segments” (Maalouf, 2012, p. 2). There is no deep rooted feeling waiting to be discovered on the inside when it comes to race identity. Being part Ethiopian, part Choctaw Native American, Part Italian, and part Puerto Rican does not harbor

this feeling within either. Everything I've learn about my racial makeup culminates these assumed feelings within my inner-being. To assume these feelings exist at birth based on a single racial make-up, Maalouf (2012) deems dangerous. "It presupposes that deep down inside everyone there is just one affiliation that matters, a kind of fundamental truth about each individual, an essence determined once and for all at birth, never to change thereafter" (Maalouf, 2012, p. 2). If this were reality, I would have a difficult time deciphering how I truly felt deep down inside as a full-blooded Native American as my grandmother was.

In *The Transit of Empire*, Jodi A. Byrd (2011) enlightens the reader on the fact that while her work is not well suited for discussion on indigenous people and more appropriately placed under discourse for Diaspora studies and border crossings, her book is primarily "essayistic, provisional, and some of its readings and conclusions often defy the expected affective common sense of liberal multiculturalism invested in acknowledgements, recognitions, equality, and equivalences" (p. xv). This gives me fortitude in knowing that the Native American portion of my racial makeup is not being marginalized in her work through pacification and patronization. It goes directly to the heart of the tragedy experienced by a nation of people at the hands of European conquerors. Byrd points out how the U.S. government viewed Indian tribes. They were viewed as separate from the European colonists however, under treatise made between several Indian tribes and the government; international law deemed them indigenous to the North American soil with sovereign rights.

Supreme Court Justice John Marshall utilized a clause the U.S. government created to justify their actions of stealing land from the Native Americans. The "Commerce clause of the U.S. constitution (Article I, section 8, clause 3) invokes Indianness to operational ends in order to evacuate sovereignty and international recognition from any nation or peoples the United

States may one day seek to invade” (Byrd, 2011, p. xxi). In other words, we can take over your lands whenever we get ready. Sovereignty became a moot point of interest for Native Americans when it came to international law. “Marshall’s discovery reinvented a sovereignty for indigenous peoples that was void of any of the associated rights to self-government, territorial integrity, and cultural autonomy that would have been affiliated with international law at the time” (Byrd, 2011, p. xxii).

Being partially Ethiopian ties me to African Americans here in the United States today and be that as it may, being partially Choctaw Native American ties me to a people who were robbed of their sovereign status here. The feelings I hold deep down inside are not congenial and certainly do not invoke good will toward the establishment of such horrendous dealings with a nation of people in either identified category. My feelings deep down inside are even further exasperated by T. J. Stiles’ (1993) in the book, *The Citizen’s Handbook*, which articulates how White European settlers viewed and treated Native Americans with the support of the government. In the late 18th century, “Not content with the boundaries imposed by gravity, oceans, or ice, Europeans sought possession of all their eyes could see” (Byrd, 2011, p. 2).

This desire was not thwarted by the White European’s belief that Native Americans were uncivilized savages. The constant reminder throughout history almost serves as justification for the actions of the White European invaders. Even the prolific author Mark Twain “twinned himself to Captain Cook in an attempt to imagine the violences [sic] and fear the great circumnavigator must have felt struggling in the midst of the multitude of exasperated savages,” (Byrd, 2011, p. 21). The description of Native American as being ‘exasperated savages’ gives us cause for pause. Why they were so exasperated? Because throughout the

European invasion of North America, “Gradually, most Indian tribes found themselves forced onto small reservations – a bitter end to centuries of free travel across enormous territory as part of their annual rhythm of life” (Stiles, 1993, p. 137). Stiles illustrates through Inmuttoo yahlatlat, known as Chief Joseph of the Nez Pierce’s, how Native Americans were a caring, loving, proud people who only sought peace in the land that their fathers and fathers’ fathers were raised on and roamed freely for centuries. In the course of conflict between his tribe and the U.S. government, Chief Joseph refused to be moved off of his land with his people because the U.S. government told them they had to. The desire to live in peace overrode the instinct to annihilate a furtive enemy invasion that grew beyond the control of the Native Americans already there. “When the white men were few and we were strong we could have killed them all off, but the Nez Pierce’s wished to live at peace” (Stiles, 1993, p. 144).

A peaceful people with caring hearts do not sound like exasperated savages but as illustrated by Welsing’s (1991) Color Confrontation theory, inferiority and feelings of inadequacy can turn a person to utilize violent defense mechanisms. When Chief Joseph heard General Howe’s prideful words, “I will not let white men laugh at me the next time I come. The country belongs to the Government, and I intend to make you go upon the reservation” (Stiles, 1993, p. 145), feelings changed for the worse. The threat of soldiers being brought up and having them moved by force, which would most certainly involve the bloodshed of innocent people, left Chief Joseph no other choice but to go to war with the United States. Being peaceful people and allowing the Europeans to roam freely as they had due to their belief that “All men were made by the same Great Spirit Chief. They are all brothers. The earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it” (Stiles, 1993, p. 156), the Nez Pierce’s suffered greatly and many of them died. The only portion of the Nez Pierce’s beliefs the White

Europeans believed was the 'earth is the mother of all people' however, they also believed they should be the ones to dominate and subdue it through subjugation. They did this surreptitiously in addition to violently.

Byrd (2011) explicates Jim Jones' contemporary dealings with Native Americans in this furtive type of subjugation. Jim Jones would claim Native American ancestry on his mother's side and sometimes his father's side. In his pursuit to build People's Temple in Guyana where ultimately 900 people ended up committing suicide, he claimed to be Choctaw. Dennis Banks, American Indian Movement Leader, reflects on the Guyana People's Temple mission and recalls Jim Jones stating, "In Guyana I'll rebuild my temple and create a community. I'd like you to come with me... I need your spiritual support. Remember, I'm Choctaw, so you must do this for me" (Byrd, 2011, P. 81). Being able to identify as Native American made it possible for Jim Jones to carry out his mission of mass suicide however, an even broader point to be made here is that "playing Indian was endemic to the counter culture movements and communes of the 1960s and 1970s, and certainly Jim Jones' assertions of an Indian identity exemplify [the] point that being Indian offered one an identity as a critic of empire" (Byrd, 2011, p. 81).

The empire should be criticized because even to this day the lies and deception about Native American experiences through this transit of empire continue. Stiles' (1993) circumspect wording in 'The Citizen's Handbook,' attempts to, I believe, assuage the reader into believing that people care today. He states, "Today, few Americans would call the Indians savage, and many consider the destruction of Native American culture and peoples one of the greatest tragedies in our history" (Stiles, 1993, p. 137). The problem I find with his statement is, for starters, there seems to be nothing done on a widespread scale to make reparations for the injustices brought upon an entire nation of people. And why would I expect reparations when

there were none provided for the African Americans who were treated equally as badly?

Moreover, his continued use of the word Indian delineates the fact that he is unaware of the use of the word or simply doesn't know any better. I understand it is easy to get caught up in the common use of a word just as Black is used to describe a people however, when you attempt to right a wrong by telling the truth it should be done keeping in mind what might possibly be misconstrued as offensive. My point here is that the term Indian identifies a nation of people as the epitome of subjugation. Byrd (2011) argues throughout her book, "that U.S. cultural and political preoccupations with indigeneity and the reproduction of Indianness serve to facilitate, justify, and maintain Anglo-American hegemonic mastery over the significations of justice, democracy, law, and terror," (p. xx). This is nothing new as she goes onto state,

Through nineteenth-and early twentieth-century logics of territorial rights and conquests that have now morphed into late twentieth-and early twenty-first century logics of civil rights and late capitalism, the United States has used executive, legislative, and juridical means to make 'Indian' those peoples and nations who stand in the way of U.S. military and economic desires. (Byrd, 2011, p. xx)

So there is no desire to right the egregious wrongs brought upon Native Americans. Thus, in assessing my feelings on the subject, I prefer not to be referred to as Indian, African-American, or Black. They are titles given to a nation of people by force under common means of identification to suit and support the purposes of subjugation whether intentionally or unintentionally. It only means I am in the way and still have no place in the place where I dwell.

The Reality behind Identity

Maalouf identifies deep rooted thoughts and expressions in everyone as the reason for our limitation on the meaning of identity (Maalouf, 2012). Identity cannot be diminished to a

single amalgamation because there are many aspects contained within the premise of identity. Identity can be defined by the number of allegiances one has and these allegiances connect or tie you to many people. Maalouf indicates that “the more ties I have the rarer and more particular my own identity becomes” (Maalouf, 2012, p. 18). Examining my own identity forces me to think about those ties and question the depths of them altogether.

One day I went to the bank for a loan and the Brokerage Associate I spoke to asked me if my ethnicity was Hispanic/Latino or Non-Hispanic/Latino. I promptly replied,

“Hispanic/Latino.”

She smiled and advised me that they had to ask me these questions because the federal government wants to ensure that they are adhering to fair lending practices. She smiled and continued, “What is your race? You can choose one of the following: African-American, Alaskan/Native American, Asian or White,” she said staring me straight in the eyes awaiting my answer.

I paused briefly then replied, “What do you think I am?”

Without letting go of her smile and her cheerful personality, she shared with me that she was mixed. Fifty percent Japanese and fifty percent European mixed with Irish, French, and German.

“There’s so much of a mix on the European side I just go with the most dominant portion and mark Asian,” she said.

I smiled on the inside because I had never thought of it that way before but in her explanation I gather we had things in common but we were very different. Firstly, we were both mixed and the most obvious fact was that we were both humans. We both took great pride in financial stability and looked to teach our children fiscal responsibility. In many ways, we were

the same with our only known difference being how we described ourselves racially. Maalouf (2012) asserts “not that all humans beings are the same, but that each one is different” (p. 21). The Brokerage Associate and I have things in common but are two totally different people identity wise. She didn’t judge me for being who I claimed to be – multiracial and certainly appreciated her openness about her own racial background. Maalouf (2012) reminds us that “it is often the way we look at other people that imprisons [sic] them within their own narrowest allegiances. And it is also the way we look at them that may set them free” (p. 22). In that experience, that moment in the bank, I felt free because of the way I was perceived and how I was able to perceive the Brokerage Associate. Now if I could just get the loan I am seeking, I would feel completely positive about the entire experience because for me in that moment, that’s all that mattered.

Coates’ contribution to the reality behind identity harbors a more deep rooted connection to blackness and what it means to be black. In his letter to his son, he describes the fear blacks hold in trying to protect the foundation of their own individual identity, which is the body. The body is the acme of one’s identity but the black body is constantly under attack by a “world... ruled by savage means... [and] schools that valorize men and women whose values society actively scorned” (Coates, 2015, p. 32). Due to the hypocritical dichotomous relationship between spoken values and actual actions, the black man tends to live and reflect on his experiences from an aspect of fear. Coates contends that the need for defense of the body is crucial to who you are as a person, a black person because “Very few Americans will directly proclaim that they are in favor of black people being left in the street. But a very large number of Americans will do all they can to preserve the Dream” (Coates, 2015, p. 33). The Dream he speaks of is the one where whites continue to reap the benefits from the massacre of millions of

Native Americans and the hard work off of the backs, sweat, and blood of Africans brought here in bondage to be the foot stool to the Dream seekers. The fear drummed up from these criminal absurdities has lead many of us to retreat to the folds of passiveness in search of peaceful solace only to find violence and bitter struggle brought upon ourselves because of the continued search for a single characteristic that defines our identity. Maalouf (2012) postulates man “is not himself from the outset; nor does he just grow aware of what his is; he becomes what he is. He doesn’t merely grow aware of his identity, he acquires it step by step” (p. 25).

Paul Gilroy sees identity as a materialistic cultural phenomenon in his book ‘There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack.’ He highlights and criticizes several writers’ works surrounding ideas about the sociology of race relations, the congenital effects of different structures and culture (Gilroy, 1991). His criticisms of these writers lean squarely against the fact that they have “made race into a synonym for ethnicity and a sign for the sense of separateness which endows groups with an exclusive collective identity” (Gilroy, 1991, p. 16). Unlike Coates (2015) and Maalouf (2012), Gilroy believes black bodies are not the acme of their identities but are subject to “the sturdy walls of discrete ethnic identities” (Gilroy, 1991, p. 16). In other words, the arguments presented by Gilroy are political in nature and look to substantiate the notion that economic relations and “Racial structuration is thus imposed by capitol” (Gilroy, 1991, p. 21), which places blacks at the bottom of the totem pole when it comes to the work population in Britain. Gilroy has more than one way of speaking about identity as he illustrates in his book ‘Against Race. Looking at identity in broader terms he indicates identity “offers far more than obvious, common-sense ways of talking about individuality, community, and solidarity,” (Gilroy, 2001, p. 98). This is in tandem with the notions that Coates (2015) and

Maalouf (2012) advocate but he takes it a step further and reveals that “Nobody ever speaks of a human identity” (Gilroy, 2001, p. 98).

Prior to moving to the suburbs from the inner city while I was growing up, human was all I knew. By the time I reached the age for kindergarten, step by step I became introduced to my identity as something in addition to human. People I had experiences with saw identity as Gilroy describes. “It seems that what we expect from the term identity will be cultural specificity, [sic] and that on occasion we even expect identity and specificity to work interchangeably” (Gilroy, 2001, pp. 98-99). This type of thinking warranted acting a certain way to fit in with cultural and societal norms and for those who didn’t they were ostracized verbally and physically.

Dinesh D’Souza (1995) notes that “Every oppressed community has drawn lines and says certain behavior puts you outside the community” (p. 480). I experienced many days where I was not found in favor with the black cultural community because I didn’t walk right, look right, act right or sound right at times even though my physical features could easily be described as one who fit in the black community. D’Souza observes the reason for this behavior as racism. He argues that “blacks are portrayed as living largely involuntary lives, wholly manipulated by the structures of visible and invisible racism” (D’Souza, 1995, pp. 481-482). In my view, this racism casts a blanket of fear, jealousy, and self-hatred over blacks, which thwarts positive growth toward healthy development of identity.

Silence is Golden: Language Barriers to Identity

Looking back, there were many times I wish I had just kept my mouth closed. As I got older, I learned to speak my mind almost in a compulsive uncontrolled way. The issue wasn’t what I said as much as it was how I said something. In the past, I have been very direct and

blunt. My mother was born and raised in a very small town in Mississippi called Bolton. The southern dialect there was thick and drawn out however, my mother didn't have this southern dialect and she was severely ridiculed due to speaking clearly and articulately. Perhaps it was a genetic anomaly of sorts but nevertheless, it trickled down to her children. All of us could speak articulately and with good diction without having had to learn to do so. This was not as big of a problem in Chicago as it was when I moved to the south as a young adult. Attending the University of Alabama had its challenges with respect to race however; language was also a challenged portion of my experience there. My diction won me rave reviews in the theater program but campus life earned me burlesque treatment when it came to my speech. The feelings I culled from those moments only compounded my confusion about identity, about who I was as a person. Werbner and Modood (2015) make an intriguing point that clarifies the confusion felt,

Even when our anxiety falls short of the extreme stage of psychic malaise, our self undergoes as profound process of transformation which splits it into multiple units... Our self simultaneously comprises a number of components, and the deepest-seated aspect of uncertainty is structured precisely by our difficulty in identifying with only one of them, and by the requirement that we should do so in order to act. (p. 63)

When one struggles to identify with a single portion of themselves out of many, it causes inner turmoil and strife. This, in turn, leads to apprehension and trepidation in our actions leading others to see a stifled self rather than the true self that is buried in solitude along with feelings of inferiority. Many times, those feelings kept me separated from blacks because I wasn't black enough. In her book, 'Yearning,' Bell Hooks attributes our identity to a collective commonality among southern black folks' struggle with racism. "The identity crisis we suffer has to do with

losing a sense of political perspective, not knowing how we should struggle collectively to fight racism and to create a liberatory space to construct radical black subjectivity” (Hooks, 1990, p. 36). She also iterates that the connections blacks experienced in the past kept them together as a people however; those bonds are quickly abrading (Hooks, 1990) through fusion with European culture.

The very people who placed Native Americans and Africans into bondage through subjugation have now created a landscape whereby blacks and Native Americans are beginning to identify with other than self. I’m not pointing this out to argue Hooks’ point as it is very valid and poignant. I’m asserting that identity is far more complex than a collective struggle to fight racism. The collective struggle to fight racism is merely another tentacle extending from the subject of identity itself albeit a huge tentacle. “The concept of identity is a substantialist notion which refers to a permanent essence as the foundation of identification,” (Werbner & Modood, 2015, p. 64). It is not permanent and is under constant construction so in essence it should not be surprising to see collective bonds eroding and being reconstructed in other ways.

How one speaks is an integral part of their identity and as stated earlier, caused confusion for me once I came to the south. Language can be stereotypically used against you if you don’t fall into certain social categories. Speaking clearly and articulately where others do not can almost be interpreted as a sign of intrusion. In other words, you do not belong here sounding the way you do. It is not explicitly stated in any classroom I’ve ever taught in before but students and even some teachers interpret clear speech as someone being stuck up or condescending. In Lisa Delpit and Joanne Dowdy’s ‘The Skin That We Speak,’ Michael Stubbs revealed that language experiments done as far back as the 1970s showed this phenomenon thus “Speakers of standard English were perceived as more ambitious, more intelligent, more self-

confident, and more reliable” (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p. 67). In the South, I experienced a reversal of this finding. Teachers and students tended to view me as being arrogant and condescending. I couldn’t understand their misjudged feelings about me in any logical sense except to assume that they were jealous but I honestly couldn’t see what there was for them to be jealous. I recall my first year teaching in the south where I was working as a substitute teacher in a co-teaching setting at a middle school. The general education teacher was going over poetic devices. I sat and listened to her butcher the English language in ways that I was familiar but never in a classroom setting.

“Nah yawl heya me and heya me gud! Ain’t nobody failin’ my tess tamorrah,” the teacher warned them confidently.

She pointed to a list of poetic devices on the board and began reading them to the students.

“Allituhrayshun, metaphor, hyper-bowl...”

I couldn’t believe my ears as I raised my hand like I was a student in the class as well.

“Yass mistuh Willums,” she called on me.

“That’s hyperbole,” I said.

“What!”

She frowned as though I had said something in another language.

“Hy-per-bo-le. The word is hyperbole,” I repeated.

“Well ah don’t know where you come frum but down heya we say hyper-bowl,” she said and continued with her review.

I didn’t challenge her and maybe I should have for the sake of academia or for the sake of not having a bunch of kids ignorantly informed on the pronunciation of a poetic device. I

would hope that someone taught them the correct way before they entered high school at least. Perhaps my ignored corrections only fell silent on the teacher's ears and the students picked it up anyway. At the end of the day, I gathered my things to go and sign out in the front office. The teacher stopped me on my way out of the classroom.

“If you evah sub fa dis skewl agayne, please don't embarrass us with yo north accent.

We jest as smaht as yawl is,” she said emphatically while standing behind her desk with her hands on her hips.

I was stunned beyond belief.

“It doesn't have anything to do with being smart. I wasn't trying to embarrass you but I'll keep that in mind if I come back,” I told her as humbly as I could then left.

The incident didn't make me mad because I have always been a firm believer in allowing people to be heard and understood as they are. I think the understanding is what we can't allow to get lost and saying an improper pronunciation of the word can lead to a loss in understanding. Her response to my correction of her pronunciation alluded to something deeper than the classroom lesson altogether. Her judgment of me, however incorrect it was, cannot be taken lightly. “Such judgments may be manifestly unfair, but it is an important social fact that people judge a speaker's intelligence, character and personal worth on the basis of his or her language” (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p. 67). A person's character, intelligence, and personal worth go a long way when it comes to identity. How must Celie have felt in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* as noted in Delpit and Dowdy (2002) when she says, “Darlene trying to teacher me how to talk... Every time I say something the way I say it she correct me... Pretty soon I feel I can't think. [She] bring me a bunch books. White folks all over them” (Delpit & Dowdy,

2002, p. 166). This implies that the way white people talk is correct and the way black people talk is incorrect.

Similarly, those stereotypical social labels of ‘poor white trash’ and ‘redneck’ are viewed as incorrectly speaking the English language as well. Michael Stubbs points out that the British view the speech of people living in the large cities as boorish because they “are very sensitive to the social implications of dialect and accent” (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p. 67). The sensitivities of the British have silently seeped into the social fabrics of our culture here in America. Perhaps what this has done to the minds of many people here is forced them to think in ways that are not them thus disrupting the construction of their identity. “Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind” (Walker, 1982, in Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p. 166). Celie felt more comfortable speaking around people who knew her language and spoke it as well.

Coates (2015) describes this same feeling of comfort when someone runs past him, bumps into him on the streets then says ‘my bad.’ In the white world that suppresses a black man’s ability to be themselves it was comforting for him to hear those words spoken in a language for which he was all too familiar (Coates, 2015). That familiarization is what connects blacks and ironically does not exclude any other races. Coates recognizes that race is a reified biological notion that is impossible to be connected to. He sees himself connected to black as a group of people bound together under a common experience of injustice. “they [are] bound because they suffered under the weight of the Dream, and they were bound by all the beautiful things, all the language and mannerisms... all the language that they fashioned like diamonds under the weight of the Dream” (Coates, 2015, p. 119). The bondage under the weight of the dream cannot be denied whether it was experienced by your black ancestors, you personally

today or in the past, or any portion of your racial makeup. It is like the wetness on water that cannot be wiped away because it sits in the depths of the oceans of the world. Therefore Coates is precise when he says “We will always be black, you and I, even if it means different things in different places” (Coates, 2015, p. 127). I admire Coates and his words are inspiring however, the language in which he speaks although similar to mine is not the same. His writing and experiences are different from mine connecting us only by the desire to do so and be heard and suffering under the weight of the Dream. Therefore I agree fully with his words, “You can no more be black like I am than I could be black like your grandfather was” (Coates, 2015, p. 39). This further clarifies the reality behind identity. It is an individual entity that is constructed through many things in your life.

The Struggle to Identify as Black

The struggle to identify as Black is just as complex, if not more, than identity itself. There is a deep rooted psychological accounting for my own struggle with blackness that is not easily explained. Frantz Fanon’s ‘Black Skin, White Masks’ heralds the psychological effects of racism by sharing his experiences while in the French Caribbean. Blacks have long accepted the status of their skin color and the incorrectness of their language as impure which is wholly dictated by a dominant white culture (Fanon, 2008). Feelings of inferiority, impurity and self-contempt are injected into the minds and souls of blacks due to racism produced by White Europeans. Fanon points out that the black man is seen as a child in the eyes of the White European conquerors and are treated as such to the degree that blacks desire to ingratiate themselves toward whiteness. Black identity is subtly constructed through dominance and subjugation. Two men are fighting, one white and one black. The white man is on top pummeling the black man nearly to death. In the black man’s mind, he firstly wants relief. But

because it is not coming and he doesn't know when it will come, his mind races to thoughts of survival and within those thoughts he desires to be like the white man because it means freedom from the pummeling currently being received (Fanon, 2008). Fanon describes this phenomenon as a fundamental question of language in which he tries to understand why the Antillean is so fond of speaking French well. Any justification given to him be it philosophical or intellectual, Fanon responds, "If equality among men is proclaimed in the name of intelligence and philosophy, it is also true that these concepts have been used to justify the extermination of man" (Fanon, 2008, p. 12). Moreover, he cites a story told by Monsieur Achille to illustrate the presumptuous ignorance that many blacks have experienced at one time or another. Monsieur Achille was a Black Roman Catholic living in France taking part in a pilgrimage in which very few blacks participated. "Seeing a black face among his flock, the priest asked him: 'Why you left big Savannah and why you come with us?' Achille answered most politely, and in this story it wasn't the young deserter of Savannah who was most embarrassed" (Fanon, 2008, p. 14).

I recall a time when I was pursuing my master's degree in criminal law at the University of Alabama and my work study supervisor asked me to go to the administration building to retrieve school programs for the new athletes coming for recruiting visits. It was a cold day. I had been growing my beard and looked gruff, I suppose in the face. I wore a long black Raider's bomber coat with a red and black Chicago Bulls sweater cap. I thought I looked pretty good. When I entered the administrative offices a white woman was looking down at her computer screen. As I approached her to ask about the programs my supervisor had sent me over to get she looked up and jumped with alarm in her eyes.

"Oh my you startled me," she said gasping for air.

I would like to think I startled her because she didn't see me coming but there were several people entering in and out of the building. I chuckled devilishly and responded in a British accent,

“Stick them up! I want the programs Mr. Allen sent me here to get and I shan't ask for them twice.”

She bucked her eyes and looked around at the others workers who were staring by now and they started laughing hysterically, relieved that I wasn't a hood character coming to rob them. The lady retrieved the programs for me handing them to me with tears in her eyes.

“Here ya go young man. Have a good day,” she said wiping tears of laughter from her face.

I left thinking they were so relieved that I wasn't a black man attempting to rob them that it struck them as funny. At the time, there was less than 5% blacks attending the University and I assume they weren't used to seeing many black faces on campus let alone one who's looked like mine. When I returned with the programs, Mr. Allen took them and winked at me, “You got a great sense of humor, Mike.”

I laughed and continued my work study duties. I found the incident amusing but all peoples who have been subjected to oppression, bondage, subjugation or colonization over long periods of time tend to succumb to the mantras of what is correct or proper and what is incorrect or improper. Eventually, contemporaneously, it seems that is becomes common knowledge as Delpit and Dowdy (2002) assert, “Everyone who writes the language knows they have to translate their thoughts as fast as they can speak, if they are going to come across as more than the morons attempting to speak the Queen's English” (p. 7). D'Souza shows just how deeply embedded these concrete assumptions are by acknowledging claims made by some black

nationalists and afro centrists “that racism is a peculiarly western or white pathology that is embedded in the English language... Many of us fall victim to racism because the language we share keeps it alive” (D’Souza, 1995, p. 26). D’Souza (1995) goes on to illustrate the characterization of the black man as Satan representing all that is shadowy and dirty depicting him as Europe’s bad character. Gilroy (2001) reminds us that identity, whether from others who lack particular, chosen traits that become the basis of typology and comparative evaluation,” (p. 104). This is the struggle I experience inside with my own identity and in part why I look to self-identify as multiracial. Fanon (2008) postulates, “the black man belongs to an inferior race [so] he tries to resemble the superior race” (p. 190). The black man tries to emulate the superior race because under his oppression he no longer sees himself. He can only see the oppressor thus “because of [his] identification with the oppressor, [he has] no consciousness of [himself] as [a person] of an oppressed class” (Freire, 2007, p. 46). In other words, “during the initial stage of their struggle the oppressed find in the oppressor their model of manhood,” (Freire, 2007, p. 46).

In observing the subject of identity I turn to James Baldwin, who extrapolates some profound ideas from Alex Haley’s ‘Roots’. In his collected essays found in ‘How One Black Man Came to Be an American,’ Baldwin discusses something rarely, if ever mentioned about the story of Roots. He lauds Haley for his bravery in writing a piece that describes the creation of the black man in America out of “pain and darkness, remnant of slaughter” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 762). He tells of the beginning of the story, Roots, to trace back to where the black man had his own identity. The eight day ceremony, a cultural practice in West Africa, was used to name a newborn child eight days after its birth. “It was the first time the name had ever been spoken

as this child's name, for Omoro's [Kunta Kinte's father] people felt that each human being should be the first to know who he was" (Baldwin, 1998, p. 763).

The West Africans revealed a strong sense of identity through their names and it gave meaning to who they were as a people. We see now, why Kunta Kinte stubbornly endured the master's whip for so long in an attempt to not give up his given name of Kunta Kinte for the slave master's name, Toby. This part in the story is where the White European slave master has successfully, symbolically created a new race of people, the black man. Today, the new black man is so far removed from his distant past where he once had an identity, contemporary generations seeking identity cannot help but be confused. Debra Dickerson's 'The end of Blackness' supports this notion whole-heartedly by addressing the diminished identification of African Americans through blackness. She emphasizes the fact that "They lost their family structure, their histories, their knowledge, their religion, their customs, their cultures, their countries, their continent... They are a people without a return address" (Dickerson, 2004, p. 124).

A disconsolate feeling rises in my chest as I take in Dickerson's words painting a desolate reality for future generations to come where home is concerned. My own identity has no foundation in the past freedom of blacks unless I look to Chancellor Williams' 'The Destruction of Black Civilization' and take from it pride fully, the noted attractions of Ethiopia. I am part Ethiopian and take great pride in knowing those attractions are "The land of the Gods, [and they] were great not only because the Egyptians regarded it as the main source of their religion, but also because of its socio-political, economic and strategic importance" (Williams, 1987, p. 129). History of this caliber is what strikes a chord in my conscious and drives me to

honor the Ethiopian portion of my identity; however, speaking in terms of a multiracial identity becomes complicated and confusing. Dickerson (2004) touches on a possible reason:

Too many blacks have little notion of their identity apart from a history of oppression and a thoroughgoing self-hatred inculcated by ruthless, narcissistic oppressors. This circumscribed, oppression-based self-notion, counter intuitively enough is kept alive by the victims, as if it were helpful... it is merely familiar and reinforcing of a belief in never-ending black oppression born of never-ending white racism. (Dickerson, 2004, p. 130)

All of the history I was exposed to growing up touted the struggles and oppression blacks have been under for hundreds of years. This instilled a complacent fear in my mind in the midst of trying to ingratiate myself to a blackness I did not completely understand and in which I was never fully accepted. As open and outgoing as I am, I have always been cautious of people no matter their race or ethnicity. In almost paranoid schizophrenic like fashion, I separate myself from people when it comes to race and for those who see me as black or African American I accept it outwardly but in my mind I am neither. "The divided self will always distance itself from others, and may even try to destroy them, to defend its fragile identity" (Palmer, 2007, p. 16). My identity is not as fragile as it is multifarious. However, having experienced rejection on multiple levels as well, I hide what portions of my identity that I can. Palmer (2007) supports this action by describing the reason students stay silent in the classroom. "Is it any wonder that students, having received such messages from a dozen sources, stay silent in the classroom rather than risk another dismissal or rebuke" (p. 46)? In my experiences, dismissals or rebuke came in the form of ridicule and beat downs whereby I got the message 'we don't like you and we don't want you here.' Palmer (2007) goes on to say "Their silence is born not out of

stupidity or banality but of a desire to protect themselves and to survive. It is a silence driven by their fear of [a]... world in which they feel alien and disempowered” (p. 46). This rang true for a good portion of my life.

Upon reviewing the literature, I have not seen much evidence of written works on multiracial issues in the field of curriculum studies albeit, Dr. Gaztambide-Fernandez has written about identity and class warfare to some degree. Moreover, I question why the government has been so reluctant to acknowledge multiracial as a racial category when there are so many of us that are multiracial. This may be expressed in monoracial populations educated by government propaganda as fear. The fear of a multiracial category taking the place of a monoracial category is no more logical than the only child that worries about their position as they watch the stomach of their mother growing with an expectant newborn. Just as the newborn will teach the child new things so will the child teach the newborn new things. Exposure of these fears may allow further dialogue to take place between the races to ultimately learn from each other and hopefully perpetuate a more humane society.

CHAPTER TWO

ELEMENTARY MY DEAR

Shadows over My Soul

Shadows draw near and are never clear
 In my mind and heart lies a primal fear
 Fear of the shadows masquerading as darkness
 Darkness that cuts light with sullen sharpness
 I am the light, I am the darkness too
 I am the gray smoky shadow that keeps me from you
 Doors shut tight, entrapped in the smoldering flames
 My fear I'll admit is chock full of shame
 Shame and pain I hold deep within
 Cause to reveal its true existence must be a sin
 I'm finding keys in the shape of curriculum theory
 To turn the locks on my soul for all to hear me
 (Michael G. Williams, 2015)

1976 Chicago Green Elementary

Coloring time was approaching and I knew it because that familiar knot began to develop in my stomach. The room looked dim with its amber light contrasting with the brown carpet covering part of the floor. Douglass Brantley and Marcus Coleman were snickering and pointing at me from the reading section with the big purple and red bean bags because they always poked fun at me. I couldn't take it too personally because poked fun at everyone so much so that Mrs. Soy would give them time out in the small broom closet adjacent to the classroom door almost daily. It's amazing how consequences to poor behavior maintain the prevalence of the undesired act. I wanted to tell Mrs. Soy that time out only made the situation worse. I wanted to tell her to just leave them be because I would be alright. David Laramie, a good friend of mine, looked as though he were about to cry as he pointed toward the broom closet.

“Mrs. Soy, they are still pointing at Michael and making fists that are threatening,” he tattled as Mrs. Soy inched her way over to the door.

David was very articulate and spoke with good diction. He sounded as though he were pronouncing every syllable in the words he spoke. I liked him. I liked him a lot. He was slim, about the same height as myself and had a light complexion as well. He had big eyes that almost seemed to tear up whenever he addressed the teacher with an issue concerning me. I wanted him to just stay silent, to leave well enough alone because just as Mrs. Soy’s consequence was void of gaining the desired behavior so too was David’s constant tattling. I mentioned I liked him a lot because he was the only one who ever stood up for me. Regardless of whether his stance was effective or not, he stood up for me. None of the others did while Mrs. Soy handed out coloring sheets. I stared out of the window, with a blank look on my face. I was stressing on the inside but my outward expression was blank. Inside I could hear the threatening jingle that always came around coloring time.

“See my pinky, see my thumb, see my fist, you better run,” Douglass and Marcus sang in unison with wolf snarls on their faces.

A loud banging sounded followed by snickers from the other side of the broom closet door.

“Mrs. Soy, they’re kicking the door,” David yelled out disrupting the momentary silence in the classroom.

The other kids erupted into laughter.

“I know David, don’t be such a tattler,” she warned him as she made her way to the broom closet door.

I put my head down to avoid being targeted. I don't know why because I was already the target.

"Pick your head up and color your bird Michael," she commanded with an ounce of warning in her tone.

She was beginning to get impatient with the laughter and disruption caused by two students. I picked my head up just enough to rest my chin on my arms folded in front of me. Peering out of the window, I noticed gray clouds were covering the sky barely holding the rain which would soon fall to the asphalt outside the school, Green Elementary. It was a depressing sight and I longed to be home away from the insults and threats that were unfolding from the broom closet like clockwork.

"You boys have a seat at your desks and the rest of you, get quiet! It's almost time to go home," Mrs. Soy said raising her voice.

The class got quiet, continued coloring, and I could almost hear the ticks and tocks of the clock echoing in my ears as the minute hand approached the three. 15 minutes after the three o'clock hour was dismissal. I grabbed a black crayon and scribble scabbled all over the bird on my coloring sheet. Inside the lines, outside the lines I went frantically back and forth because I was frustrated and angry and afraid all at the same time. Mrs. Soy just shook her head in disappointment as she walked by and saw my coloring. Kathy Smith looked over at me sympathetically. She was extremely dark skinned with the whitest teeth I had ever seen and while she didn't speak up for me the look in her eyes spoke silently for me. She was beautiful and I was caught in her sympathetic stare momentarily basking in the comfort it brought me. The bell rang and the sound of chairs sliding out from under desks and being pushed back under them filled the classroom along with shoes trampling over the floor then the carpeted area

toward the classroom door. I didn't move. I never did. I waited until everyone else had left.

Marcus mumbled the familiar threat,

“See my pinky, see my thumb, at 3:15 you better run!”

Douglass insinuated the sentiments of the tune while Marcus mumbled the words. Once again, I was threatened with being beaten up after school because I was lighter than everyone else except David who was the same complexion as I but he lived right across the street from the school. His mother would be waiting on the curb when the doors to the school were opened and the kids were let out. He ran passed my desk saying,

“See you tomorrow Michael,” as he darted out of the classroom.

Kathy walked past my desk and dragged her finger across it slowly as she headed out.

“Better get it over with. The sooner the better,” She said still holding that sympathetic look in her eyes.

Mrs. Soy motioned for me to exit the classroom. As I slowly gathered my things and put them in my backpack, I sighed deeply. My feet felt like led as I schlepped across the floor toward the door. Mrs. Soy put her hand on my shoulder and gave me an unsympathetic ‘tsk, tsk.’

“You had better toughen up boy cause you're not like them. That's why they pick on you. You're not dark enough, too light... work on your coloring at home,” she said handing me another coloring sheet.

She sounded as though she didn't want to say what she said but something forced the words out of her. I didn't feel any different but apparently I was because the teacher said so and it wasn't a good different. At the time, I didn't realize it but she was a red haired brown eyed white woman who was in her forties. My mother told me some years later when we reminisced

about old times at school in the inner city of Chicago. I almost felt as though I was being set up, thrown to the lions without warning. I thought about Kathy's words as usual,

“Just get it over with, the sooner the better.”

I snatched the coloring sheet from Mrs. Soy and ran to the right down the hallway then a quick left eyeing the big brown double doors that led to my demise. On the other side of the school where the older kids were, my brother and sister were waiting for me. I pushed the doors open and ran through with my head down anticipating the pummeling I had become accustomed to. I felt a forearm yoked around my neck with fists and feet finding their way to my body like a flock of birds to a pile of seeds. I fell to my knees, covered my face as I pushed it toward my knees and closed my eyes. My ears absorbed the vocal vibrations coming from Marcus and Douglass along with a few older guys I did not know.

“White boy,” one shouted!

“Casper the friendly ghost,” shouted another!

And still another, “Banana Boy!”

As silly as the names they called me were, they hurt far more than the fists and feet connecting to my head and body. Then the sound of a whistle blowing penetrated the air. Mr. Wilson came running from the older kids' side yelling,

“Hey break it up! Break it up! Get away...”

Bursts of whistles followed between as Mr. Wilson approached me out of breath.

“Get up son, you're okay, you're alright,” he said.

He began brushing leaves and partially dried mud from the wet ground off of my throbbing legs, arms, and head. I looked Mr. Wilson in the eyes searching for some ounce of understanding, some sympathy for my situation but found none. He was a dark skinned man

with a look on his face that suggested he would rather be anywhere else than with a bunch of elementary kids just let out of school at the end of the day. I recognized that look in the eyes of many teachers I work with today. It's that same faraway look that fails to establish any kind of rapport with students. A look that suggests you find someone that gives a damn because they didn't seem to care about what was going on with me. I slung my backpack over my shoulders, shoved my hands in my pockets, and headed toward the older kids' side to meet up with my brother and sister. Many of the kids still finding their way home didn't seem to notice anything had happened and part of me felt like I had imagined it all but the throbbing feeling shooting through my head and body was a reminder that it did.

I caught up with my brother and sister who had started walking home without me.

"Hey you guys, wait up for me! Wait for me," I yelled!

I was trying to make them slow down and realized they were leaving me. When I caught up with them I asked why they were leaving knowing mama said to wait for me.

"You know the way home Bae Bae. You're smart. Mama won't worry," was the answer my sister gave.

"Shouldn't be screwing around with your boyfriends after school," my brother teased.

I didn't care because I had caught up with them and the momentary fear of being left after being beat down subsided with thoughts of home. Home was like the safe place in the game of 'Hide and go seek' or 'Tag.' Once home, I would let go of the negative experience I had at school. I never forgot the experience but at home I could deflate and let it go. My mother greeted us at the door with hugs and kisses asking us how our day was. My brother pushed past her and yelled,

"Good," as he headed to the refrigerator for a baloney sandwich and kool aid.

My sister put her backpack down on the living room floor and huffed.

“That Linda Stafford keeps at it mama. She calling me blacky and doo doo balls talking about she gonna fight me,” she said clearly upset about her day.

My mother looked concerned but didn’t say anything initially so my sister continued.

“I don’t want these puff balls in my hair. Do it different for tomorrow please, mama please,” she begged!

My mother always made sure we were dressed nicely and well groomed. People thought we were spoiled but as my mother always put it, we were spoiled but never rotten. She gave us all the material things she could afford, which wasn’t much and drowned us in love to compensate for the lack of those material things of which we saw other in possession. She taught us to love what we had, work for what we wanted, and to be patient for that which didn’t come quickly. She is one of the smartest women I know. She asked my sister why she didn’t like her neatly groomed puff balls.

“They make fun of me at school and I don’t like them,” she sulkily replied.

“So what other people think of you makes the puff balls ugly? Not to mention the hard work I put into doing your hair,” my mother said in a tone that wasn’t harsh but made you think.

My sister wasn’t easily taken in by her psychological tone and began to mimic the way the kids at school teased her.

“You black! Black gal with the doo doo balls...”

My mother cut into her twisted face rendition of school kids teasing her.

“You are Lynn so work on being her first,” my mother calmly said followed by, “You need to work on those grades because they are atrocious. If you spent as much time worrying about them as you do those knotty head kids at school you’d be a scholar.”

My mother was clearly frustrated with my sister's frustration with her skin color and hair. My sister frowned in defiance and my mother would go to the other side of the living room and put a record on the record player. The silence in the air fused with the sound of the needle on the record sparked anticipation from us all including my brother who was eating a baloney sandwich standing in the doorway of the dining room connected to the kitchen. James Brown's 'Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud' blared through the speakers drawing a partial smile from my sister. Mama danced and told us to join in with her. I happily joined her with my rhythm less knee bending dance while my sister reluctantly came over and danced with us. My brother didn't dance. He just stood in the doorway smiling continuing to eat his sandwich.

As I listened to the words from James Brown's song, I became confused because ironically, my sister was being bullied for being dark skinned among other things and I was being bullied for being too light in complexion. To make matters worse, my only reference to black was everyone around me in contrast to white people I saw on television and everyone knows that television is not real. Even Ms. Soy, who was actually white, appeared to only be another light skinned, albeit extremely light skinned, black person in my mind. The difference between white and black people never occurred to me until we moved to the suburbs. Before then I was black, trying to be proud as James Brown put it, through the tutelage of my mama and the accusations of being white like the fictitious people on the television. I didn't dwell on it much because I pushed things away attempting to be invisible like my sister told my mother she wanted be after coming home on another occasion when being bullied had gotten the best of her. I felt her pain as she cried and shouted, "I just want to be invisible!"

Poetic Discernment

Shadows over my soul describe the feelings of mental anguish endured during my early years growing up under the yoke of not fitting in with the community I was surrounded by. I

feared being beaten up even though it was a common occurrence. I was ashamed because at the time I never talked to anyone or told anyone how I felt or what was actually going on with me. Being beaten up or intimidated was a secret I held from everyone. Christopher Edmin discusses forming an identity that responds to society by describing his interaction with society growing up in Brooklyn, New York. Reasoning abilities he possessed were not readily available to me at such an early age but I developed similar coping skills later in life which helped me combat the bullying which became subtle intimidation. He exhibited an attitude that we would have called flexing or perping (perpetrating). He states,

If they were hip-hop like we were, we could tell. A slight head nod or a demure smile would tell their story because it meant that it was similar to ours. Anything different meant they were not on our side and deserved the menacing stares we gave. (Edmin, 2010, p. 36)

Reading Edmin makes me feel like he was one who would have singled me out because I certainly was not hip-hop nor did I walk around with an ice grill on my face to combat would be adversaries. Shadows over my soul exude a spark of pride in the darkness I attribute to myself because in my secret withholdings I was also preparing to overcome my fears because I was black and I was proud but I was not quite sure of that which I was black and proud. My silence separated me from other kids and made me cautious and weary of others. Like an approaching cat, I would take every precaution before engaging anyone, kids and adults alike. I wasn't dull-witted just apprehensive given the circumstances within the environment. Palmer (2007) states, "Their silence is born not out of stupidity or banality but of a desire to protect themselves and to survive. It is a silence driven by their fear of [a]... world in which they feel alien and

disempowered,” (p. 46). Being told I was different where I couldn’t see any difference or quite understand the difference had a huge impact on the way I perceived people early on in life.

I Went Down to the Crossroads

There’s a road shaped like a cross
 It’s a dirt road that’ll cost
 You dearly so they tell me
 But my mixture never fails me
 So I went down to the crossroads
 And laid down my soul
 I had a question for the devil
 His answer was worth more than gold
 Why is my mixture so problematic?
 He replied, for my vices you are an addict
 Republican, Independent, or Democratic
 Doesn’t matter to me they’re all acrobatic
 In simpler terms what matters to me
 Is that you faithfully succumb to an installed mentality
 So believe in the reification of this racial paradigm
 And I’ll continue to rule from this chair of mine
 Bedazzled and confused, I grappled with his answer
 Animosity and false conviction spread through me like a cancer
 I picked up my soul and carried on in color
 Mixed in with everyone else ignorantly judging each other
 (Michael G. Williams, 2014)

Ms. Miller the Big Fat Roach Killer

Green Elementary was an old, dilapidated school that had a drab look, which brought a depressing feeling over me. The first grade was a repeat of kindergarten and the second a repeat of the first. Fortunately, I received the best Christmas present ever the second half of my second grade year but before Christmas came I endured the trials of being bullied because I wasn’t black enough and conversely my sister was too black. My brother Charles was just brown enough to escape the wrath of those people who identified as black. It reminds me of the story of ‘Goldie Locks and the Three Bears’ with the cruel kids we grew up with being Goldie Locks and me and my siblings representing the porridge. Michael was too light, Lynn was too dark but

Charles was just right. As I lay in my bed early in the mornings, I waited to hear my mother sing those words that reminded me of early birds trying to catch the worm. “Wake up little people. Time to go to school,” She said a few times before everyone was finally up and getting ready. I had been awake off and on throughout the night pondering ways to get through the day.

I could never think of anything outside of playing hooky like my brother, Charles would do on occasion. We got to the school and instead of going inside the building when the bell rang he headed for the hills with older kids and smoked cigarette butts they found still smoldering after some unknown passerby discarded them. I tried to go with him but he told me there was no sense in both of us getting in trouble if we ever got caught. I understood. He didn’t want me to know he was smoking on the hill but I guess he didn’t realize that I could clearly see him out of the window of my first grade classroom. With snow on the ground and the sun reflecting off of it brightly, I could clearly see him with his green nylon coat with the furry hood and his black ski cap on his head. I stared out of the window envying his freedom on the hill. Almost in a trance, I stared, watching him stand with one foot at the top of the hill and the other a little lower on the hill and he held the cigarette to his lips and puffed as cool as the Marlboro man did in the cigarette ads. Suddenly out of corner of the room where the teacher’s desk was, a loud shriek snapped me back to reality.

“Michael! Michael Williams, get your butt away from that window!” Miss Miller yelled.

The entire class erupted into laughter as I nearly fell out of the chair I was sitting in. I still hadn’t taken my coat and hat off and the other kids started poking fun at me.

“Yellow boy peel that banana,” Quita Washington remarked.

She had a twin sister named Sherida and for some reason they liked to pick fights with anyone who didn't listen to them. It didn't matter whether I listened to them or not, they were going to pick on me anyway.

"Settle down class right this minute," Miss Miller commanded.

She was a heavysset brown skinned woman with a large wide nose and round eyes. She wasn't the nicest teacher at Green Elementary and she had a passion for embarrassing students in front of the whole class. As the laughter settled down to slight murmurs and a few snickers, Miss Miller pointed at me with her index finger and gave me the come here motion. The class murmurs and snickers grew into and expanding, "oooh!" and faded as quickly as it started. Teachers could use corporal punishment on unruly students if they deemed it necessary. Apparently, my staring out of the window was unruly and had to be punished. Miss miller retrieved a pointer stick from the blackboard and tapped her had with it a few times as I slowly, reluctantly went up to her in the front of the class.

"Your white ass about to get beat black nah!" Sherida whispered as I walked passed her desk with saucer eyes.

"Now Michael, I don't understand why you feel you're so special. You don't have to take your coat and hat off like everyone else was instructed to do huh?" She asked resting the pointer stick over her shoulder.

I nodded my head no slowly trying to hold tears of fear and embarrassment back. I still had my hat and coat on and Miss Miller swung the yard stick toward my rear end. It made a swish sound that made everyone in the class sit up at attention.

"Now turn around and look at my face!" She snapped.

I quickly did as I was told feeling relieved I hadn't received a lick but deathly afraid that she wasn't finished.

"You think you're better than me? Huh? Huh?" She asked gritting her teeth.

I nodded no once again.

"But you still have your hat and coat on. You must think you're better than me and everyone else in here. Carl is he better than you?" She asked another student.

"No ma'am!" He replied emphatically.

"Sherida, Quita, is he better than both of you?" She asked the twins.

"We'll see at 3:15 Miss Miller," Quita threatened.

"Noll, noll I think he thinks he's better than you all," she stirred their emotions.

The class began to deny I was better than they were.

"Raise your hand if you all think Michael deserves a few licks," she polled the class.

Many hands went up high. I believe the students who didn't raise their hands didn't because they were afraid they would be next.

"No, no I won't do it this time. I'm going to let you deal with your classmate..." she said then paused before finishing with, "at 3:15. Take your hat and coat off and sit your butt in that desk," she scolded me.

I returned to my desk and received a few threats on the way back to my desk but Sherida's threat was the one I was most concerned over.

"At 3:15 you mine Casper," she threatened out loud with no fear of getting in trouble by Miss Miller.

The class started laughing again and singing the theme song to the cartoon Casper the Friendly Ghost. I flopped down in my seat at my desk and put my head down.

“Pick your head up before I change my mind,” Miss Miller snapped.

I did as I was told and started working on the addition worksheet in front of me. I was angry, embarrassed, and afraid all at the same time waiting for the day to end; wondering if I would run or just take the beat down. The school day seemed to fly by unlike the uneventful days where you could hear the hands on the clock squeak to the next minute slowly. I knew how to tell time well on an analog clock by now because 3:15pm was my point of reference when learning the concept. When the minute hand and the hour hands both covered the three as the red second hand glided past the twelve, that was 3:15pm and I knew it because not only did the school bell ring, bells went off inside of me and sometimes a punch to the head left a ringing sensation I couldn't forget. Lunch time had come and it was the only part of the day I liked. The food smelled good everyday as we anticipated our class being called down to the cafeteria. The best part was at the end of lunch. Students were given an opportunity to buy large round peanut butter cookies for only 20 cents. The cafeteria lady counted your change and gave you as many cookies as your change would buy. I handed the lunch lady a dollar bill and she gave me five peanut butter cookies wrapped in a brown paper towel. Once we returned to the classroom, I shoved the cookies in my coat pocket for later. I would eat them on the way home. At least, that was the plan. Miss Miller made everyone sit down with their heads down before recess. Fifteen minutes of yelling, screaming, running, playing 'Tag' and 'It,' all on a cement lot in the back of the school, which was enclosed inside a cyclone fence. Once everyone was quiet with their heads down resting she would call us up one at a time to get in line.

“I see Marvin resting quietly. You may line up,” she said slightly above a whisper.

“I see Melody resting quietly. You may line up,” she said once again.

This would continue until everyone was lined up waiting to go outside for recess. It was cold and snowy but no one paid that any attention. Going outside was like being freed from prison. I was usually the last one called to line up.

“I see Michael resting quietly. You may line up,” she said while staring at me as if she were waiting for me to do something wrong.

As I made it to the back of the line, Brian Wallace shoved me into the blackboard yelling, “Ooh a roach! Miss Miller a roach!”

Miss Miller came running to the back of the line screaming,

“Kill it, kill it, kill it!”

When she caught a glimpse of the critter, she stomped on it repeatedly continuing to yell, “Kill it, kill it, kill it!”

The other kids in line exploded into laughter and a few sang teasingly, ‘Miss Miller the big fat roach killer.’ The roach was now a brown pasty film on the floor and Miss Miller looked as though she had run a marathon with her wig sloped to the side. Trying to catch her breath, she grimaced at me.

“Settle down class or recess will be cancelled!” She yelled.

The class settled down immediately. All faced the front and zipped their imaginary zippers across their lips.

“Darn thing probably came from your house,” she said staring at me annoyed at the class’ behavior.

“We don’t have roaches at my house,” I defended myself.

No one wanted to admit to having roaches. It was a sign of not being clean and poverty. We were poor but not that poor.

“Oh so you’re still better than me right? Right?” She asked with her hands on her hips leaning over me in a menacing way.

I was reluctant to answer because I didn’t want to get whacked with the pointer.

“No,” I managed to eke out.

“You’ll stand on the wall while all the other kids play,” she snapped her finger at me.

“Why?” I whined.

“Because I don’t like you,” she responded walking to the front of the line.

Why was the question that ran through my head the entire time I stood on the wall during recess and what had I done to her? Standing on the wall during recess was one thing in the summer but quite another altogether in the winter. In the summer you just missed out on playing and having fun. In the winter playing and having fun was the solution to keeping warm. It was a bitter stinging punishment and I pondered what I had done to deserve such treatment from the teacher. I knew she was mean. Mostly all the students thought so but she seemed to carry out her negative disposition more towards me than any other student. I shoved my hands in my pockets, put the hood of my coat over my head and tried to dance in place to keep warm. As I shuffled back and forth in an attempt to delight in the warmth seeking endeavor, a snowball impacted the wall near where I was. The cold remnants from the splatter tickled my forehead and cheeks, which indicated the snowball was very close and intended for me. I didn’t see who had thrown it and no warning came from Miss Miller. Throwing snowballs was against the rules and if caught you could be sent to Mrs. Green, the principal. No one wanted to go there because it was rumored that Mrs. Green had a whipping machine in her office that she would strap you into, rear end up and flip a switch. The thought of the whipping machine was worse than anything a teacher could do with a yard stick, pointer, or 3 rulers taped together to rap over your

knuckles. Another snowball hit the wall with no warning from Miss Miller who was absent minded looking in the opposite direction.

“Miss Miller,” I called to her just as a snowball smashed clean into my face.

The cold icy snow left a pulsating stinging feeling on the bridge of my nose, cheeks, and the ridge of my brow. As I fell to my knees, I could hear laughter from unidentified kids. While trying to wipe the snow out of my face, the cold melting sensation dripped down into my eyes and front part of my neck.

“Miss Miller!” I yelled out in anger and frustration.

“Nah, nah Casper real white now,” Sherida and her sister Quita teased.

“Miss Miller!” I cried.

“White cry baby,” Sherida teased under her breath before running off with her sister.

In my mind, I was thinking they had thrown the snowballs as Miss Miller came toward me. She had on thick red gloves and a hat to match that partially exposed her wig. Her eyes set behind the large rimmed glasses didn't show any sympathy for me nor did they appear to be searching for the culprits who threw the snowballs. Her eyes looked as though I had interrupted her absent minded stare in the other direction to attend to me whom she already stated she didn't like.

“Get up. Get up!” She impatiently commanded.

She snatched me up by the arm and signaled to Miss Martin, another first grade teacher, to watch her class. We entered the building and the heat merging with the cold from outside made my face feel slightly numb. Quickly I noticed we weren't heading toward our classroom but toward the lunchroom opposite side of the gym.

“Where are we going?” I asked concerned about the route we were taking.

“Just close your mouth. Because of you we have to see Mrs. Green,” she complained. A knot the size of an anvil developed in the pit of my stomach. We made a right turn I had never made in the school before and headed down a slim hallway. The wooden brown door at the end of it has Mrs. T. Green in bold capital letters positioned under the word principal. Miss Miller stopped in front of the door, paused then sighed deeply before knocking.

“Com in” a voice replied from the other side of the door.

In we went and I immediately searched for Mrs. Green’s whipping machine. My search was thwarted by Mrs. Green’s voice.

“What can I do for you Miss Miller?” She asked.

Her voice had a light calm but stern tone. Miss Miller explained that I had been acting up all morning and after being told to stand on the wall after lunch, I ignored her and ran around playing despite her directive to stand on the wall and got hit in the face with a snowball.

“Why are you not listening to your teacher Michael?” Mrs. Green asked in a tone attempting to coax an answer out of me.

This was her attempt to keep me from shutting down. It didn’t work. I was so confused at Miss Miller’s explanation I didn’t know how to respond.

“Look at his face. Poor thing,” Mrs. Green exclaimed.

Miss Miller huffed, folded her arms defiantly and looked away.

“Come here Michael,” Mrs. Green said sweetly.

I walked toward her slowly, reluctantly because I didn’t know what would happen next.

“I’m not going to hurt you. Mrs. Green loves all her children. I just want to give my baby a hug and make sure he’s alright,” she said holding her arms out toward me.

I was split between believing her and not believing her. By the time I reached her embrace I could hear Miss Miller's defiance growing in her breathing.

"There, there that's my good boy," she said warmly embracing me.

As she pulled me closer to her bosom, she pressed her hand against the side of my head and ear.

"The light skinned ones respond differently than the dark ones," she said just above a whisper but I could hear her clearly.

She directed Miss Miller to call my mother to let her know what had happened. She would send me back to class shortly. When Miss Miller left the office, I felt a momentary sense of protection and comfort. Mrs. Green reached into a jar sitting on her desk filled with hard candy. She handed me a piece and I gratefully took it from her. She was my savior in that moment. She was a dark skinned woman with eyes that were pleasantly set deep in her eye sockets. She was wearing an olive green dress suit and wore heavy make-up.

"Michael, look at me," she said.

I looked at the heavy make-up covering her face thinking she was the nicest person I knew at the school.

"You will do great things if you work hard and do your best okay?" She said encouraging me.

"I want you to go back to class and work hard, listen to your teacher, and be a good boy because good boys get good things, alright?" She said patting me back and directing me toward the door.

"Okay Ms. Green," I said heading out of the office feeling somewhat relieved that there was no whipping machine in her office.

As I headed back to class, I wondered what Miss Miller said to my mother on the phone. My mother being the nicest person that I knew didn't alleviate the fact that she didn't tolerate nonsense. You respected your elders and did as you were told otherwise, a swift waxing to your backside would be the end result. I returned to class trying to figure out how to explain the phone call home by Miss Miller, indeed, the big fat roach killer. I was also worried about 3:15 dismissal from school. Surely they had done enough teasing by now and maybe found someone else to pick on in class. First grade yielded me no such luck. The only other person available for teasing was Eric Carter. He was wiry like me, had a large forehead like me, wore glasses and appeared to be an old man in a first grader's body. The major difference between us was he had brown skin, wavy hair, and Miss Miller loved him like her own son. I don't know if she had a son or not but I suspect if she did how she loved Eric would be how she loved her son. No one could taunt or tease Eric without being severely scolded by Miss Miller and at 3:15 she would walk him to his car and chat it up with his father before returning to the doorway of the school to monitor the other kids along with the other teachers. I went straight to my desk avoiding eye contact with any of the students especially the ones who would show me their pinky finger then their thumb with a threatening look on their face. I almost felt like if I didn't see them they didn't see me. I would become invisible through lack of eye contact. Miss Miller stood up and walked over to my desk.

"It's time to color," She said in the most pleasant tone I had ever heard come from her.

"Do your best okay?" She instructed me in an even nicer tone.

I was too young to understand she was using a patronizing tone but my perception of what sounded pleasant was taken with extreme caution.

"Okay," I replied taking the picture of a pilgrim standing next to a house.

I peeked around the classroom occasionally to see if anyone was watching me. No one was and all appeared to be working quietly on their coloring sheets. I took a brown crayon out of the box and began to color the pilgrim's face. It was far from perfect as I went outside the lines coloring in several directions. I imagined myself as the pilgrim getting ready to go inside the house to eat Thanksgiving dinner with all the other pilgrims. Everyone would eat and have fun inside the house. By the time I got to the pilgrim's hands, Miss Miller called me up to her desk instructing me to bring my coloring sheet. She looked at it and shook her head no.

"What is this?" She asked annoyed at the picture.

"It's my pilgrim getting ready to go in the house..." I sadly replied because I knew something was wrong I just didn't know what.

"First of all, you are not staying inside the lines and more importantly, pilgrims are not black! Do it over," she said handing me another coloring sheet with the pilgrim standing next to the house.

For the first time I had to actually think about what black was. As far as I knew I was black like everybody else and should be proud as James Brown stated in his song. As I walked past Carl's desk on the way back to mine, he stuck his foot out to trip me. I stumbled clumsily but didn't fall after regaining my balance by grabbing hold of Sherida's desk.

"That's your daddy on that picture white boy!" She said as the class quickly recovered from the giggles and snickers created by my near tumble to the floor.

Miss Miller barely looked up to address the inappropriate behavior and Carl, who had tripped me, chimed in, "Everybody knows pilgrims ain't black. You dumb!"

His voice was kind of gruff as he spoke in a low volume. I sat down feeling cornered in the classroom as well as in my own mind. What was black I assumed I was but was constantly

being made fun of as other than black. And what was white? My only point of reference to white people was on television shows like ‘Starsky and Hutch, The Brady Bunch, and The Courtship of Eddie’s Father’ to name a few. Why was I being compared to those fictitious people on television? I stared at the pilgrim on the coloring sheet wondering why he couldn’t be black and since he was white why that was a problem. Miss Miller slammed her pointer stick on my desk snapping me back to reality in the most alarming way.

“You get a zero for the day!” She said taking my coloring sheet and drawing a big fat zero on the page.

It didn’t mean a lot to me but something inside was saying I should be concerned. No one ever told me pilgrims had to be white nor had anyone shown me how to color. There were no instructions on the coloring sheet indicating that all pilgrims are to be colored white. What if I had colored him green like Sharon Mosley did? Miss Miller didn’t give her a zero or tell her pilgrims had to be colored white. She told her good job for staying in the lines. I was too young to understand what discrimination was and too afraid to state what I felt, which was it was unfair for me to get a zero when Sharon Mosley didn’t. I felt like crying but no tears would come. It was almost as if my body was saying,

“We won’t give her the satisfaction of seeing your tears.”

A quick glance toward the clock revealed the hour had blended with the minute hand pointing toward the three. A panicky feeling captured my insides as I frantically searched for the red gliding second hand. As it slipped over the 12 the bell sounded and Miss Miller said,

“Dismissed!”

It was time to run or be a punching bag until Mr. Wilson came running blowing his whistle to stop the onslaught I would endure. As I hit the double doors to run through them a

peculiar sight caught me off guard; not that my guard provided any viable protection. I stopped just outside the doors and stared blankly, surprised at whom I saw.

“I’m on it today kid,” Mr. Wilson said with a partial smile on his face.

I didn’t say anything to him. I just ran passed him heading toward the big kids’ side where I found my brother.

My sister had been sent to Mississippi to live with my grandmother for awhile. Mama thought it would be best until we got our finances in order. She and my dad were planning something special for the next school year. They wouldn’t tell us until the summer time when school was out. I pinched off a piece of cookie from lunch earlier that day and offered it to my brother who most likely ate all of his during lunch.

“Thanks Michael, can I have some more?” He asked stuffing the piece I gave him into his mouth.

I pulled out the piece that was left and shared it with him. We took the long way home so we wouldn’t run into the older kids who would pick on you for no reason at all. About a half block away from home I could clearly see the front windows on our house. The snow being crushed under my feet felt good even though I was ready to get in out of the cold. To my left I heard a girl’s voice, “Peanut butter motherfucking two time bitch. You mess around with me you get your white ass kicked!”

It was Sherida and her sister Quita running from the other side of the street toward us. I had all I could take from them that week. It was Friday and I was looking forward to the weekend at home - the safe haven where no threats of being beaten up or white jokes took place. I squared up with her intending to knock that smirk off of her face. She began to swing wildly windmill style as only a girl could. Amazingly it worked well as a couple of her wild swings

connected to my head. I ducked to counter. I closed my eyes and rushed toward her. She side stepped and I fell to the snow filled ground reaching for air then snow. I thought my brother was fighting with Quita but I realized that wasn't the case when I looked up to see her and Sherida both pounding me with fists and feet. Getting beaten up by two girls in the winter time was a bad ordeal that would be extremely difficult to live down. I scrambled to pick up my crayons that had fallen out of my backpack during the scuffle. I'm not sure why I was so focused on getting my crayons out of the snow while they continued to kick and push me in the snow. My cousin Lawrence ran over to help me. He was a couple of years younger but fought like he was a couple of years older. Sherida and Quita finally gave up their assault on me and walked back across the street talking trash about how white boys can't fight. I was disoriented and my fingers and toes were numb from picking up crayons and snow getting into my boots. Lawrence helped me up and walked with me to the house. The half block walk seemed longer than it ever did before.

“Those girls are crazy. Ain't no white boys out here,” Lawrence said as we crossed the street just before getting to the house.

I didn't see any white boys either. I knew they were just picking on me from school earlier that day. The sad part was I lost the remaining cookies I had from lunch and where was Charles, my brother? When we made it to the front porch I could see Charles in the window eating a pocketbook baloney sandwich. He had run away from the fight. Upon entering the house, the heat hit my hand and fingers causing them to ache and throb so intensely I began to cry. My nose was running but I couldn't feel it and my face was burning red like fire. I had sustained frostbite and it was painful getting my fingers thawed out. My mother hugged me and prepared a bowl filled with lukewarm water. She told me to submerge my hands in it while she

yelled at my brother for running away and leaving me. Lawrence yelled at him too. He was always protective of me.

Poetic Discernment

Crossroads is indicative of the duality I struggled to understand with believing I was black but being called white and perceiving my experience with Ms. Miller, my first grade teacher, as not liking me because I was light skinned. The poem ultimately shows that the vices of racism impact us all as we are also prejudiced towards one another at different points in life. Ironically, our prejudices don't always have to deal with race. They deal with the particularities of identity that go well beyond race too. In this particular story, I felt outnumbered by a majority of the students and teachers in which I interacted. The characters mentioned are few but the ones who stayed silent are counted as well. Baldwin (1998) states that, "Presumably the society in which we live is an expression – in some way – of the majority will. But it is not so easy to locate this majority," (p. 215). I understand this to mean at this time in my life I cannot tell who the majority is that seem to be against me. I can only deal with individuals as they deal with me. In the first grade it felt like the majority was against me making me feel like I was at a crossroads with my racial identity.

Fading Black

Derived out of slavery black is the title
 Slave masters gave you for inferiority's survival
 With your culture stripped and your language too
 You run around America not knowing what to do
 Pretending somehow we're a collective group
 Ignoring the fact that we've all been duped
 Hoodwinked, bamboozled into believing Black exists
 And the mere mention of the word is like an evil snake's hiss
 Black is beautiful this may be true
 But what has it to do with me and you?
 Identification for the sole purpose of pride
 An attempt to heal the wounds of history's racial ride
 The mental enslavement perpetuating a bleak reality

Holding on so tightly to an installed mentality
 Well I say give it up this empty title Black
 Take their loathsome title and give it right back
 Because at the end of the day you're a race lost
 Not in a melting pot; more like a salad tossed
 Awaken and discover the melanin is Brown
 A title more befitting the colored race all around
 The majority would sing from every black less cell
 Minorities would cry into an empty wishing well
 Racism would cease to define us as Black
 And we'd be free to take our identity back
 (Michael G. Williams, 2014)

Who's Color Matters?

Later that evening, I awakened to the sound of keys rattling and the smell of Vaseline Intensive Care lotion and double mint chewing gum. My mother was heading to work.

Normally we would go to Ms. Rawlings to be watched until my mother came home the next morning but every once in a while she would take us across the street to the Dunn's house.

"Now you know I don't like leaving you all over here but mama don't have much of a choice. Be good and I'll see you in the morning," she said as she left us in the care of Esther Dunn.

"They'll be fine. Plenty of other children to play with," Esther would say with a funny shaped cigarette hanging from her mouth.

She had rollers in her hair and wore a raggedy housecoat.

"Now they go to bed between eight and eight-thirty. They've already eaten so you don't have to feed them..."

Esther snatched the funny looking cigarette out of her mouth and walked toward the front door.

"They gone be fine Suzy. I got them. They boys anyway; they gona be little boys," she assured my mother escorting her out of the front door.

“Okay. Bye boys. See you in a little bit,” she said leaving us in the Dunn’s care.

The house was busier than school was. There were more kids there than the law should have allowed. People were constantly coming in and out creating an atmosphere of constant motion. Charles and I were told to sit on the couch in the living room and watch television. Three other kids were already on the couch watching television and only briefly looked up to acknowledge our existence in the room. A radio was blaring in the next room down the hallway. It sounded like a party was going on and we weren’t invited. Of the five small children sitting on the couch, none said a word. Ms. Dunn came into the living room where we were after some time and gave us all lollipops.

“Thank you” we all mutter about the same time.

“You’re welcome,” she responded in kind.

She was smiling at us as if we were the most precious beings on the planet. My brother ripped into his lollipop first and the others followed. The room was dark except for the light coming from the small black and white television set. Ms. Dunn left and emerged again fully dressed to go out on a Friday night. Her husband, Elvin, who was light skinned like me, stood behind her reeking of alcohol.

“Enjoy yourself baby. I got ‘em till Shanice gets here,” he told her.

“You too good to me,” she said sarcastically and walked out the door.

Shanice was one of their daughters. She was around sixteen years of age with smooth dark skin. She entered the front door with two other friends. She had on a red bandana that covered her entire head. She and Elvin exchanged familiar glances and he walked out the front door.

“Man my mama always leaving me with these brats,” she complained as her and her two friends came further into the living room.

She put her hands on her hips.

“Get off my couch,” she yelled as we all jumped up to move to the floor.

She pushed me back onto the couch and plopped down beside me.

“Not you yellow. You my boyfriend tonight,” she said giggling with her friends who also sat on the couch.

“Got you a little white boy huh?” One of her friends said stroking my cheek with her index finger.

“Yeah girl, Bobby Brady with nappy hair,” they all laughed at Shanice’s comment.

I didn’t know how to feel about it because at the time it was more awkward to be the only kid sitting on the couch with older girls.

“Poochie! Turn that got damn music down before I tell mama what you did,” she yelled startling us all.

Poochie was her older brother who had apparently done something bad that she could hold over his head because the music went down immediately.

“You happy now,” he asked emerging from the room with no shirt on?

He had nappy hair like mine with a gray patch of hair on one side. He was dark skinned too with a wild look in his eyes.

“I’ma tell mama you cussin,” he threatened.

“Go ahead cause then I’ma tell what you did, nah try me,” she said licking her tongue out at him while caressing my head and rocking me.

“You need to leave that little boy alone,” he told her.

“Shut up! He my lil boyfriend ain’t you my boyfriend,” she asked me?

I shook my head slowly wondering what would have happened if I had said no.

“You want to come back here with us,” he asked?

I looked at my brother and the other kids on the floor. They appeared to be asleep and I was feeling sleepy as well. I looked at Poochie and shook my head.

“Come on then. You can hand with the big boys,” he said.

He led me to the room where the loud music was playing earlier but now turned down at low volume controlled by blackmail. The room was hazy looking and filled with smoke.

“What up lil dude?” One of the older boys greeted me as I rubbed the sleepy feeling out of my eyes.

The combination of sleep and smoke caused them to burn and itch.

“He sleepy. Lay on the bed lil man,” Poochie told me motioning to one of the older boys to move over.

I lie on the bed and quickly fell into a half sleep whereby I could still her low music and murmurs of conversations coming from them in the room. It was hard to decipher if what I heard was real or a dream. A short while later or what seemed to be a short while had actually been a couple of hours, Shanice walked into the room. She scooped me up off of the bed briefly awakening me. She smelled like grape bubble gum and strawberry lip gloss. My eyes were half way opened as I lazily searched the room for Poochie and the other boys. They were not in the room. It was deafly quiet except for the sounds of the traffic outside and an occasional yell for camaraderie in the streets muffled by the pane of the window in the room.

“Where’s Poochie?” I asked concerned about where my protection had gone.

“He gone out,” she whispered in my ear as I felt her arms pressing me tightly into her chest.

She rocked me as a mother would a newborn smothering me with kisses of affection. We walked to the back room where it was even quieter than before. She had on a long t-shirt with a black bandana and some old bunny rabbit slippers that had seen better days. Closing the door and gently turning the lock, she put her index finger to her lips reminding me to shush. She put me down and reached for a bottle on top of a dresser placed opposite the foot of the bed. I didn't know what it was until after she turned it up and drank from it for several moments then kneeling down in front of me she asked,

“you still sleepy?”

I nodded yes silently as I normally did when responding to her questions.

“Good. Me too. You can lay with me until your mother comes back,” she said holding me by my shoulders.

She looked me into my eyes. For a brief moment I could see a mixture of pain and sadness in hers just like the mixed smell of grape bubble gum, strawberry lip gloss, and now some kind of alcohol. It was pleasant and wrong, but altogether odd, which made me slightly uncomfortable to be in the room with her. I suppose she could tell I was uncomfortable because she told me she wasn't going to hurt me and that she loved me and would never want to do anything bad to me. I nodded yes.

“Pull your pants down,” she whispered as if someone else could hear her.

I did slowly while watching her pull her t-shirt up over her head. She picked me up and laid me on top of her, legs spread just enough for me to fit snugly between them. She pressed my head against her chest and it reminded me of Mrs. Green's embrace except with Shanice my

heart was pounding so hard it felt as though it would soon pop out of my chest. It wasn't that I enjoyed it. I was terrified because you weren't supposed to pull your pants down except for taking a bath. I didn't want to be caught doing something that felt wrong. I didn't want my brother or any of the others to see because I would then hear the cry, "Oooh, you in trouble!"

She rubbed my head gently and whispered words that left me in limbo emotionally and slightly reserved about how I would deal with being in trouble if we were caught.

"See this doesn't hurt does it?"

I lay on top of her motionless, quietly, barely breathing.

"Your mother will understand but don't tell nobody you hear me?"

I inhaled slowly and deeply then exhaled the same. My mind was racing a mile a minute and I was confused. For the first time I felt the need to ask her a question.

"If my mama will understand why can't I tell her?" I asked after raising my head up to look at her face.

The look on her face was of sheer terror but her voice was so calm it twisted my mind. I didn't really want to tell my mother and after Shanice's answer, I certainly did not want a soul to know.

"My step daddy, Elvin, is light colored like you and he said you don't tell because black folks don't like white people being with black people," she said no longer whispering.

"But I'm not white," I reminded her.

"But you too close to it and black people will get mad at you," she said.

"My mama is light and my daddy is black and nobody is mad at them," I told her.

"That's why she'll understand... but... Shut up lil boy. You too little to see it now but you will. Don't get yo mama killed by telling," she said in an even calmer tone.

It worried me even more than stepping on a crack that would break your mama's back. To this day I find myself avoiding the cracks in the sidewalks so as not to break my mama's back. It is illogical and certainly irrational but those are psychological impressions that have been with me all my life. She continued rubbing my head while I pondered my mother's fate in our inappropriate predicament.

"I want to go home," I cried.

"Why lil boy? Just be cool. I won't hurt you," she tried to reassure me.

"I don't want nobody to die. Your daddy would die too all because of us," I reminded her.

"You're right," she said realizing her own logic applied to her and her daddy as well because Elvin was light skinned too.

"That's why we can't tell nobody... and you know what? Daddy might need to die!"

She said ending with slight force in her voice.

I could feel her stomach tighten up when she said it. I looked up at her and she was looking away toward the closed bedroom door. She wiped her face and sniffled.

"Let's go," she said.

She sat up on the edge of the bed as though she were in deep thought. We got up and I pulled up my pants. We had effectively scared ourselves into believing someone would die because black people didn't like white people. Ironically, this irrational rational fear has caused the death of many people black and white alike in this country. The score is uneven because white kill blacks and blacks kill blacks at an even higher rate than whites over the very notion that we are different and afraid to explore the similarities that exist between us. I went back into the living room where my brother and the other kids were sleeping on the floor. I laid on the

couch and waiting for my mother to get home from work. Little did I know at the time but we were left in the hands of a teenager who had been molested by her stepfather. There was no telling what other atrocities occurred but a guesstimation of poverty, neglect, and many forms of abuse among other things probably wouldn't be too far off from the truth. As the early morning hours drew close, the parents of many of the kids returned to find Shanice on the lazy boy chair gazing into the black and white television that had been turned off for a couple of hours. She defended her mother's absence with a lie.

“She back in the bed sleep. I'll tell her to call you later on today,” she said as if it were the God honest truth.

I heard her and knew better but believed her when she lied. When my mother arrived, Esther Dunn had already returned and gone to bed. Shanice's earlier lie was now the truth but sounded uncannily similar all the same.

Poetic Discernment

Fading Black expresses the anguish felt over the thoughts of possibly losing my mother because of our color and interacting with dark skinned people. What was interesting to me was the idea of anti-miscegenation rooted in the mind of a 16 year girl left to babysit me and my brother. How could this be possible in an all black community? Root (1992) appears to have an answer,

Anglo-Americans, in order to neutralize the threat to White dominance implicitly posed by multiracial individuals of partial European ancestry, enforced a policy of hypodescent, which relegated these individuals to the subordinate group by designating as Black everyone who was not pure White. (p.107)

The enforcement of this policy has unscrupulously crept its way into social constructs of society and oppressed the minds and actions of those who were intent on mingling with Whites. Those who were mixed with White were designated as Black but ostracized by Blacks within their own communities. Fading Black is a lament expressing my desire to rid ourselves of the belief that we are actually Black.

I Am

I am what my mother is
 I am what my father is
 They are what their mothers are
 They are what their fathers are
 Black, White, Red, or Brown
 Identity for me cannot be found
 Because four races in me I'm steadily seeking
 In a race made up OpianChocTaliRican
 Ethiopian the Black seed recognized
 Italian the White both sides despised
 Choctaw the Red forced near to extinction
 Puerto Rican the Brown the minor distinction
 Dare I say me or simply I am
 This racial paradigm appears to be a scam
 Witnessed by all as a concept reified
 A Governmental construct, a kaleidoscope of lies
 So I am if truth is what is
 I am I tell you what my mother is
 My father is
 Their mothers are
 Their fathers are
 Therefore I am
 (Michael G. Williams, 2014)

My Blood is Red and White

One weekend during the spring of my first grade school year, I arose early around 6 am as I normally did. My brother and mother were still asleep and my father had not come home from work yet. I missed my sister because she would get up early and fix cereal for us both. I was on my own this morning. A bowl of cheerios with too much granulated pure cane sugar was perfect. After my fill, I roamed the house until my brother awakened and soon after my mother.

My father worked on the railroad in downtown Chicago. He worked odd hours depending on what shift he was working. He was a dark ghost that appeared and disappeared often. When he was home he was very active with us and I missed him when he was gone. Mama said soon he would be home more and that it was part of the surprise they would tell us about in the summer when school was out. My brother wolfed down a bowl of cereal and challenged me to race him to the basement where we could exit the house to go outside and play. "Brush your teeth and put on some clothes," my mother reminded us. It wasn't uncommon to see kids in the neighborhood outside barefooted or with nothing on but underwear. My mother looked down on that citing the neglect many black mothers had for their kids. She wouldn't dare allow us out of the house that way and if we ever did go out that way we'd be snatched back in and rapped a few times with her strap. Teeth now brushed and clothes on our backs, my brother raced me to the big wheels in the garage. A sprint out of the basement backdoor across the backyard to the yellow and black garage that sat on a small lot by itself proved to be victorious for me. There was an alley that ran behind the garage where we played hide and seek on occasion. I reached the door first yelling,

"I'm Starsky!"

My brother, disappointed that he lost would convince me that he had to be Starsky because Hutch sounded more like me.

"Why?" I asked snatching the door to the garage open.

"You're lighter than me and Starsky has dark hair so you have to be Hutch!" He complained.

I explained that I had beaten him to the garage and called Starsky first so I should be Starsky.

“Okay,” he conceded, “but it just doesn’t look right.”

We raced up and down the sidewalk and back and forth across the alley having a great time I remembered. A break in the fun came when mama called us in to eat lunch and right after we were tearing up and down the sidewalk and alley once again. While riding toward the alley, my brother sped up and spun out in front of me.

“What are you doing Charles?” I yelled at him as I careened into the back of his big wheel.

“Sit still,” he demanded!

His eyes were fixated on the brown car parked on the curb just in front of our garage. Charles pulled his big wheel beside the garage on the same side as the alley and then pulled my big wheel back towards the garage with me on it. I kept my eyes on the brown car as a man of light complexion opened the door and looked toward Tony Smith’s house, which was the 2nd house down from ours across the alley. Marvin Sutton’s house was first then Tony’s. The streets had been relatively quiet up until that moment.

“Eh Stan! Get your black ass out here and bring my money niggah!”

The man with the light complexion yelled. The block became eerily quiet after Marvin Sutton, who had been sitting on the front porch, was instructed to go inside by his grandmother. “Danger Marvin. Come on inside” she warned him with high pitched animation in her voice. Marvin responded quickly by dashing into the house. My brother put his hand over my mouth from behind and pulled me closer to him. Normally, I would get angry with him if he did anything of this nature; sibling rivalry, but the situation unfolding was almost terrifying. Tony’s brother, Stan, was an albatross around the fun and play on the city block. Whenever he showed up, all movement seemed to stop. In this instance, the mere mention of his name stopped us

from playing. Tony emerged from the house with his younger sister Kim. Kim stood on the top stair of the front porch while Tony energetically bounced to the bottom and stopped.

“He said he coming,” Tony told him waving in the light skinned man’s direction.

The man pulled a toothpick out of his front shirt pocket and coolly stuck it in his mouth.

“Tell ‘em to hurry up cause I ain’t got all day,” he commanded.

“Okay, okay,” Tony said racing back into the house.

The man chewed on the toothpick switching it from one side of his mouth to the other continuously until he observed another car pull up behind his. It was an old beat up green car with two dark skinned men inside. He stared at the men in the green car and they stared back but didn’t get out of the car. It wasn’t until Stan came out that the two men in the old beat up green car got out and grabbed the light skinned man.

“Oh so it’s like this now? What’s up then fool?” He asked Stan spitting out his toothpick.

Stan had on dark pants and no shirt or shoes. He didn’t reply. His response appeared to be punching him in the stomach several times as the two dark skinned men held him up. I say appeared to be punching him because that’s what it looked like. When he stopped and they let him go, the light skinned man slumped slowly to the ground and I could clearly see bright red blood trickling from his mouth. Stan’s fist was covered in the same bright red blood but he wasn’t finished. The two dark skinned men got back into their car and waited as Stan dragged him bleeding profusely from his chest and gut. He opened the door to the brown car and dragged the man partially into the car and slammed it on his head a few times.

“Stan! Man let’s move!” One of the men in the old beat up green car shouted.

Stan stopped and looked at his work of violence, reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of money and threw it down on the motionless bloody body of the light skinned man.

“There’s your money yellow bitch!” he said with a look of pure disgust on his face. He ran to the green car.

“Man, I can’t stand those light skin dudes. They think their better than us,” he told the man on the passenger side as he got into the backseat.

“I can tell Jack. You had it in for that cat,” the passenger said as they sped off down the street laughing.

“Michael, come on. Mama calling us,” my brother said yanking me by the shirt collar and snapping me back to reality.

“Let go! I’m coming,” I said as we made a mad dash into the house.

Once inside, my mother was furious.

“Where were you two? I’ve been calling you for the last five minutes,” she yelled.

I was so caught up in what was going on that I never heard her calling us.

“Outside by the garage ma,” Charles replied.

“Yeah, I was with Charles,” I said adding my two cents.

“Our big wheels are still out there and somebody’s going to steal them,” Charles whined.

“Don’t move a muscle,” she commanded.

We sat in front of the window and watched the police and ambulance pull up on the side in front where the brown car sat with the bloody light skinned man. Many of the neighbors came out to view the scene from their front or side yards only. No one talked to the police or admitted to seeing anything because the police were not very friendly. We handled our own

disputes among ourselves in our black community. I remember a time when my father's sister was dating this man who had gotten angry with her and threw her small black and white television set out of the window. My grandmother called my father and I kept asking my mother why she didn't call the police.

“Because the police don't handle our affairs like they handle everyone else's,” she told me.

I didn't understand what she meant. I could only assume they didn't handle the situation like my father did. My cousin Lawrence would later tell me how Uncle E. C., as they all called him, beat his mother's boyfriend up and threw him out of the house and how he never liked the man and wished uncle E. C. would have killed him. No police were ever called and my aunt's boyfriend never returned.

My mother returned to the house.

“Get away from that window,” she yelled at us.

My mother was over protective at times and other times seemed to let us explore and venture out without worrying. She always used opportunities such as this one to give us what if lessons. This was her way of seizing teachable moments.

“What if the police get to shooting and bullets comes through that window and kill you, huh,” She asked?

We were both dumbfounded as could be seen by the looks on our faces because the thought never crossed our minds.

“They don't care about you and certainly don't care if you die but I do,” she said hugging us both.

“Mama when can we go back outside?” I asked.

“Wait till things cool off in the neighborhood. At least until those police leave,” she said heading toward the kitchen.

“Aw ma,” We both whined!

“Go find something to play with here in the house. There’s plenty to do,” she said.

We begrudgingly headed downstairs to the basement. Once down stairs we both stood in awe at the sight before us. Our big wheels had magically appeared. We were able to ride in the basement not as feely as when we were outside but we could ride and for the moment that was good enough.

The next day, late Sunday afternoon, I was riding my big wheel toward the alley. I saw Tony walking toward me carrying a Tom and Jerry table top supported over his head. I stopped my big wheel right between his legs.

“Move little boy,” he demanded.

I looked in his eyes. I was curious. Nosey is what my mother would say.

“Watcha doing,” I asked?

“We’re building a tree house now move!” He said getting impatient.

I figured as much but I really wanted to know what happened to his brother.

“Your brother go to jail for stabbing that light skinned man,” I asked presumptuously?

“Nah he ain’t light skin he white like you now move lil boy! This table is heavy,” he said becoming more impatient by the second.

“I ain’t no white boy! That’s why your brother going to jail nah,” I yelled at him!

I shoved my big wheel backwards after seeing the look that seared across his parting lips. It was anger and fear meshed together like the tracks of a zipper on a winter coat in the summer time. I heard a grunt come from him then the sound of the table along with a razor sharp stinging

sensation across my forehead. He fell over to the side of my big wheel and I thought it had started to rain along with a loud ringing in my ear. I could hear him cursing and yelling but couldn't quite make out what he was saying, but I knew he was angry. What I thought was rain trickled down into my eyes and they stung as I attempted to rub my eyes clear. I became light headed and dizzy, slumping over the yellow plastic handle bars of my big wheel. Moments later, I felt someone lift me up.

“Michael? Michael baby?”

My mother called trying to see if I was okay. It wasn't rain that I felt. It was actually blood, which had soaked my face and neck by the time she got a response from me.

“Huh,” I replied dazed while squinting my eyes.

The next thing I remembered was sitting in the front seat with a white bath towel pressed to my head. By the time we made it to the hospital, the white bath towel was completely red. I received six stitches for my mistimed curiosity. When I returned home from the hospital, my mother made me go to bed. She said I needed to rest. My brother Charles and cousin Lawrence came in to tell me how they beat Tony up for slamming me in the head with a table. My mother came in to describe the whole ordeal but mainly just to say how afraid she was for me. My dad came home and I felt like I was going to get a whipping for having to go to the hospital but he just reassured my mother that boys are rough and will get hurt sometimes. While I had them both in the room I took the opportunity to ask a question that had been on my mind since school earlier in the week. I sat up in the bed and stared at them both who had a look of great relief on their faces.

“Am I a white boy,” I asked bluntly?

“Hell noll!”

My father responded before he knew it. My mother looked concerned. She sat on the bed and stared at me.

“Is there something wrong with being white,” she asked?

“Yes,” I answered quickly.

“White people aren’t real. They’re make believe people on TV,” I said as a matter of fact.

They both laughed and my dad called me a knucklehead as he always did whenever I said something silly.

“Well your grandmother and your great grandmother are part white and your great, great grandfather is Italian. That makes you part white so are you make believe?” She asked with raised eyebrows.

“No ma, I’m right here with stitches in my head,” I said laughing. They laughed too.

“Hey, your grandmother on your dad’s side is full blooded Indian,” my dad reminded my mother.

“Sure is. Almary is Indian,” she recalled.

I felt special knowing I was Indian and white; more so the Indian than the white because the other kids always teased me about being white. I told my father about the teasing and he told me not to worry about it.

“Just don’t let nobody put their hands on you,” he said showing me his large brown fist. I was too ashamed to tell him about the kids beating me up almost on a regular basis. My father was a fighter with a warrior spirit and I was too but only in my mind. I was passive and easy going like my mother. She only showed her fighting spirit when she was afraid of something. She coined herself a coward and seemed proud of that fact, but there were things she had done

that proves she's no coward. I fell asleep quickly once they left my room and reveled in the fact that I was Black, Indian, and Italian.

Poetic Discernment

'I Am' is a poem that expresses pride about being racially mixed. Hearing the animosity that some blacks had against light skinned people made me feel terrible but I never talked about it to anyone. I was still learning what white and black actually meant. When my mother and father revealed to me that I was racially mixed with Black, White, and Native American, I pulsated with pride and joy. I believe I felt this way because just being light skinned and ridiculed for it did not give me a connection to anything but alienation. However, I now felt I had something of which I could be proud. Like Edmin explains, negative words used against some hip-hop artists were turned into positives by them that they could throw in the face of their former teachers who used those words against them. He states,

In rap lyrics, I would hear lines like "I'm the dropout that made more money than theses teachers" (50 cent, 2004), "I'm the proud new owner of the [New Jersey] Nets, no diploma no regrets" (Jay Z, 2005), "I make a lot of zeroes, that's what my teachers called me, predictions like they're Cleo" (D.J. Unk, 2007). In these lyrics, I heard hip-hop participants valuing themselves for what they have achieved and throwing their success in the face of their former teachers. (Edmin, 2010, p. 41)

This parallels my experience only in the respect of feeling prideful. At the time, I didn't have anything to throw up into anyone's face because it could have been detrimental to my health.

I Remember You

I remember you in the cafeteria
 Looking around trying to avoid hysteria
 But it showed in your eyes, I knew you despised
 The troubled feelings inside where they reside

I remember you in the club
 Listening to the beat but dared not cut a rug
 Too stiff a rhythm less black
 But the others in you are held back
 I remember you shouting, no disrespect
 But what about the others what the heck
 You screamed for acknowledgement but never received any
 Those who didn't acknowledge their numbers were many
 I remember you crying on the railroad tracks
 Italian, Puerto Rican, Choctaw Indian you lack
 But the lack is non-truth it's the perception of others
 I beseech you hold on to your spiritual mothers
 I remember you black boy, brown boy
 African American racial titles of joy
 I remember you black man
 Isolated pigmentations of tan
 Isolated pigmentations yes, that's what I remember
 Young gifted and alive
 Forever fluid and continuing to strive
 To become whole on this physical ride
 (Michael G. Williams, 2015)

The Red Warrior Surfaces

Later that school year, being Indian and Italian didn't keep kids from picking on me and sometimes I think it was just something they routinely did to keep themselves amused in a world where everything else was oppressive. Picking on me was an outlet for their pinned up anger and frustration, but what were they so angry about? My sister returned from Mississippi at the end of the year and finished the school year out in dramatic fashion. As I said earlier, I was picked on for being light skinned and she was picked on for being dark skinned. The day before the last day of school was filled with rumors of fights and getting jumped. Getting jumped was when several kids would beat up one. I was nervous and worried that I was going to get jumped. I wanted to be sick that day but I couldn't muster the nerve to fake being sick. The walk to school with my brother and sister was a quiet one. I suppose they were worried about fights and getting jumped on the big kids' side. The day went pretty smooth though. Even Miss Miller was

extra nice. Perhaps she had taken Mrs. Green's advice on how to deal with the children who weren't brown skin or more likely, she was glad to be rid of all of us for the summer. When 3:15 came, she hugged each one of us on the way out, including me. Her embrace felt real enough and all my animosity melted away when she said,

“You have a wonderful summer Michael. You hear me?”

I looked at her and forced a smile on my face.

“Yes.”

I think I smiled. I was really shocked at how nice she was being. My mother had withdrawn us from school earlier in the week because we were moving to the suburbs. That was the big surprise they were holding until the end of the school year. We would go to a new school and make new friends my mother told us. I was thrilled and terrified all at the same time because I didn't know what a suburb was and who I would meet there, but it had to be better than Green Elementary. I believed anything would be better.

I started slowly toward the doors of the school then picked up the pace as my mind turned toward the possibility of a beat down before the last day of school. I stopped and took a deep breath and held it for a moment. As I exhaled, I made my mind up to fight back. I would not run. I was leaving Green Elementary for good and I wanted to let them know that I wasn't afraid of the picking, bashing, bullying, and cruelty towards me. If I get hit, someone is getting hit in return. I started walking toward the doors that led outside the school; those same doors where once I exited them I would be pounced on like a pack of dogs on a piece of meat. But not today; I put my hand on the door with my other hand clenched into a tight fist. I was ready. Pushing the door open hard, the sunlight masked my vision momentarily. I looked down and

pushed forward anticipating blows from other students. When my vision became clear, I could hear a circus of kids yelling,

“Fight, fight, fight!”

I looked to my left to see packs of kids headed towards the big kids’ side. I headed in the same direction hoping my brother and sister were alright, but the feeling developing in my stomach the closer I got to the other side said otherwise. Around the gate leading to the big kids’ side I could see a group of older kids surrounding my sister walking toward my direction as if she were the challenger in a boxing match. Tears were streaming down her face and she appeared frustrated and afraid. I knew the fight had not started yet because directly behind her was another group of older kids surrounding Linda Stafford. She had light skin and hazel eyes and was solidly built much heavier than my sister which understandably invoked tears from Lynn. Linda strutted within the surroundings of her entourage like a champion prize fighter preparing to take down another unworthy opponent in my sister Lynn. Admittedly, I was afraid for her and I felt bad that she had to return home to the awful rivalry of skin color. In that moment leading up to the fight, I became enraged. Charles was tapping me on my shoulder. I was not aware he had walked up to me in the midst of all the bantering children.

“Michael, we gotta find mama! Lynn is about to get beat up!” He yelled frantically at me.

I looked at him with fire in my eyes, “Not today big bro.”

I scooped up a handful of rocks and Charles did the same. I was waiting for the right moment to let a couple of them fly into Linda Stafford’s face. I wanted her face to look like how I felt on the inside. As I reared back to throw a rock in her direction, Lynn turned and pushed through her own entourage as well as Linda’s like a mad woman enraged. Before I knew it,

Lynn was on top of Linda throwing a barrage of punches at her. The most Linda could do was alternate her hands and shift her head from side to side to avoid being hit. Slowly, I saw a pen rise and fall into Linda's arm. Lynn had stabbed her with a pen. Then my heart dropped to the bottom of my diaphragm. Dad scooped Lynn up with one hand while her arms were still swinging wildly at Linda. I don't think she realized what she was doing because even as my father carried her away toward the car, she was still yelling and cursing at Linda. My mother motioned for me and my brother to get into the car once she had our attention. We did as we were instructed. I felt some sense of relief in that my sister had beaten up one of the biggest bullies in the school on what was effectively our last day attending Green Elementary.

"Damn I'll be glad when we get out of this hell hole," dad expressed his frustration.

We would miss the last day of school because we were going to look at the new house in the suburbs. My mother didn't seem too upset with Lynn as she agreed with dad.

"I was gona kill her ma!" Lynn said out of nowhere still breathing hard from the altercation.

"Well I'm glad you didn't Lynn. It'd be a shame if you had to go to that home for girls," mama told her in a calm, relieved tone.

As we drove home, all I could think about was how I would have thrown those rocks at Linda Stafford had the fight gone the other way. In my mind, I had to be the protector of my sister and brother.

"I would've killed her for you Lynn," I said proudly.

"What?" She sounded surprised.

"Me too!" Charles chimed in not wanting to feel outdone by his younger brother.

“Yeah Lynn, I saw the whole thing. Michael and Charles had rocks ready to throw at that girl,” mama told her.

“Well we all would have killed her then,” Lynn said still angry that she had gotten into a fight her.

“Hey, hey be cool with all this killing now!” Dad said getting impatient with the idea of murdering someone.

He had done three tours of Vietnam and would still hit the ground if a car backfired. On the 4th of July, he would go down into the basement and play his records at high volume, smoke cigarettes and drink beer the entire night. Looking back, those were some of the best times of my life dancing off beat with very little rhythm to the sounds of The Spinners, Teddy Pendergrass, and The O’Jays to name a few. All the family would be down there having a good time and nobody judged me for my lack of rhythm. I felt as free as a bird soaring in the sky with a piece of that sanctuary I found at home and no other place. I would bask in those moments and feel loved by all who surrounded me. As I danced, my mother, brother and sister would clap and encourage me and do their own thing. Dad would sit behind the bar peering from behind a cloud of white and gray cigarette smoke, eyes bloodshot with a splenetic look of nostalgia. His look spoke volumes to a six year old boy who knew nothing about the tragedies those eyes had seen but could feel the pain, though unexplained, registered in his heart like the wind from the wings of a butterfly felt gently across the smooth high yellow cheeks he possessed.

Poetic Discernment

Remembering the desire to be accepted in the midst of learning that I was mixed collided with the reality of my experiences dealing with racial strife. My sister being picked on for being too dark completely confused me because it was like being stuck between a rock and a

hard place mentally. Too light you're not right, too black get back. Where did I fit in or rather what did I need to do in order to fit in with everybody else (Janis, 2016)? The poem 'I Remember You' is an expression of Triumvirate Mental Diaspora oscillating back and forth between thoughts of not being black enough, being proud of being mixed, and wondering which racial mix would fit me in with others. It is a poem that encourages me to remember who I am as a person and to try to avoid getting down on myself because of my race.

Just Be Yourself

Forty-Four years fortified in love
 My cells connect and resonate with that love
 Love for me and love for you
 And love for anyone considered to be true
 Whose consideration has been place upon a shelf?
 Forcing them to be other, other than self?
 Identity is tainted or masked if you will
 Painted invisible to lie totally still
 Unrecognized never acknowledged ignored and denied
 Psychological processes begin to collide
 The face revealed is recognized as other
 A recognition mistaken by your own mother
 Traversing the world, you are now a contradiction
 In the eyes of others offending their convictions
 Of who and what you are supposed to be
 Never recognizing whom they truly see
 Only wanting to see that which they desire
 Ignoring the pain, they cause with their fire
 And brimstone cast at your true identity
 Creating a hostile world for you and me
 Therefore, I retreat to my sanity fortified in love
 Meditate on the unknown from sources above
 Far and wide in search of acquired wealth
 This is my true identity, me being myself
 (Michael G. Williams, 2015)

Summertime Blues

The next day, plans to ride out to the suburbs had gone awry. My mother sat at the dining room table with her eyes wide open and brows frowned as my father talked to someone on the phone. I stood in the stairwell that led to the attic where my brother, sister, and I slept.

Eavesdropping, all I could make out was something about a down payment. My father sounded agitated but reserved as he spoke to the person on the phone.

“Aw wow, so you mean I can get it but after...” a pause ensued then he continued,

“well yeah we can manage that. Both of us work... well, maybe six months or less,” he said sounding disappointed.

After another brief pause he said, “No, no, I want that one. I’ll get it, I’ll get it... Hey I don’t have a choice. I gotta get my family out of here,” he said with finality in his voice and hung up the phone.

“So what are we doing?” My mother asked with a trace of hope trailing her words.

“Well we’re gona get the house baby but the bank wants a larger down payment,” he told her hoping she would understand.

“So what does this mean? How long will it take,” she asked?

My heart started racing because I knew how long I wanted it to take – no longer than the summer.

“About six months or so, maybe less if I can get some over time on the extra board,” he said rubbing his hand briskly through his fro.

I counted six months on my fingers from the day. “Dang!” I thought to myself. I emerged from around the door to the stairwell.

“We ain’t going nowhere today huh?” I asked sounding disappointed.

At the end of the day, I would have liked to have gotten the chance to leave the city.

“Go outside and play son. Let me and your mama talk,” my father suggested.

I knew he was frustrated and I didn’t want to become an object of his frustration so I hurried to the back porch and out the door. Charles was already outside and Lynn was across the

street waiting for her friend, Angela to come home from school on the last day. By all rights, we should not have been there but we were and made the best of a setback. We would revel in the joys of the school year's end with everybody else. The kids started coming home and the streets came to life. I had been roaming back and forth across the alley stuck in my own thoughts about not leaving as soon as I hoped we would. Every now and then I would yell across the street to my sister in frustration about it. She would reply as if it didn't really bother her. Lynn and Charles were both like that when it came to expressing their feelings. When her friend, Angela, came home, they sat on the porch and ignored my rants about not being able to move. Tony, his sister Kim and Marvin were coming down the street toward their houses across the alley.

“Hey Michael, you wanna go to the candy store?” Tony asked still heading toward his house.

“My mama said don't go too far but bring me a Chico Stick and some Now and Laters” pronounced (Noun Laters), I told him.

“Cool. We'll be back,” he said.

They continued passed his house down the street and around the corner. Marvin couldn't go either. He couldn't even stay outside and play when I asked him. The only time we really played was if Mrs. Eldridge babysat us or if she was right there on the porch watching our every move. Very shortly thereafter, the block became eerily quiet. I was headed back toward our house. I had gone down past Tony's house to see if he and Kim were returning from the candy store. As I was heading back, four or five older guys were headed in my direction. I didn't have a good feeling about them and my instincts was to run into Tony's backyard, cut through Marvin's backyard and avoid his German Shepherd on the leash then run to the back of our garage and hide. While that sounded like a good plan in my head, my feet had plans of their

own to stay solidly planted where they were. The boy in the front had on a black and blue bandana with a six pointed star on it indicating he was a member of the notorious Gangster Disciples. I was too numb to be afraid at the time especially after the plan in my head failed to somehow implement itself.

“What’s up lil Folk,” He greeted me?

“Sup,” I responded.

That was a mistake. I was not a Black Gangster Disciple gang member and was not affiliated with the Folk Nation in any way. I was a six year old kid who had just put my foot in my mouth and was apparently too stupid to move when I saw them coming.

“Oh shit, we got a tough lil yellow niggah,” he told the others with him.

The pit of my stomach turned creamy with crushed butterflies because I didn’t know what the danger was encountering them but my intuition was screaming,

“MICHAEL WE ARE IN TROUBLE!”

It’s not that I wanted to ignore my inner calling; I just didn’t know what to do in the moment. They grabbed me by my shirt and pants and a dizzy feeling came over me. One boy had me by my ankles and another by my wrists. They swung me back and forth several times before releasing me whereby landed in the row of sticker thorn bushes that grew between Tony and Marvin’s house.

“Yellow nappy headed mother fucker,” one of them said as they walked off down the street toward the candy store.

I was in so much pain, I couldn’t even cry. My sister and her friend, Angela, came and helped me out of the thorn bushes. Angela was even lighter than I was being mixed with Asian and Black.

“Michael, are you okay,” my sister asked?

I shook my head yes and pulled thorns out of my arms and hands.

“It wasn’t so bad,” I said trying to cover up my embarrassment in front of Angela.

“It’s okay baby. The gangster disciples killed my uncle for being light skin,” she said brushing thistles out of my head then hugged me.

I almost melted when she and my sister went back across the street and carried on as if nothing had happened. I went and sat on Tony’s front porch steps and waited for he and Kim to return with my Chico Stick and Now and Laters pronounced (Noun Laters). I survived that incident and surprisingly enough, the Chico Stick and Noun Laters Tony returned with made me forget about the incident altogether. What I couldn’t forget was the fact that Angela’s uncle had been killed by gang members for being light skinned. I didn’t want to get killed because I was light too and now it was very important for us to move to the suburbs. I didn’t think there were any gangs out there because my mother and father always referred to it as a better place. The rest of the summer went pretty much the same with a few fun highlights like going to Fun Town on 95th and Stoney Island Avenue and Old Chicago with my cousins, Charles and Lynn.

Poetic Discernment

Just Be Yourself is a poem that stemmed from future worry of being harmed because I had a light complexion. When I was approached by the gangsters in this story, my six-year-old mind jumped to ‘situational ethnicity’ before I ever knew what it was. My response, “Sup” was an attempt to fit in futilely. Edmin (2010) argues “that a person’s identity with one’s community is the principal or dominant (perhaps even the only significant) identity a person has” (p. 43) and this seemed to have a substantial impact on me at that moment. In the aftermath, I realized that I may be faced with death after hearing about my sister’s friend, Angela’s uncle, because I

was light skinned too. But that also meant that she and any other light skinned person could face death as well for the same reason so I was determined to express my desire to be me. “What I’m about is being all of what I am... nothing more, nothing less, nothing else” (Gaskin, 1999, p. x).

Heart Thumps of Joy

Visions of joy in my heart a bumpy ride
 As I hide true feelings deep down inside
 My eyes opened to the world around me
 Trapped in a situation a black plague surrounds me
 Forcefully inhaling in and exhaling out
 Potential death surrounds me stifling my shout
 To the mountaintops of freedom vibrations beware
 Only patience and time can heal this loathsome scare
 Spare me the details of patience and virtues
 To grow wings and fly away is what I choose
 So I retreat to my heart the plane of hope for a little boy
 And there I await the treats of Christmas joy
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Hoping for Christmas in September

The first day of second grade produced knots in my stomach. The class assignment sent in the mail over the summer said I had Ms. Adams. My sister didn’t make me feel any better either when she described her.

“Ooh Michael, you’re gona hate her. Angela had her in the second grade and she can’t stand light skin people even though she’s almost white herself,” she said in the most over the top expressive way imaginable.

“Don’t worry son. You won’t have to deal with her long. We’ll be gone before Christmas,” my father said trying to reassure us all.

My sister looked at me and shook her head with a warning of beware, “She’s a witch Michael. I really feel bad for you little brother,” she whispered keeping eye contact with my father to make sure he hadn’t heard her call a grownup a witch.

I nodded quietly wishing she was wrong and we were in the suburbs getting ready to go to a new school. Instead, we headed out the door just like the year before in our new clothes carrying new school supplies in our new backpacks. Upon entering the classroom, our names were on the desk so we knew exactly where to go. John Wimbley sat down at his desk while everyone else was still standing. Mistake!

“Who in the world do you think you are?” Ms. Adams screeched.

She startled everyone else including John, who stood up quickly rolling his eyes toward the sound of her voice. He looked like he had seen a ghost and when I turned to see her, she did in fact, look like a ghost. She was extremely light complexioned with a small, tight afro. She had on a powder blue pants suit, which made her look even lighter in complexion. She grabbed a pointer stick off of the black board and tapped the palm of her hand as she walked around the classroom eyeballing us like we were recruits in the U.S. Marine Corps. When she got to me, I looked at her with surprise and awe.

“Yes, I’m black baby so don’t you dare think nothing different,” she said putting her face so close to mine any closer and our noses would touch.

She squint her eyes and stood up straight and smiled with an attitude.

“Yeah, you’re gona be one of my smart boys. I expect you to be the very best in my class,” she said nodding her head to an unheard rhythm I could only assume was in her own head.

“Everybody sit!” She commanded and we all sat immediately.

She handed out several worksheets covering reading comprehension. I don’t remember her ever explaining anything on them. What I do remember is sitting next to Kathy Smith. She seemed to understand the instructions on the worksheets and would furtively point the answers

out to me when I cut my eyes in her direction. That was a perfect situation in school but we were usually sent home with similar worksheets to do for homework, which created quite an imperfect situation. The next morning, my heart was pounding because I knew immediately that my answers were incorrect on my homework when I looked at Kathy's paper. Sometimes she would have an attitude and cover her answers up as if she were mad at me then later in the day she would pencil fight with me to show me she wasn't mad anymore. I don't remember doing anything wrong to her so even to this day I believe females are fickle. I digress. When Ms. Adams came around to collect the homework, the pressure on my pounding heart increased to the point where I could feel beads of sweat forming on my forehead and my usually squinted eyes were as wide as saucers.

“Don't look so surprised Michael. I know you did your homework,” she said somewhat sarcastically.

She replaced the homework collected with another reading comprehension ditto (worksheet). While she graded them at her desk, we quietly worked on the new dittos. As she completed one student's homework sheet, she either turned it over and went to the next or she called you up to the front of the class and you stood there awaiting a fate that was obvious to those who got to stay in their seats.

“Michael Williams? To the front of the class... right... now!” She said sounding like I had double crossed her.

At the conclusion of calling students up to the front of the room, we quickly discovered we were not being praised or honored for our academic excellence.

“So you all take me for some kind of joke huh?” She rhetorically asked over half the class standing in front of the classroom.

Kathy looked at me unsympathetically and shrugged her shoulders.

“I am disappointed in each and every one of you standing up here,” Ms. Adams said grabbing her 3 foot pointer off of the black board ledge.

I was disappointed in Kathy as well. Not for failing to give me her answers but for not being more sympathetic toward my current predicament. She winked at me with both eyes and smiled to curb my anguish felt due to being amongst the doomed in front of the class.

“You’re not using your heads. You’re not thinking but I’m going to help you turn your brains on,” she exclaimed!

A swish sound followed immediately by a whack and a child’s yelp from being hit then another and another and another and I tensed up inside and out closing my eyes because I knew I was coming up for an, what I felt, undeserved whack. I don’t recall any instruction ever being given to us, whole group or small. We were expected to know how to complete an assignment correctly on our own. Had I missed something along the way? Was I too absorbed with my own discomfort with my skin color and being beaten up for it? I ask myself these questions because a few students, Kathy among them, were still in their seats because somehow they knew the answers. Somehow they were able to escape the wrath of the pointer. Interestingly enough, although they were getting the answers correct, I didn’t feel they were smarter than I was. I felt singled out within a crowd and it made me angry the more I thought about it and listened to the whimpers from the students who had already received their whacks; a single whack to remind them not only to do their homework but do it correctly. She was coming closer to me and I was looking forward to taking my whack and sitting. I would watch the rest of the kids to my left and have sympathy for them. It didn’t quite happen that way though. When Ms. Adams gave the boy next to me a good whack, my heart almost stopped. I could feel the wind from his lick and

fear filled my heart like water poured slowly into a glass. It built up gradually and my mind attempted to navigate the pain of being beaten up and made fun of with this one whack I was to receive from the meanest teacher in the whole school. It was my turn and I braced for it as I heard the swish and whack sound but the cry out loud was not my own. It was the girl on my left, Mylitta Nichols, who had yelled out and fell on the floor kicking and screaming as if someone had poured hot water all over her.

“Shut it up right now before you get another!” Ms. Adams forcefully scolded her. She stopped immediately because it was all an act to keep from getting hit again in the first place. The last three students on my left received their whacks and I was the lone student left standing with everyone staring at my light skin and nappy reddish-brown hair. I knew that was my description because that is what Ms. Adams said.

“Look at you with your light skin and nappy reddish-brown hair.”

She circled around me and observed me as if to inspect me for something other than the two descriptors.

“You are a disgrace to your color,” she said looking me up and down.

“Do you hear me talking to you?” She asked raising the pointer above her head.

“Yeah...” I whimpered.

“Yes ma’am!” She said ending with a whack that shot a surging stinging pain on the back of my legs just underneath my buttocks.

“Yes ma’am,” I winced.

I wanted to cry but for some unknown reason I couldn’t. Perhaps it was my way of fighting back.

“I expect better from you. I expect more from you and I don’t expect to see you up here again is that understood,” she yelled?

“Yeah, ma’am, I mean yes ma’am,” I corrected myself.

She gave me two more hard whacks for good measure I suppose to ensure that I understood. I understood clearly and the pain throbbing on the back of my legs made it hard to forget. What I didn’t understand was the work she gave and I didn’t understand how some kids got it right. I went back to my seat and stared at my paper real hard. I could read but the words wouldn’t string together long enough to make any sense prior to those three whacks I received. After the whacks, I focused long enough for them to make some sense. I answered the questions and hoped I was right. Every now and then I would glance at Kathy’s paper.

“Don’t look on my paper. You got it by yourself,” she said sounding disappointed that I didn’t need her anymore.

But I did because she was my security.

“Michael,” Ms. Adams snapped as I was filling in the last bubble on my sheet.

“Collect everyone’s paper for Ms. Adams,” she told me referring to herself in the third person.

I did as I was told and some of the other kids shoved their papers toward me. Inside I could feel that this was not good.

“Teacher’s pet!” Barry Bradford mumbled under his breath.

They called him B. B. for short and he had already repeated the second grade and really should have been in the third grade. I picked up Kathy’s paper and she smiled at me. She had me on a yo-yo. One minute she was upset making me feel bad and the next minute she was smiling making me feel good inside. Good enough to ignore the negative vibes I received from

other student when I picked up their papers. I gave Ms. Adams the papers and returned to my seat. It was almost lunch time and I figured she wouldn't have time to grade the papers before lunch but I was wrong. She went through them faster than lightening across gray skies. I felt crunchy inside and still remembered the stinging burning pain in the back of my legs from earlier that morning.

“Michael!”

Ms. Adams' voice made me jump on the inside and outside. The blood rushed to my fingertips and toes as my heart pounded so hard I was sure she could see my shirt moving on my chest.

“To the front of the class,” she commanded and handed me my paper.

“Now tell everyone what the right answers are,” she said in a calm tone that seemed to part her lips into a partial smile.

I called out the answers with dull interest or at least that's probably how it sounded because I was petrified.

“Very good Michael; show your color and make me proud. Make yourself proud. You are very smart,” she doted over me.

I didn't know what to say nor was I happy with my good work. I was just happy not to get whacked again.

“After lunch, if you didn't have all the same answers as Michael had then tsk, tsk,” she said then lined us up for lunch.

After lunch, I ran across the street to David Laramie's house. He had transferred to private school. I saw him in the window and ran to his house seeking protection from B.B. who had threatened to bust me up at lunch time recess. David beckoned me to come over to the

window. He was still in his pajamas as he talked and told me about private school. When I asked him why he wasn't in school he said he was out sick and that they did not allow you to come to school sick. Green Elementary was the exact opposite. I used to think some parents used school to get rid of their kids for the day. I heard a whistle like the one made with two fingers placed specifically under the tongue. That whistle usually meant the police were coming and it would behoove you to run, but sometimes it was a way of snitching someone out. I looked up to see two older boys jumping the fence and rapidly making their way toward me. David's eyes got big as saucers.

"Ma! Ma come quickly," he pleaded over his shoulder then ran out of his room.

I ran toward the back fence in his yard and a third guy close-lined me.

"Let me show your yellow ass a trick my uncle showed me," he said tightening his arm around my neck.

I could feel the blood rushing to my face building up pressure like air going into a balloon. My vision was beginning to get blurry and eventually the only thing I was aware of was the tears streaming out of my eyes. Not even the kicks and punches were felt. I felt the aftermath of them later. David and his mother were standing over me before I realized it and I could hear him yelling my name.

"Michael! Michael, are you okay?"

I suppose I was okay since I was aware that they were there.

"Little boy, let's call your mother," David's mother insisted with deep sympathy in her voice.

A streak of fear shot up from the base of my spinal cord to the top of my head then quickly dispersed throughout what felt like every bone in my body. I jumped up quick as a jack-rabbit and ran for the gate.

“Michael, come back,” David yelled!

I couldn't go back because I knew I shouldn't have been away from the school in the first place. I ran to the big kid's side and spotted my sister in line. They were getting ready to go inside from lunch. She saw me coming, opened her arms and hugged me.

“What's wrong little brother,” She asked repeatedly?

I burst into tears but shook my head no as if to say nothing. She knew something was wrong. Something had happened but I couldn't tell her because that meant my mother could possibly find out where I had been. She took a handkerchief out of her coat pocket and wiped my face. She told the teacher standing at the door she needed to take me to my class. The teacher opened the door and as we walked in, I heard,

“Look at spooky taking Casper to class,” and a few giggles were heard before the teacher commanded everyone to settle down.

When we got to my classroom door, Lynn brushed the remaining leaves and grass off of me.

“Michael, I hate this school. I'll be so glad when we move.”

I composed myself before going into the classroom.

“Me too,” I agreed with her.

My sister opened the door and saw Ms. Adams standing in front of the class.

“Hi Ms. Adams; I was bringing Michael to class. He was upset about something,” she said.

“Lynn, how are you?” She asked dragging her words out like the wicked witch of the west.

“Good,” Lynn said quickly then closed the door.

Ms. Adams eyeballed me then eyeballed my desk nodding in its direction. With raised eyebrows, I quickly meandered over to my desk trying to avoid B.B.’s desk. As I sat down, Ms. Adams spoke to the class about being in line on time after lunch-recess. Now, I was filled with a surrounding all consuming fear because I had been nearly choked to death, at least death felt imminent to me at the time, showed my sister there was a problem, which might raise questions at home if she talked, and Ms. Adams was lecturing about getting in line on time after recess. I knew she was referring to me because I was the only one not present and this could ultimately lead to a phone call home which could lead to a whipping. I did not like whippings because the pain of them goes deeper than physical pain. After a whipping, the breath you breathe in feels slightly different and affects your insides to such a degree that you cannot forget the pain. It is the same when getting beaten up for being different from others. The pain from being beaten up physically is a lot less than the pain felt inwardly. It is a pain that absorbs all fear and emotions of joy and leaves you toiling in the agony of being alone. Once that physical feeling has subsided, all that remains is a hole in your emotional self. By this time in my life, I had many holes in my emotional self and I was beginning to shut down even at home. My mother would ask me if there was anything wrong and I would shake my head no and the same response was given to Ms. Adams at school. No one seemed to probe any further than the basic question of what’s wrong? It’s as if my answer satisfied them. I even responded to Kathy the same way and she accepted my answer and continued on like everything was okay.

Close to the Christmas break, I walked up to Ms. Adams’ desk and stared at her.

“Oh, so you have something to say now?” She asked somewhat surprised that anyone had approached her desk.

I stared at her for a moment trying to muster up the courage to tell her that we were moving.

“Well spit it out light bread. I don’t bite,” she assured me anticipating my words.

“We moving far away from here and ain’t never coming back,” I said letting every word that escaped my lips fill me with confidence and joy.

I was prepared for a whack with the pointer or a good scolding at best but her response surprised me.

“Well you just remember you are a bright little boy and can know whatever you choose to know. Ms. Adams teaches the best. Now don’t forget that you hear me?” She said eyeballing me sternly then softened her stare to a smile.

I don’t think I had ever seen her smile before but it made me feel good all the same.

Poetic Discernment

Heart Thumps of Joy expresses the feelings of hope I carried through that last semester of the second grade at Green Elementary. Every threat, every beating, every fear or worry of a beating was soothed by thoughts of moving away to another place that would bring me peace and solidarity away from the struggles of being light skinned. Even Ms. Adams who was light complexioned as I was only brought grief and conflict because I became the teacher’s pet. I supposed this was because she didn’t want me to suffer for being light skinned amongst the darker skinned students but the results experienced were the same intimidation and bullying of the past. This story, in conjunction with the meaning behind the poem, expresses an attempt to overcome fear. Root (1996) states, “Fear is irrational by its very nature,” (p. 47). In some sense,

I recognized this and used the hope of moving away as a defense of that fear. As long as I had hope that it would eventually end, it made the experience bearable to some degree.

Cultivating Maturation

Sitting beneath the awareness of my knowing
 My ignorance shines a perpetual showing
 Of that which I know because it is all I know
 But more shall I learn in this space to grow
 Confused all the while letting ignorance go
 An empty vessel I am attempting to know
 With my eyes wide open and my ears listening
 I am reborn again like a baby's christening
 Shards of experiences with a smooth flow
 My life's journey is to one day know
 One day know why flight is for the bird
 One day know when my voice should be heard
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Blackness Unraveling in My Mind

Before moving to the suburbs, I knew I was black but didn't actually know what it meant. Everyone else around me was black and our differences ranged from dark skin like my sister, to light skin like myself. Being light skinned, I was compared to anything other than dark skin and that included white people, whom I believed were fictitious characters on television. My mother helped me come to that conclusion one day after I told her I wanted run away like Opie did on the Andy Griffith Show. She sat us all down in the living room and said,

“Listen to me very carefully. Those people on TV are not real. They are make-believe. Do you understand me?” She asked waiting for all of us to respond.

“Yes mama,” we all said simultaneously.

“Good! Now get ready for bed,” she said quickly dismissing us.

Thinking back, it never dawned on me that the characters on Sanford and Son, The Jefferson's and What's Happening were not real as black cast members. I suppose it was

because black was all I knew and had experiences with at the time. Miss Soy, my kindergarten teacher, was actually a white woman but she was just as black as my sister Lynn, Ms. Adams, or myself as far as my understanding of black was concerned. Black was pretty much all I knew and I didn't have anything to compare it with until we moved out to the suburbs.

My first day at Serenity Hill elementary school was an absolute culture shock. Many of the fictitious white people I had seen on television were now in the same classroom with me up close and real. They were not imagined nor make believe as I stood in the doorway watching television characters watching me. Miss Prunnell, the teacher, got everyone's attention after asking me if I preferred to be called Mike or Michael. No one had ever asked before and up until that moment I had not given it any thought. In a flash, I decided that I preferred being called Mike. It was different from what I had heard my entire life up until that moment. No one had ever given me a choice on what to be called. Michael was all I ever knew and like being black, I felt people would make fun of me. In my mind, I was a different kind of black or not the right kind of black because I was always made fun of for being the black that I was. When she said Mike or Michael, Mike sounded cool to me. It had a ring to it I had never heard before so I immediately said,

“Mike, I think I like Mike.”

She put her hands on my shoulders and turned me toward the class.

“Class this is our new classmate, Mike,” she said sounding as though her voice had a smile all its own.

“Hi Mike!”

They all responded in unison with jubilant voices and smiles on their faces. I don't remember anyone being received like that at Green Elementary. Miss Prunnell showed me

around the classroom and put my name on the calendar next to my birthday. Next, we were broken up into groups and started reading. I remember being in the group with Brenda Marks and Brooke Dawson. They stand out in my memory because Brenda had brown hair with freckles that seemed to dance on her pale skin. When she read aloud for Miss Prunnell, her voice had a gurgle sound to it as if she had to clear her throat and at times she would clear it with an ‘ahem’ but it didn’t help. The rhythm she read with was slow and deliberate but she knew the words. Brooke, on the other hand, read with good strong, solid conviction. It sounded like she knew what she was talking about when she spoke and even more so when she read aloud. She had curly blonde hair the same as Miss Prunnell’s with pale skin as well. They were very nice to me and encouraged me to read aloud when Miss Prunnell asked me to do so. I could read just as well as anyone else in the class but I didn’t want to do anything that could possibly cause them to pick on me, make fun of me. I would have read willingly initially, but there was one boy sitting in a desk by the window. It was a very large window that stretched across the span of the wall connecting classrooms on both sides of our room. It was bright inside and the vibe was pleasant. The only apprehension I felt deep in the pit of my stomach came from the boy sitting by the window. He had dark skin and a short haircut and was dressed neatly. I had seen his type before and figured it was only a matter of time before he threatened me, only a matter of time before his buddies in another class jumped me at recess or after school. I leaned in close to Brooke and asked,

“Hey who’s the guy by the window?”

The sunlight shone brightly on his forehead as he stared out of the window.

“Oh that’s just Tim Douglass. He’s a sweetheart and the kid behind him is Keith Seikler. You’ll get to know everybody real soon,” she assured me.

“Real soon,” Brenda added playfully.

Sweetheart my brown eyes – I didn’t trust his look one bit.

“I hear you guys talking about me to the new kid over there,” Tim observed.

His voice sounded funny, almost like a Muppet.

“Awe, mind your beeswax Mr. Douglass,” Brenda said laughing with her gurgled voice.

“Alright, let’s get back to it you guys. Mike it’s okay if you don’t want to read,” Miss Prunnell said in a calm voice.

I didn’t feel threatened anymore and agreed to read anyway. After reading, Miss Prunnell praised me telling me how beautifully I read. I was concentrating extremely hard because I didn’t want to make a mistake and look dumb after Brooke and Brenda read so well. I concentrated so hard in fact; I could not remember a thing I had just read.

“Wow, that yellow boy can read,” Tim blurted out before I think even he knew it.

“Tim, shame on you! We don’t say things like that in this class. I am very disappointed in you,” Miss Prunnell told him.

She went over to his desk and stood over him scolding him for his insensitive racial slur. What he said was inappropriate and was rightfully scolded by Miss Prunnell, but the tone in his voice gave me the impression that he was actually complimenting me and meant no harm.

“Mike you just ignore him. That’s what my dad would say,” Keith Seikler spoke up like the dead rising.

He wore a dark blue jean jacket with cowboy boots and lighter jeans not matching. His ears were almost pointy like Doctor Spock’s from Star Trek and his eyes and hair were uncannily similar. I was so surprised at anyone coming to my defense that I didn’t have time to feel bad, one way or the other. In fact, I actually felt bad for Tim, who sat looking at Miss

Prunnell with his big brown sad eyes looking remorseful over his inappropriate comment. It felt good to be finally free of fear at school. In a sense, I felt empowered to be who I was and on that first day I was Mike who could read well and didn't have to worry about being bullied over my skin color. I actually felt safe.

Later that day, Miss Prunnell made us color before going out to recess. I did my usual artistic scribble scabble on the picture of the large truck Miss Prunnell had given me. She walked over to my desk and I tensed up waiting for that pleasant sound in her voice to transform into a scolding screech over my bad coloring. The closer she came to my desk the more I stayed coloring in one spot in the center of the truck. Waiting for it, I tensed up even more and could feel the blue crayon tip mashing muddily into the paper. It looked bad even to me at this point and I wanted to bawl the paper up and throw it into the trash can like Miss Miller had done so many times before at Green Elementary. I glanced at her quickly and she walked by with her hands behind her back observing everyone quietly coloring. I felt slightly relieved but still anticipated eventually being yelled at for my poor coloring. I searched the classroom looking for others who colored poorly as well thinking it might be okay but that feeling quickly faded upon viewing the wonderful works of coloring others had done.

“Alright class, let's line up for recess,” Miss Prunnell said quietly.

Kids jumped up at random and stood in line at the door for recess. There was no order to it but it appeared routine and structured. I popped up out of my seat just as happy as ever because I didn't get yelled at for my coloring.

“Not so fast buddy,” Miss Prunnell said walking towards me.

Wait for it – here it comes. I knew it was too good to be true. Here comes the other side of Miss Prunnell and I braced for it by holding onto my desk and giving her that wide eyed stare as if I had been caught doing something wrong.

“You know Mike I was thinking, if it’s alright with you, would you mind staying in for recess and working on your coloring,” she asked?

I was utterly floored as I stared into her deep blue eyes almost hypnotized and at a loss for words. It was like I wasn’t in trouble and wasn’t being punished but given a choice to work on my coloring or going out to play for recess. Well who wants to miss recess? I certainly didn’t but the way she approached me and asked me, it was like she became a Svengali over me. I felt obligated to fulfill her thoughts of me staying in for recess.

“Yes, Miss Prunnell,” I responded feeling completely disappointed about missing recess.

I think she knew I was disappointed but her job was to teach and not give into my playful desires.

“Brooke, do you mind staying in to help Mike,” she asked with a big smile on her face.

“Sure thing Miss Prunnell. No problem,” Brooke replied.

She had that serious tone in her voice that made it sound like she knew what she was talking about. Miss Prunnell left the classroom with the rest of the kids for recess. Brooke gave me a brown crayon and a clean coloring sheet. It was a large square. I stared at it curiously.

“Well get started mister. It’s not going to color itself,” she said turning to her own coloring sheet.

I started frantically coloring the square in all different directions. It was large and I was impatiently attempting to fill it in as quickly as possible in hopes of finishing so I could get out to recess. I was curious as to how it would be in the suburbs. I was focused, head tilted and

coloring away. The next thing I knew, a hand slightly lighter than my own pressed down forcefully on my hand.

“Slow down and remember one thing,” Brooke said as I looked up into her green eyes.

“Color one way,” she instructed.

I was caught in her stern stare that suggested she had a goal, a mission of sorts to accomplish for Miss Prunnell and though she never said it her words conveyed the same assumption.

“I know it’s just a square but that’s not important. What is important is that you stay in the lines and make it beautiful,” she said with compelling conviction in her voice almost as if she would be punished by Miss Prunnell if I failed.

I liked Brooke and didn’t want her to suffer because of me so I concentrated on slowing down and staying in the lines.

“Good, good now you can press light or hard when you color but for this square, choose one or the other,” she said more calmly as if she had accomplished one of many difficult tasks but was relieved to know I was catching on quickly.

It was a strange feeling for me that day because I realized I was being taught how to color where no one had ever done so. Before I knew it, everyone was coming back inside from recess and I wasn’t disappointed anymore. Miss Prunnell came over to see the work I had done.

“Good job Mike. Thank you for helping your classmate Brooke,” she said taking my brown colored square to her desk.

Brook turned to me and winked. I didn’t quite know what she meant by it until Miss Prunnell returned my picture to me. It had a gold star in the upper-right hand corner next to my name. I turned to Brooke and winked.

“No, good job for you,” she said smiling and I knew exactly what her wink meant then.

On the way home that day, I noticed some kids were being picked up by their parents but most walked home. Kerry Jensing, a quiet girl in my class, road up behind me on a black Huffly bicycle. I was headed to the fourth and fifth grade side because I thought that was the only way home. Charles had left me, I assumed, because he was nowhere to be found. She had short blonde hair with green eyes. It was the second time I had peered into a pair of eyes of which the color I had never before seen.

“You’re going the wrong way kid,” she said with her boyish looks.

Later, I discovered she was a Tomboy. She could pop a wheelie and jump a ramp better than some of the older kids in the neighborhood.

“Well which way is right,” I asked still curiously staring into her green eyes.

“C’mon I’ll show you,” she said riding off on her bicycle slowly enough for me to keep up walking.

We headed down Sherry Lane, which was parallel to Serena Drive, the street we had taken initially to get to the school when my mother dropped us off. Serenity Hills Elementary School sat at the end of a square block, which was approximately a mile and a half away from our new house which sat on Lynn Lane. Kerry Jensen was a strange person in my eyes. She took me down the other side of the neighborhood and showed me where many of the kids lived on the way to our new house. How did she know them all? They all knew her and appeared to respect her. She wasn’t big or powerful or dominant in nature but her personality elicited respect in a nice way. When we got to the cul-de-sac down the street from my house, I spotted my brother, Charles, talking to a kid in his drive way.

“Hey Michael, come meet Gary!” Charles yelled in my direction.

Kerry jumped off of her bicycle.

“Here hold my bike,” she said running toward Gary.

Gary backed up laughing but was soon caught in a headlock applied by Kerry. She snatched her gloves off and raked her knuckles across the top of his head.

“Okay, okay, cut it out already,” he whined.

“Say Uncle,” She demanded!

“Uncle! Uncle,” Gary yelled!

Charles and I were amused as Kerry pushed Gary to the ground.

“Why did you do that in front of our new black friends,” he said laughing.

“They know their black dummy. Just say friends,” she admonished him.

It was the first time I had been respectfully referred to as black.

“C’mon Mike, show me your house,” she said hopping back on her bike. Gary stayed on the cold partially snow covered ground looking confused.

“Why did you do that,” I asked her?

“Because he’s an idiot,” was her reply.

“Oh,” I thought to myself.

“My stepdad is black and he doesn’t like it when you point out the obvious,” she said riding slightly ahead of me.

I didn’t know what she meant so I switched the subject.

“How do you know everybody,” I asked?

“It’s my business to know,” she replied.

I still didn’t understand her and this is why I thought she was strange. Most things she said were either confusing or incomplete. She was nice though and I liked her strangeness and

all. All throughout elementary and junior high school she would pop up on her bicycle, say a few words then leave. When we got to my house, my mother was standing on the front porch.

“Hi Mrs. Williams,” she greeted my mother like she had known her for years.

“Hello young lady. I see you made a new friend huh Michael,” she said smiling.

“Yes mama,” I replied wondering what my mother’s first impression of her was.

Kerry turned and grabbed my arm.

“You live in front of Brook Creek. You’ll meet Keith in our class. He’s a bit of a weirdo but nice,” she warned me.

“What you mean weirdo,” I asked?

“You’ll see. See you in school,” she said and rode off down the street on her bicycle.

Poetic Discernment

Cultivating Maturation expresses my growth from being confused about my race to learning that I was black in the eyes of white people. This lesson was not a fallacious one. It made me think more deeply about the portrayal of race from both black and white perspectives. When Douglass blurted out, “Wow, that yellow boy can read,” and was quickly scolded for it, I was surprised. I was surprised by the way whites treated me and respected racial boundaries. Korgen (2010) argues that “lighter-skinned blacks are more highly accepted in our society because they more closely resemble “whiteness” than individuals with dark skin” (p. 91). I could surmise that this is why Kerry and Keith easily befriended my when we moved to the suburbs however, they appeared to be outcasts in their own white community as well. Either way, I was beginning to recognize my own blackness. Ironically, I began seeing my own blackness as a result of encountering whiteness which is similar to Ibrahim’s (2014) notion that “When Blackness encounters the syntactic structure of identity, it seems that a new becoming

spills over, a rhizome is given birth to” (p. 1). My new identity became black as I encountered white people but encountering black people was still problematic to some degree.

Blind Judges

Born into Blackness no fault of my own
 Seconds to hours pass into this skin I've grown
 Who made these rules giving sight to color?
 Why do your eyes fail to see the obvious other?
 The Choctaw, the Italian, the Puerto Rican in me
 Even the Ethiopian the judges cannot see
 Subjected to subjugation consistently under attack
 Let's face it blind judges you only see black!
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Let's Face it I'm Black

I went inside and told my mother and father about my day at school and how nice Miss Prunnell and all the students were to me.

“By the way ma, white people are real. My class is full of them,” I told her.

The entire day while I was at school I could hardly wait to get home to tell my mother just how real they were. At first she looked concerned as she searched her memory.

“Son, I know they are real. For crying out loud, your kindergarten teacher, what's her name?” She asked snapping her finger trying to recall the name.

I looked dumbfounded while scratching my head because I just knew she was a light skinned black woman.

“She's black... right?” I responded unaware of the correct answer.

They both laughed so hard, tears were coming out of their eyes.

“Michael sweetie, Mrs. Soy is clearly a white woman. And those white people on TV are not real. They are playing characters... uh oh,” my mother put her hand over her mouth.

She understood how I mistook her words to mean white people on TV were not real. The fact that my understanding meant they weren't real solidified the fact that Mrs. Soy was black because black people were real and white people were not.

"I am so sorry son. Sit down and listen to me very carefully," she said holding my hand and leading me to the couch in the living room.

She, along with my father's help, explained to me that my grandmother, her mother, and my great grandmother were mixed with Italian and Ethiopian.

"So that's why they called me white boy at school sometimes," I said trying to make light of the bullying I had experienced at Green Elementary.

For reasons I can't explain, I didn't want them to know I was hurt. I felt like it would hurt my mother as she was a heavy worrier and it would enrage my father. His rage was far greater than any bullying I could experience and that was a door I certainly didn't want to be responsible for opening.

"Wait, it gets more complicated. You're not white, just light skinned. Yes, we have white in our blood but you also have my father's blood and he is part Indian and Puerto Rican," my mother told me further complicating my racial makeup.

I sat with my mouth open and my eyes opened all the same. I was excited to know I had all this blood running through my body.

"Why do you think I try to speak a little Spanish with you all?" She asked to which I could only respond with shrugged shoulders.

"Como te llamo," she asked in Spanish.

"Me llamo Miguel, Miguelito," I responded before I knew it and she nodded knowingly at me.

She told me I would learn better when I got older because she wasn't around her father long enough to become fluent. They didn't speak for several years when she was growing up and he lived in California now. I wanted to talk to him and find out more about him but she would only tell me that I would see his mother, Almary, who was full-blooded Choctaw Indian when we went down south to visit Mississippi.

"Well what am I, what does that make me?" I asked completely confused at this point.

"Well, your birth certificate says you're black but you can be anybody you want to be. Just remember you're my son and I love you," she said hugging me.

My father hugged me too and nodded his head in agreement. From that moment forward, I carried around in my head that I was black but I never felt black. I still wasn't fully aware of what black was other than skin color which I obviously didn't fully possess. There had to be more to black than skin color and after the conversation with my parents, let's face it, I'm black.

Poetic Discernment

This story, preceded by the poem *Blind Judges*, reveals my knowledge of my complete racial makeup that would become *OpianChocTaliRican*. It is a heritage mix of Ethiopian, Choctaw Native American, Italian, and Puerto Rican. The problem for me is that nobody could see my racial mix and automatically labeled me black. I was in full agreement with Zack's (1995) statement, "So many people I have known... as my multiethnic heroes in this society are most often monoracially... identified by reactionaries and progressives alike, who have espoused or internalized the racist invention of "race" and uncritically adopted America's rule of hypodescent" (p. 80). *Blind Judges* espouses emphatically regardless of what my racial makeup is people only see black.

Opposites Attracting

Love and hate two emotions collide
 Vying my time which one shall I ride?
 Like pleasure and pain some like intertwined
 Fiery hot passion the forbidden entwine
 Inevitable Black and White what a luscious mix
 Innocent mingling among them too hard to fix
 But who can separate the magnetic attraction?
 And who will dismiss the negative reaction?
 From those who witness opposites attracting
 No right or wrong in this natural exacting
 Will we ever accept two emotions colliding?
 Will you ever acknowledge which one you're riding?
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

No Nigger You're Black

Getting used to the new house and neighborhood was an emotional roller coaster. I can still remember how the house smelled especially the basement and carpet left behind by the former residents. My mother said we would have to make it our own by living in it and keeping it clean. Our neighbors on the right were a family of four white people. Two kids a boy and a girl and mom and dad. They were the Ross'. Johnny and Jenny Ross were siblings that appeared and acted fairly nice to us however, throughout the years our interactions were mixed with racial tensions that could be attributed to fear, privilege, natural conflict, and disagreements. Initially, we were welcomed with open arms but they all kept their distance with a wave during neighborly passing. I felt like we were being monitored, closely watched by them because I always noticed the curtains being peeked through whenever we were outside. They may have just been nosey neighbors but it was odd that all of them had this trait.

On the weekends, I would go out early in the morning when it was frigid cold and play in the snow by myself. My brother and sister thought I was crazy but I was good at being alone. Once morning, I was making mini snowmen for my snowdrift army and a snowball hit me in

the back. It wasn't hard so I mistook it for snow falling off of the tree branches above me until the second one hit me in the back. I turned around cautiously hoping my past fears of bullying weren't resurfacing. I didn't see anyone, only our brown Nova sitting in the driveway. The cold in the air casted a grayish film on the morning light as snow began to lightly float to the ground. I was sure someone was there but I saw no one. Moments later, a snowball sailed high over the top of the brown Nova and laughter followed shortly thereafter. I stood up and eased behind the tree from whence I thought the snowballs come for cover. A strange figure of a kid emerged from behind our car. He had on a long black trench coat with gloves to match and a ski mask that covered his face. He stood with his arms hanging lifelessly by his sides and stared at me. As I followed the length of his arms to his hands searching for another snowball, I noticed the brown and white cowboy boots on his feet. Kerry's words shot through my mind.

“You'll meet Keith in our class. He's a bit of a weirdo.”

I came from around the tree fully exposing myself as a target. He reached down and made a snowball then threw it at my snowdrift army. When the snowball hit one of my mini snowmen, he made an explosion sound with his mouth.

“Direct hit! Enemy is crippled. Move in now,” he said running toward me at what I assumed was full speed for him but it wasn't very fast.

He fell forward flat on his face just before the rest of my snowdrift army.

“Houston, we have a problem. All systems are down. Requesting assistance,” he said in an animated voice looking up from his fallen position.

I was slow to catch on but he was playing make believe so I figured I'd play along.

“Enemy is down. Prepare the prisoner,” I said helping him to his feet.

“I know where the gold is,” he whispered.

“Hand it over,” I yelled!

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a plastic copper looking nugget of some sort. He pulled his ski mask up and held the nugget to his eyes inspecting it like it was real gold.

“Ah! They fooled me with a fake!” He yelled startling me momentarily.

He looked at me waiting for a response but I had none. I had run out of ideas.

“You’re supposed to say to the brig you go then,” he told me.

I laughed because not only did he have a good imagination but it was as if he believed his imaginings. I had never played with anyone on this level before and I like it so I went along with him and we played make believe prisoner of war until the cold in the air snapped the desire to play.

“Hey, you want to come to my house?” He asked like it was the best idea ever. I wasn’t sure I should leave the front of the house without permission and it must have shown on my face because he put his hand on my shoulder and reassured me we would only be gone for a minute.

“C’mon, I stay on the other side of Brook Creek in Hamilton Woods,” he said trudging through the snow heading toward our backyard fence.

I followed closely behind and explored the area directly behind our house across Holbrook road. Hamilton Woods looked like something out of a Halloween horror movie. With no leaves on the branches of the many trees that laced each side of the street running into the subdivision, it looked like sleepy hollow but the houses were big and beautiful. My mouth must have been open as I looked at the houses because it became dry very quickly. When we reached his house I shouted,

“Awesome!”

Before I knew it because his house was so big I'm sure it could hold three times our house with room to spare. Awesome was a word I heard other kids using at school when they were excited about something. I was totally confident it was appropriate upon seeing Keith's house.

"Where's your mother and father," I asked?

Keith walked up to the front door and took his glove off to get a good grip on the large silver door knob to open it.

"They're in here somewhere. C'mon and make yourself at home," he invited me inside smiling like he had won the lottery.

When I had both feet solidly over the threshold and inside the vestibule, Keith ran up to me and hugged me.

"I love you Mike. You're my best friend," he said embracing me like a lost brother who had come home.

I was stunned and once again it apparently showed on my face because he put his hand on my shoulder to explain.

"My dad says to always tell your friends you love them cause you just never know," his words trailed off and he stared up at the high ceiling.

It looked like tears were forming but I couldn't quite tell and if they were he held them back. Why did he see me as his best friend? Why did he even want to be friends with me for that matter? In his bedroom, which was twice the size of our living room, he had everything a kid could ask for or want. I did notice there were no other siblings around.

"Where are your brothers and sisters?" I asked still marveling at all the toys and games he had.

The Tyco race set in once corner and the Santa Fe train set in another; model airplanes and cars, a huge toy chest and more board games than I could count. Who did he play with, I wondered?

“Since you’re my best friend now, we’re gona have loads of fun playing games and having sleepovers, ooh and guess what?” He asked very excitedly.

“What?” I responded cautiously curious but I was excited on the inside.

“On Christmas I get to tell Santa to get you whatever gift you want,” he said with a gleam in his eyes.

I was always tense, cautious, and a bit uptight around other kids but it was hard to be that way with Keith. He was the whitest kid I had ever laid eyes on and he resembled Dr. Spock from Star Trek. His demeanor and mannerisms were nonthreatening and I wasn’t concerned about being on guard. I was excited about my new best friend and could hardly wait to tell my mother and father. He would be the first real friend I had at the time. It was like a dream come true out of nowhere. I had made friends with a person who didn’t judge me as black, white, yellow, or any other race. It was as if he didn’t see race only friendly companionship.

We played and ran through the big house playing make believe and laughing and I was having a great time. I had forgotten I was away from the house and my heart felt like it stopped momentarily. Keith saw the panic in my eyes right away and became just as concerned it seemed.

“Mike, your mother and father won’t be too upset will they,” he asked concerned?

“I don’t know,” I replied and I didn’t know.

All I knew is that I had to get home. It was almost near noon and I had the feeling that my parents were looking for me.

“Let’s go!” He shouted heading for the front door.

“Whoa there mister, where do you think you’re going?”

A man in a black suit asked. It was his dad. He explained my dilemma and attempted to open the door but his father put his large foot in front of the door stopping it from opening.

“I see you’ve made a new friend,” he said staring at me.

Keith left his hand on the doorknob and didn’t respond. His father knelt down in front of me and extended his hand.

“Hey there young fella, what’s your name?” He asked waiting for a response.

“Mike.”

I had never seen a white man close up before. I was just as curious about him as I suppose he was about me considering I was a strange kid standing in his living room. Keith made a hand shaking gesture prompting me to extend my hand to shake his father’s.

“Awe, that’s not much of a grip sir. Make sure it’s always firm like this when shaking hands,” he said tightening his grip gradually as I followed his lead.

“He’s got to get home dad,” Keith said impatiently.

“Cool your jets buddy. What do you say I give you a lift home,” he asked?

The sound of his question made me nervous and turned my stomach because his kindness would seal the fact that I wasn’t where I was supposed to be. I nodded yes but my heart would rather have walked back on my own. Keith and I piled into their car and his dad drove me right up to my house. My mother was standing on the front porch with her hands on her hips and no expression on her face. That’s never a good sign. As I got out of the car, Keith’s dad got out as well. He walked toward my mother with a huge grin on his face.

“Hello ma’am, I’m Zach Seikler. I see that worried look on your face but Mike is fine. He was playing with my son and most likely lost track of the time. I thought it best if I saw him home,” he said pleasantly.

“Oh thank goodness,” my mother said with half of a giggle.

“I was wondering where he was. You know we just moved here and he doesn’t know his way around,” she said shaking his hand.

“Not yet, but he will. Take care ma’am,” he said heading back to his car.

“Thank you so much,” she said eying me sternly.

When they drove off she let me have it pretty good. Wandering off was dangerous and strictly prohibited. I told her about Keith and how nice he and his dad were to me and she wasn’t so upset after that but stressed letting her know where I was at all times.

The following weekend, I asked my mother if I could go to Keith’s house. After describing where he lived, which was not far from us at all, she agreed with, “I suppose so, Michael.”

I tracked my way over through the snow and rang the doorbell. It echoed through the house. After a few moments, a blonde haired, blue eyed white woman came to the door. She had on jeans and a red turtle neck sweater. The look on her face suggested she was aggravated and quite perturbed that I had rung the doorbell around 10 am in the morning.

“Zach, some little nigger boy is at the door,” she said coldly looking back for Keith’s dad to come to the door.

I didn’t think much of the term nigger but the way she said it referring to me made me feel a bit defunctive, like crawling under a rock and disappearing. Everyone has had that feeling one time or another where they feel completely out of place as if they don’t belong. This was

one of those moments. I didn't know whether to run away or just stand there and wait. What quickly turned that feeling around for me was Keith's dad. He came to the door and when he saw me, a smile parted his lips.

"Hon it's just Keith's friend Mike. Hey there tiger," he said holding the door open. I hesitated before coming in because the woman had her arms folded. Her face turned apple red with her lips pressed so tightly together they seemed to form one thin line. I walked in as he ushered his wife toward the kitchen.

"He's in his room. Go on in and say hello," he said in his usual upbeat voice.

"Honey, why a little black nigger boy," the woman whispered slightly below a vocal sound so I heard her.

"Gretchen Elizabeth, that's his friend and damn it if...," his voice trailed off into an inaudible whisper so I couldn't hear the rest of what was said. At the time, I didn't know enough to be offended because people always referred to each other as niggers.

"Nigger please! Nigger if you don't you better! Stop playing so much nigger! My nigger, good to see you!"

It wasn't uncommon to hear it used scornfully or playfully so I didn't think much about the term. My dad's sister would always say,

"I ain't a nigger, I'm a nigger-row."

When I got older I knew she meant Negro but at the time nigger-row just sounded like a cool hip way of saying nigger.

I walked into Keith's room and saw him sitting on the floor playing with his Santa Fe train set.

“Who’s the lady with the red shirt on,” I asked? “My mom,” he replied without looking up from his train set. His voice was crisp but abrupt.

“She’s a asshole sometimes but my dad says I have to love her,” he said still not looking up with the same tone.

I stood beside him with my coat still on feeling anxious, wanting to leave because I didn’t feel comfortable anymore. In my mind I felt like I would feel better outside the house. The sound of a glass plate crashing to the floor was integrated with sounds of inaudible arguing between Keith’s parents. The argument being about me never crossed my mind. Keith covered his ears and forced his head downward repeating, “la, la, la, la, la,” as his parents continued to argue.

I tapped his shoulder.

“I’m going to go home now,” I told him.

He looked up surprised that I would say such a thing then yelled, “Dad! I’m going to Mike’s.”

He slid on his cowboy boots and grabbed his coat from behind the door. When we got to the vestibule, his mother rushed up to him like he was attempting to escape jail.

“I forbid you,” she said eying him on his level.

Keith kept walking toward the door completely ignoring his mother and all I could think was,

“Wow!”

I’m not sure exactly what would have happened had I ignored my mother as he did his but I was quite sure it wouldn’t have gone the way it did. He opened the door, stuck up his middle finger and yelled, “You’re not my mother! You’re not the boss of me! I hate you!”

I followed but just before I made it out of the house, a hand on my shoulder gently guided me back inside. Keith's mother eyed me on my level and her eyes glared at me.

"You're still a black nigger," she told me just above a whisper.

She seemed to get some kind of relief or satisfaction from her words because she tilted her head slightly to the right and smiled at me. I nodded and made my way out of the door quicker than before. Keith had started out ahead of me. When I caught up with him I didn't say anything. I just walked along side him wondering what the problem was.

"She's not my real mother," he said as the cold air captured his breath and sent it into the air in front of us.

I asked him where his real mother was.

"She's in Colorado," he said. "I'm going to be with her soon," he continued emphasizing the word soon.

He told me the lady at his house was mean and did a lot of things that didn't make sense.

"Like what," I asked curiously?

He looked down and shook his head, "I don't know. She's just stupid."

I could hear frustration in his voice like when my mother was getting impatient with us. We played at my house for what seemed like all day but eventually his dad drove up into our driveway. Keith waived at me and darted for the car. His dad waived and they drove away.

Poetic Discernment

Reflecting on this story draws me to Korgen's words, "the complex racial identities of a large and growing number of people in a world that is racially very complex" (Korgen, 2010, p. 206) makes me question the family dynamic I found in my new best friend. I couldn't understand how Keith and his father could be so tolerant of me, a light skinned black boy, but

his stepmother was openly a prejudice bigot. While I was happy to have a friend I had to remember Prasad's (2006) warning that "All of us, whether we are conscious of it or not, compartmentalize people so that we can more readily place them along the continuum of what is personally comprehensible" (pp. 7-8). The poem *Opposites Attracting* exemplifies the connection made between me and Keith and questions those that have an issue with races interacting.

Where Is Your Place?

I'm confused when I see hypocrisy abound
 Love for one another is scarcely found
 It's simple to relate to your own color
 But some refuse and hate their own brother
 We pick and choose the clicks we follow
 And love for mankind appears all too hollow
 I see this outside of my own chosen race
 I see white people also struggle to find place
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Whites don't Like Each Other Either

Strangely enough, I wasn't picked on at school for not being the right color, but I was sometimes left out of reindeer games because I was friends with the weirdo. Keith was considered a weirdo because of the way he dressed and went around quoting his dad's passion for telling your friends that you loved them. Unfortunately, I was his only friend so when teams were chosen for a game of kickball during recess he would not get picked. He acted as if he didn't care.

"So what you guys, Mike is my best friend anyways so there," he said and I would be kicked off of the team that chose me.

"I told you Mike, he's weird," Kerry said to me but her tone and facial expression was directed toward Keith.

"Awe, leave him alone," I said because I felt bad for him.

He was nice enough and no different in my eyes than any of the other kids. My defense of Keith would get me out casted as well. The team captain walked up to me and slightly shoved me back indicating I was now off the team.

“Hey Kevin, you’re in now, Mike’s gona play with his girlfriend.”

Once those words came out everyone would laugh and start singing, “Keith and Mike sitting in the tree K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, then comes marriage, Mike and Keith in a baby carriage, sucking their thumbs, wetting their pants, doing the hula hula dance.”

The first time that happened, I was shocked and embarrassed all at the same time. Miss Prunnell watched everything going on but never intervened until the song ended.

“Alright you guys play nicely.”

She ushered the others along smiling and turned to me with the same smile, winked and nodded in Keith’s direction. He was headed toward the Timber Towns; a wooden play village at the school where your imagination could explode with make believe. I hesitantly followed but soon found myself caught up in his fantastic world of make believe for the entire recess period. At the end of the day when it was time to go home, Miss Prunnell asked me to stay after school for a few minutes. I thought I was in trouble but could not think of anything I had done wrong. That still didn’t help the feeling of being in trouble escape me. The first thing I remembered sitting at my desk waiting for Miss Prunnell to return from dismissing the student after school was the lingering smell of her perfume. She was very pretty and all the kids were enamored by her beauty even the girls. We would argue and sometimes fight over who got to sit with her at lunch time until she convinced us that we were all sitting with her connected by each other. I don’t know if everyone bought the idea but it did stop the quarreling among us. She walked into the classroom and headed straight toward my desk with the usual smile on her face. She almost

seemed to move in slow motion and a wave of her perfume hit my nostrils sending chills up my spine. This was better than sitting next to her at lunch time. I had her all to myself with no others around. For a second grader to revel in those few moments was like what I'd have imagined heaven to be like, eternal bliss.

“Mike I don't want to keep you long,” she expressed.

My thought was she could take me home and set me on the mantle if she wanted.

“I want to thank you for being Keith's friend. You might even say you're his special friend,” she said.

I looked confused because I didn't know why she was telling me anything about our friendship.

“I probably shouldn't tell you this but I if do you have to promise me you won't say anything to anyone else,” she said looking deeply concerned about the words she had yet to reveal to me.

I promised her and crossed my heart like I had seen other kids doing.

“Keith is not going to be with us much longer,” she told me.

“Oh I know he's going to Colorado to be with his mother. He told me that already,” I said full of confidence that I knew something as well.

“So he told you about his mother in Colorado,” she asked?

“Yup, I know all about that. I know his dad too. He's pretty cool,” I said.

She gave my head a friendly rub,

“Oh good. I feel better that you know. Keith's really sick and after his mom passed in Colorado his illness got worse so it's really great that you are being a good friend to him,” she said.

Her words spun a string of butterflies in the pit of my stomach and not the excited kind either. I had a blank stare on my face and a complimentary thought process in that moment.

“Sometimes kids can be cruel to him but just don’t understand his situation. He has a rare illness that won’t allow him to live as long as you and I may live,” she explained.

“Just show him all the love you can before he leaves. Now head on home before your mother starts missing you,” she said as I headed out the door.

Her words resonated with my inner being where I felt an overwhelming sense of sadness. She had imparted information to me that she thought I knew but I was floored. A few of the kids still hanging around after school swarmed around me asking for details of my after school meeting with Miss Prunnell. I had a big smile on my face as I walked and told them how good her perfume smelled and how pretty her blue eyes were.

“Man it was awesome,” I told them and it was except for the news she dropped on me.

“But what did she want with you?” Webster, a kid who lived down the street from us, asked.

“Oh, uhm, she told me I had to get better at coloring so practice at home,” I lied.

“Dang, I should’ve messed up on my coloring,” he said invoking laughter from us all.

I kept my promise not to tell anyone as well as being the best friend I could be to Keith. I even played imaginary games with him more intensely than before because I knew he liked that kind of thing.

Right before school was out for the summer; Miss Prunnell announced to the class that Keith would not be in class with us anymore because he had moved to Colorado, sparring all but me the pain of losing a classmate to death. I was sad at hearing her words but I didn’t let it show.

“I’m glad the weirdo’s gone Miss Prunnell. He was a strange kid,” Steven Mattox said trying to justify his joy over Keith’s departure.

Miss Prunnell mildly chastised him for being so insensitive and explained that we should all get along with each other despite our differences.

“Even though we are all white, except for Mike and Tim, we all have differences but our differences shouldn’t keep us apart,” she explained.

She used various examples including hair, eye color, and freckles and distinguishing marks to point out our differences. She then explained that me and Tim were black but had differences in shades of color as well.

“Mike is a much lighter brown than Tim but you don’t see them not getting along do you?” She asked the whole class but everyone knew she was talking to Steven.

“Yes Miss Prunnell,” everyone responded almost simultaneously.

As the final days before summer vacation approached, Steven Mattox made it perfectly clear that he didn’t believe what Miss Prunnell had told the class.

“Keith may be white but he’s weird and you’re weird for hanging with him,” he told me on the playground at recess.

I wanted to tell him Miss Prunnell was right. I wanted to tell him that Keith had really gone to heaven. I wanted to tell him that he was the weird one but I punched him in the stomach instead, knocking the wind out of him. While he was down on the ground trying to catch his breath, I leaned down and said, “Yo mama is weird,” then walked away hoping he wouldn’t tattle to Miss Prunnell. He probably wouldn’t because he was just as wrong as I was, I thought. I came home that day to some exciting news.

“We’re going down south for the summer,” my mother told us.

Down south was Mississippi where my mother's folks lived.

Poetic Discernment

'Where is Your Place' was written to address Keith's place not found among his white classmates. We were both in a world all our own. Not finding place amongst your own seems to sting of the same pain as not knowing where your place is. Keith never attempted to fit in with his white classmates and he walked to the beat of his own drum. Witnessing the cruelty Steven Mattox displayed even in his passing alarmed me. It gave credence to Baldwin's argument that "White Americans find it difficult as white people elsewhere do to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that black people need, or want" (Baldwin, 1998, p. 340). I saw this attitude in Steven Mattox displayed toward Keith, a white boy, who refused to desire that value. He placed more value in me as a friend than he did in his own race. This further opened my mind to racial diversity as opposed to viewing race through a monoracial lens.

No Difference

Apples to oranges doesn't compare
 To the blood that runs through us a family affair
 It's all fruit in the big scheme of things
 Like black and white people can you see what I mean?
 A skeletal frame covered in muscle and skin
 How dare you differentiate it's a physical sin
 The separation is mental based on all you see
 If there's really any difference it's all inside of me
 My mind my perceptions influenced by you
 I struggle to see the difference in that which we do
 But certainly who we are proposes an argument there
 I beg to differ friend and who really cares?
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

The Difference between Black and White

The summer break had started and memories of the last day of school faded quickly with future thoughts of summer activities. We were going down south and that was usually a fun

experience. The long twelve hour drive was the only downside but the food and drinks packed with the passing scenery and sibling rivalries in the back seat made it all worth the time. The day before we were supposed to leave, TJ Barnett, a black boy in the house behind ours just before Holbrook road, invited me and my brother to a birthday party. I had never been to a birthday party before and looked forward to a new experience. There was no paper invitation to the party and we didn't even think to ask whose party it was.

“C'mon you guys, let's go to the party,” TJ urged us on.

We followed him three houses down across the street from ours. I was excited when I heard the kids in the backyard of the house we came upon. It was Billy Christian's house. He was a white boy who didn't play with the other black kids in the neighborhood. Evidence of this was the sea of white kids running around the backyard set up for a birthday party. Balloons, streamers, noise makers, and party hats on the guests who were all white. The only black, and now clearly uninvited guests, were us. We stood there observing the joyful occasion and the kids went on playing as if we didn't exist. I felt invisible like a ghost observing life after having passed onto death. TJ stood scanning the children running back and forth intensely like a caged animal searching for prey. Charles looked at me and shrugged his shoulders and I responded the same toward him. Uncomfortable doesn't quite describe the next feeling that came over me. TJ's eyes roamed back and forth like a lion watching a zebra heading to a waterhole. They finally locked in on a lanky looking pimple pale faced boy heading toward the punch bowl sitting on a table at the back of the fence. With his fist clinched, arms hanging down to the side, and his chest poked out, he marched over to the boy at the punch bowl.

“Hey Tommy! Hey call me a nigger now! Call me a nigger now,” TJ yelled garnering the attention of many of the kids playing.

Gasps and oohs came from some of the guests but the biggest gasp came from the boy at the punch bowl. TJ jumped on him punching him about the head and face. The guests started screaming and yelling and the back door of the house opened and Billy came out surprised when he recognized what was going on at his party.

“Who invited you niggers to my party?” He yelled at me and my brother.

Before I knew it I swung in his direction and heard a loud crack and with a sharp pain that shot through my hand. Billy had fallen to the ground crying. I had hit him in the mouth and stared at the rest of the guests who did nothing to help their friend. They looked afraid and stood like statues frozen with fear. The sound of the backdoor opening startled me and I quickly tugged Charles’s arm and took off running. I have no idea where TJ ran off to but Charles and I ran to the house and went straight to our bedroom.

Once there, we laughed about it but were afraid of being in trouble all the same. A short time later, the doorbell rang and the pit of my stomach felt greasy and crunchy at the same time. I knew it wasn’t good news. It felt like bad news. We sat on our beds sitting across from each other anticipating the call from the high pitch voice our mother possessed.

“Charles and Michael!” Get your butts in here right now,” she screeched!

We ran into the living room to find her standing at the front door with Billy and his father.

“What did you all do,” she asked?

We looked at Billy standing pitifully next to his father on the front porch. Billy’s father talked through the screen after a moment of silence from us.

“Don’t you dare stand there and act like you did nothing,” he said with great frustration in his voice.

Still silent we looked at each other.

“Show them your lip Billy,” his father commanded.

“See, see, see it there,” he whined through the bruised bottom lip.

“Well what do you have to say for yourselves,” my mother asked?

Charles shrugged his shoulders I suppose because he truly hadn't done anything. I wasn't angry at Billy for calling us niggers so I said, “Sorry. I didn't mean to hit you like that.”

I wasn't sorry but it was the only thing that made sense to say.

“Sir, I'll make sure their father deals with them when he gets home. I am very sorry this happened,” my mother apologized.

He accepted her apology for all it was worth and left. She looked at us and shook her head disappointed that we had gotten into trouble.

“Go to your room and get packed up and don't come out until I tell you to,” she said without the usual scolding tone.

Surprised that no whipping was coming or any threat of our father getting us when he came home, Charles and I went to our room still worried we were going to get a whipping. Sometimes they were delayed until our parents talked the situation over and then oh boy! We were a bit relieved when my sister came by the room and told us we could come out and eat.

“Those people are prejudice,” she said.

Her tone somewhat reassured us we wouldn't be in trouble when our father came home. When he did get home, my mother never mentioned the incident.

Poetic Discernment

The poem ‘No Difference’ was written in frustration at the fact that skin color made the difference in who we are to each other as humans. I stubbornly voiced the fact that indeed there

is no difference between us and we shouldn't really care about skin color. Deep down inside, after the incident I was terribly saddened by the fact that we were considered niggers as though it were something so different that it couldn't be invited to a white birthday party. I also recognized TJ's objective in the whole situation as well. He unwittingly subscribed to Hooks' (1992) notion that black people form collective bonds due to common struggles as a people. He saw my brother and I as black people in common with his own identity as black, which is why he asked to come to the party with him. After Billy's dad came to the house forcing an apology from us, I was relieved to put it into the 'over and done with' space in my life. It was clear at that point that some white people did not appreciate black people whether they were light or dark skinned. I cannot dismiss the mischief we had gotten into that day. It was wrong and certainly unwarranted however, based on Billy and his family moving sometime later that year, I gathered Dalmage's presumptions were correct. "The issue... was not about sameness... rather it was about the belief that blacks and whites are essentially different and that whites are inherently superior and more valuable" (Dalmage, 2003, p. 75). Looking back now, this is a hard fact to overlook.

The Gift of Brown

Where would we be without them?
 Long nights of restless bouts then
 Round and round into the daylight
 A burning struggle you cannot fight
 Each speckled spot internally enflamed
 Merged together brown all looking the same
 We were never black a belief imparted
 By those whose melanin never jump started
 Having no shades or degrees of brown
 They found a subtle way to bring us down
 Who is this they that made the sound?
 The they that are certainly lacking brown
 Brown skin from head to toe
 Brown shades from beginning to go

We are so engulfed in the color brown
 Even our dreams have a brown background
 And within the dreams the sun we thank
 Awakened in light the melanin it spans
 Creating an armor so solid and tough
 No evil will penetrate or begin to touch
 The soul encompassed within the brown
 That fortunately and gracefully came tumbling down
 As a gift in a form that has blessed so many
 Where without our brown form we would not be any
 (Michael G. Williams, 2015)

The Good Ole Mississippi Sun

Early the next morning, my dad loaded up the car. He didn't like leaving in the day time because he didn't want anyone to know we were gone. I always figured if anyone cared they would eventually notice we were gone.

“Did you ask Mr. Ross to watch the house while we're gone,” my mother asked him?

“Yeah, he seems like a pretty nice guy. Talks a little too much,” He said holding the steering wheel at the top with one hand while focusing on the road ahead.

“Huh, look who's talking,” my mother teased.

I was pretty sure they could keep an eye on the house while we were gone because they did a pretty good job watching us and the house while we were there. I slept off and on the entire trip and argued with my brother and sister between snacks and sleeping.

When we made it to my grandmother's, that familiar smell of wet cedar wood tickled my nostrils. My grandmother met us at the door welcoming us inside the shotgun house on Valley Street in Jackson, Mississippi. She had reddish-brown hair, a light complexion freckles all over her face. My mother looked like she had been spit out by her save the freckles. Grandma was a special lady because she always spoke her mind and didn't take a thing off of anybody.

“Come here and give ole Mae a hug,” she said arms stretched wide.

I ran up to her and jumped into her arms.

“Oh that’s my baby. Now you can get some Mississippi sun on your skin,” she whispered in my ear.

I paused momentarily and looked befuddled at her saying.

“Ya mama told me bout the kids picking on you at school. We’ll talk. Ole Mae got you now,” she said reaching for Lynn and Charles.

I didn’t know my mother was aware that anything was going on at school because I never said anything about it to her and she never mentioned it to me. It felt weird that she knew and I really didn’t know what there was to talk about but Grandma Mae would have her talk at some point before we left. We unpacked and got settled in and my sister’s friend Michelle came by.

“Hey Lynn, missed you,” she said like her best friend had returned.

“Take it outside rug rats!” My Uncle Carter would yell storming in from the backdoor.

“You don’t pay no bills in this house,” Grandma Mae got Carter in check.

He greeted my mother and father as we exited to the porch. Michelle had on a yellow sundress. She had a golden brown complexion most likely from the good ole Mississippi sun. I longed to be her color. It was almost tantalizing as I stared at her skin real hard from her arms, down her legs to her sandal covered toes. Almost hypnotized, I didn’t realize my brother and sister were staring at me.

“What’s the matter, you got eyeball fever?” My sister asked annoyed that I was staring so intensely.

“I, I, I wasn’t...” I stuttered then lost my train of thought.

“He know pretty when he see it,” Michelle said twirling around a couple of times making her dress fan out.

I stared even harder for reasons a young boy my age would under the circumstances. Charles punched me in the arm.

“Stare much?” He asked laughing.

I shoved his head and he shoved me back even harder.

“You guys need to go somewhere and leave us alone,” Lynn insisted.

We did. We strolled down to the Dairy Bar. It was a good block and a half away from my grandmother’s house. Sometimes she would tell us to go and get her some cigarettes and co-cola. The owner, Mr. Smiddy, would give to us because he knew Grandma Mae and he knew we would get the cigarettes and coke right to her. All sorts of activity surrounded the Dairy Bar; teenage boys running in and out, young men shooting dice, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. The smell of musty old men with oil in their clothes from working on cars mixed with the beer and cigarettes was very distinct and sometimes overwhelming. A dark skinned old man with rages for clothes, tattered and torn, caught my attention as Charles and I stood in front of the Dairy Bar. He had dusty gray looking hair with a beard to match and carried a brown wooden cane that was broken on the tip end. He talked to himself out loud about bills and loving God because the day was coming. He’d look up and shake his head then point his cane in our directions.

“He coming I say our father art in heaven.”

I was amused, watching the old man’s mannerisms and demeanor go in and out of reality. The look in his eyes was peaceful and didn’t equal the fire and passion in his voice. I

suppose that's what made him so interesting to me. Charles didn't seem to care one way or the other and focused on other things going on around us.

"The bills is okay but God is good. Holy is thy name," the old man preached.

I caught a glimpse of a twinkle in his eye when I heard something sound like a hand clap and a sharp streak of light shot through the front of my eyeballs. The back of my neck was stinging and tears flooded my eyes uncontrollably. I caught sight of a boy running past me out of the corner of my eye. The old man jabbed him in the center of his chest, flipped his cane over, hook side down and swiped the boy's foot out from under him. He rapped him a few times with his cane producing loud yelps from the boy who I recognized as Kenyatta. He was a tall dark skinned boy who usually had on dark blue cut off shorts with no shoes or shirt on with a small unkempt afro. He was fourteen or fifteen years old I guessed but was immature for his age. The old man ceased his whipping.

"God don't like ugly boy," he stood over Kenyatta chastising him about hitting me the way he did.

"Gon home little man. He won't bother you no mo," the old man said as I continued to rub my neck.

I motioned to Charles to leave. That was not the last time I would see Kenyatta on our summer vacation. He was actually cousins with James, Jeffrey, and Pookey. They lived three houses down from my grandmother in the same style shotgun house. When we got close to their house, Jeffrey was standing on the porch drinking some Jitney Jungle fruit punch. He motioned to me and Charles to come up onto the porch.

"When yawl get heya," he asked?

"Today," I answered peeking into the screen door of their house.

“Where’s James and Pookey,” Charles asked?

“Come own, they in da back,” he said leading us around the side of the house and into the backyard.

There was a lot of vegetation and plenty of bushes and trees. There was also a stream that ran behind all of the houses on Valley Street but we called it a ditch. The sounds from crickets, frogs, and locusts filled the air as the afternoon turned toward evening. James and Pookey were laying prone at the edge of the ditch watching some men across the way on the other side of the ditch. They all seemed pretty normal except for one man who was rumored to be taking growth hormones attempting to grow breasts. He was bright complexioned like me and if you looked close enough his chest did look like a woman’s chest. He had relaxed his hair and walked around fanning himself with one hand and the other resting on his hip.

“Child I am gon get drunk tonight cause it’s my birfday honey,” he could be heard talking to the other men around him.

His voice was high pitched and had a feminine tone and rhythm. James and Pookey saw us coming and motioned for us to get down by the edge of the ditch so we couldn’t be seen by the men across the street.

“Mayne when yawl get heya,” James asked?

“Today,” Charles and I both said at the same time.

Pookey laughed then put his fingers to his lips, “Shh, shh he turnin round again,” he said pulling a pellet rifle out from under himself.

“Michael, we gotta shoot yo daddy,” James joked and they all laughed.

I didn’t find it amusing.

“He’ not my daddy!” I replied sternly just above a whisper.

“Don’t get mad cause you like it in da butt,” James said stifling a snickered giggle.

“Yah crazy. I ain’t like that man,” I almost shouted but caught myself.

“Shh, shh, he gon hear you den get yo booty tonight,” Jeffrey said laughing in a whisper.

“Shut up fool,” I replied emphatically.

Pookey pulled the trigger on the rifle after briefly aiming it across the street in the men’s direction and a slight cracking sound was made followed by a few leaves kicking up just across the street in front of the men.

“Gimme dat thang. You gotta aim higher,” James said taking the rifle from him.

“Honey I can celebrate till da sun come up twice. You own know me,” the light skinned man said laughing hysterically.

James aimed the rifle carefully trying to keep it steady while keeping his head low. The same cracking sound repeated and a pellet hit the side of the shed the men were standing next to. All the men got quiet looking around but in the opposite direction from us. James fired again hitting the shed once again.

“Who shootin dem damn BBs at me?” he yelled in a deep manly voice.

The flamboyant high pitch voice light skinned man had transformed into a full-fledged man right before our eyes and it sent a chill down my spine. We were frozen with fear and laid motionless at the edge of the ditch hoping they didn’t see us. I guess my brother Charles couldn’t take it anymore and he scrambled to his feet and ran back toward the front of their house. Pookey, James, and Jeffrey followed quickly thereafter. I was stuck from the position I was in at the edge of the ditch. Fear held me in place like super glue. As I sat alone watching the men scan the area where my brother and the others had run from, I noticed the rifle lying about a foot away from me. James had left it when he took off running.

“Hey lil boy,” the light skinned man spotted me.

I stood up slowly. I was caught.

“It wasn’t me,” I said shaking.

“Oh and that ain’t yo pellet gun either,” he said pointing toward the pellet gun on the ground.

I turned to run and ran into two others that were across the street with him. To this day, I have no idea how they got on the other side without crossing the ditch. One of them picked up the pellet rifle and pointed the butt end at me.

“You like shootin’ at black men boy?” He asked with a slight grin on his face.

“It wasn’t me,” I repeated.

“Oh it was you. I saw you,” he said poking me with the butt of the gun.

The light skinned man grabbed me from behind.

“So this the lil yellow niggah that was shootin at me huh?” He asked the other two.

They both nodded yes. He spun me around and dropped to his knee to get on my level.

“Look lil man, don’t you know you can put somebody’s eye out with that thang?” He asked pointing at the pellet gun the other man was holding.

“Us black folk gotta stick together you hear me,” he said?

“You black,” I asked?

“Hell yeah, we all black and that’s why we gots to stick together,” he told me like he was confiding in me, like it was some big secret.

“So people don’t make fun of you cause you’re light?” I was curious.

“Nah they make fun of me cause I’m the queen of Jackson Miss. Now take yo lil but home and say yo prayers,” he directed me laughing with the other two.

“Eh and I’m keeping da gun ya heard me?” The other man said.

“Cuhmo yall. I got a birthday to celebrate,” the light skinned man said now speaking with his flamboyant high pitch voice once again.

I watched them walk toward the front of James, Jeffrey, and Pookey’s house then make a right toward the Dairy Bar. I looked to my left to see Charles, James, Jeffrey, and Pookey standing on the porch of the house next door to my grandmothers’ house. It was abandoned and we would play around it sometimes. They were laughing and pointing in my direction.

“Shut up! You guys left me back there,” I said angrily but relieved at how things had turned out. It was getting close to dark and the street lights were making that buzzing sound which meant they would be on shortly.

“Ooh, we better go,” James said noticing the buzzing sound.

“Yeah, smiddy gon tear into us if we late again,” Pookey said agreeing with James. Smiddy was their stepfather and he didn’t play. Jeffrey still had marks on his arms and legs from the last beating he received with an extension cord from Smiddy. He was a gray haired green eyed, light skinned old man while James, Jeffrey, and Pookey were all dark skinned. Their mother has passed away when they were real young and Smiddy was raising them with his mother, a very elderly lady. I felt bad for them sometimes because they seemed sad a lot. I liked hanging around with them even though they joked a lot and made fun of me but it wasn’t the same fun poking as I experienced in Chicago. It was almost as if they were placating their own troubles in life growing up.

Poetic Discernment

The poem ‘The Gift of Brown’ is a tribute to my multiracial identity. It also expresses the fact that I can’t get rid of who I am so I am thankful for being blessed with melanin in my

skin. When being address by the light skinned gay man, his response to being black and reminding me that we must all stick together brought me to Root's notion of what it means to be black "When Americans want to know what it means to be a black or a Jew, they often expect a definition of racial or ethnic identity from the standpoint of the person who has it" (Root, 1996, p. 141). In this case, our common phenotype and his assurance that we were black solidified in my mind that I was black and it was okay.

Broken Chatter

Black on the outside white on the inside
 I'd rather play opossum and merely hide
 I'm not what you see nor what you say
 No different than two rabbits green and gray
 I walk on two legs right or wrong
 That still doesn't stop us from getting along
 Or does it stop you with your broken chatter
 A shift in your thinking and it wouldn't matter
 That broken chatter is the difference you see
 Torn between black and white presumably you and me
 I couldn't care less cause it really doesn't matter
 All this talk about race sounds like broken chatter
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Dead Cotton Mouth or Rattler: What's the Difference?

Later the next afternoon, we left my grandmother in Jackson and headed to Bolton, Mississippi about 30 minutes away to see my great grandmother, Edna Mae. She was a heavysset biracial woman who loved to drink Budweiser beer and go barefooted. She had eyes like a cat, hazel in color and brown hair pulled straight back into a ponytail. As we came across a set of railroad tracks, I could see the Café where everyone in the small town of Bolton went on Friday and Saturday nights for dancing, drinking, and smoking. A quick right turn and about five houses down the street on the left sat her big old white plantation looking house. It had an old spigot pump in the front yard that still pumped fresh well water and a lawn jockey holding a

lantern with a green ribbon around its arm. We pulled into the front yard area as there was no discernible driveway and Grandma Edna was standing on the porch waving. We piled out of the car and I ran to her open arms waiting to receive me.

“Hey yawl! Hey my sugah. How’s my boy?” She asked hugging me tightly.

“Good grandma,” I replied under her smothering hug.

After everyone hugged and said hello, she pointed next door at two little white kids, a girl and a boy. Both had wavy brown hair and brown eyes also barefooted like my grandma and were running back and forth on the large porch, playing with each other.

“Those are your cousins. Gwan ova and play wit ‘em. They love family,” Grandma told us.

“But they’re white,” my sister blurted out!

“Lynn!” My mother called her name in a scolding tone.

“It’s alright Suzy. Ya grandmammy is white too. Ma daddy is white and all his folks is white...” she told us.

We listened somewhat surprised to actually hear it but mama had told us as much before we came down anyway. Grandma Edna was always black in my eyes like my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Soy until mama cleared that up. And now, Grandma Edna was solidifying mama’s clarification in person.

“So Edna, who are they,” my mother asked?

“They ya cousins now don’t go asking lotta questions and what not. Ain’t Carey know better than I do and she ain’t gon say nothing,” Grandma warned.

That warning meant just accept what she said and don’t question it, and we didn’t.

“Gon and play nah. It’s good to have family no matter what dey color,” she commanded.

We ran over to play with them because that was more fun than trying to figure out how they were related to us. My siblings and I approached them cautiously at first but they were excited to see us as if they were expecting us.

“Hey yawl, I’m Kurt and this is ma sister Dina,” the boy introduced himself and his sister.

Their ages appeared to be n between myself and my sister who is four years older than me. We took to each other like fish to water with the knowledge that we were cousins. We talked and laughed and ran back and forth on the large porch as we had seen them doing when we first arrived. Kurt stopped playing and looked toward the back of the house as though the most fantastic idea ever had come across his mind.

“Hey, you wanna see something I found in the back,” Kurt asked?

“No! cumho Lynn. He lookin’ at snakes.” Dina shouted pulling Lynn inside the house.

I got excited because I wrote about snakes in Ms. Prunnell’s class after reading a book on King Snakes. I read about all kinds of snakes and was fascinated by the pictures but I had never seen a real live one before.

Charles and I followed Kurt toward the back of the house and stepped gingerly through the grass as it got higher. A strong smell of cucumbers and water melon overwhelmed me as we went further into the backyard. Charles turned around and ran back after realizing he didn’t want to see a snake. A little further back, a small brook running behind the houses could be seen. A pile of old chopped wood sat near the edge of the brook and Kurt approached it slowly. I was a few steps behind with my heart racing super fast.

“There it is,” he said pointing at a long black snake sitting at the base of the woodpile. I inched closer to get a better look.

“Mike that’s a genuine black rattler there,” he said poking at it with a stick.

It was dead but I didn’t observe any rattles near its tail.

“I don’t think it’s a rattle snake,” I said still cautiously observing it.

Kurt poked at it some more.

“Well sure it is. Just look at it. It’s got to be a rattler,” Kurt insisted.

“But it has no rattle on the tail, see,” I pointed out to him by lifting the back end up with another stick.

“Sometimes the rattle falls off...”

Kurt wanted it to be a rattle snake but it wasn’t. It was a cotton mouth snake that probably came from the brook. I told him so but he kept on insisting it was a rattle snake. We argued back and forth about it until my brother returned with Grandma Edna.

“Hot damn, a dead Cotton Mouth. Yawl leave it alone, might wake up and bite cha.” She said laughing.

“It’s dead grandma,” I told her.

“It’s a rattler ain’t it cousin?” He asked pleadingly because for some reason he wanted it to be a rattle snake.

“Look like a Cotton Mouth Moccasin to me baby but I know how to know fa sho,” she said grabbing it just below its head. She squeezed it forcing its mouth open.

“Ah yeah, she’s a cotton mouth; white all in ‘er mouth,” she said observing it closely.

“Wow, black on the outside and white on the inside,” Kurt said in amazement.

“See, I told you it wasn’t a rattle snake!” I rubbed the fact that he was wrong in his face.

“Cotton Mouth, Rattle Snake, what’s the difference, it’s dead ain’t it? Grandma Edna asked tossing it to the side over into the brook.

“You boys find something else better to get into. Snakes are dangerous,” she warned us.

We took off running and found other things to get into besides snakes like the hundreds of cats grandma had running around the house. Kurt taught me and Charles no matter how high you threw them up in the air they always landed on their feet. No one seemed to care that we were playing with each other and with the town being so small I suppose everyone knew we were related.

Poetic Discernment

In writing the poem ‘Broken Chatter’ I wanted to express how race didn’t matter to me then as it doesn’t really matter to me much now. I see us all as humans who are identified through a racial paradigm which keeps us separated (Root, 1992, Zack, 1995). Discovering we had white cousins was a pleasant surprise even though my mother had mentioned we were part Italian. My Grandma Edna talked only briefly about our Italian family and she spoke as though it were a secret not to be spoken about above a whisper. When Broyard wanted to know her father, when he was sick he would tell them they didn’t really want to know him because they didn’t read his work (Broyard, 2007). I didn’t have any writings from my grandfather or any family members for that matter. I only had the word of Grandma Edna who was emphatic about not even asking my Auntie Carey because she certainly knew our family history but would never talk about it. “I read your writing, Dad... And you wrote that the most important thing for a dying man is to be understood... But how can I understand you without knowing where you came from” (Broyard, 2007, p. 12)? The feeling was mutual as my grandmother passed when I was 15 never giving us any information about our Italian heritage other than the fact that we were part Italian.

Un-Caged Flame

I'm trying to stay sane inside my brain
 Negative emotions going up in flames
 From inside to outside I want you to see
 The results of negative emotions affecting me
 Like pressure to a pipe its broken wide open
 And relief for my soul I'm steadily hoping
 But nothing averts emotions that won't change
 So subconsciously I rise with an un-caged flame
 The fire it burns and smolders away
 New emotions created for another day
 But my sanity can't suffer under emotional pain
 And I certainly can't relieve it with an un-caged flame
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Negative Emotions Up in Flames

The whole time in Mississippi was fun with its steamy hot sun that tanned my light skin to a temporary golden brown. We visited relatives, rode my uncles horse, shucked peas and husked corn, went fishing with my Grandmother, Almary, who was full blooded Choctaw Indian. We even got to feed chickens on Aunt Ollie Mae's farm. I knew we were coming to the end of our trip and that meant Grandma Mae would have her talk with me. I was hoping she would forget but the old woman had a memory like an elephant. Whenever we played the game concentration, she would always win and that was quite impressive to a soon to be third grader. As we packed our clothes up for the long ride back to Illinois, I could see my mother talking with Grandma Mae and she was nodding her head in that expectant way as if she'd gotten enough information but my mother was still talking. Grandma mae finally put her hand up.

"Michael!" She called to me and I came hesitantly running.

"Baby your grandmother wants to talk to you before we leave in the morning," my mother told me as if I didn't hear her call my name.

“Cuhmo to the back poach and listen to ole Mae,” she said heading toward the back of the shotgun house.

I followed and my mother went back to the living room with everyone else so it was just me and Grandma Mae. It was dark out back as the porch light had blown and no one replaced it. We talked for what seemed like an hour amongst the sounds of the crickets, locusts, and frogs; fireflies appearing and disappearing and swatting mosquitoes every now and then.

“Now ole Mae know you had some problems at school cause ya color lighter than most. That’s you, a beautiful black boy and don’t you let nobody tell you no different. People gon say what they wanna but it don’t change who you are,” she told me sounding like it had been weighing heavy on her mind.

“But mama says we got White and Indian and Puerto Rican in us too,” I told her. She looked up at the stars and sighed.

“Baby ole Mae don’t know much but what I do know is you got a lot in yo blood; White, Indian whatever but it all comes back to black...,” I cut her off in mid-sentence.

“Even when...”

She cut me off, “Even when other folk say it ain’t so and don’t step on my lips no mo,” she said making her point clear.

I stared at the sky as well and she rubbed the back of my head.

“Lil boy, you have to understand people say mean thangs bout cha cause they wanna feel better bout themselves. You gon talk about people too, you watch what ole Mae tell you,” she said laughing.

I laughed too because I knew it was true.

“Granma Mae, remember when I was a baby and you used to come home from work and fix rice and butter,” I asked?

She nodded reminiscing a few years back.

“Can you fix me some rice and butter,” I asked?

“That’s the Chinese in you. You know they eat a lot of rice,” She said laughing.

“Wow, I have Chinese in me too?” I asked excitedly.

“Nawl boy, Ole Mae just teasing; if you do I don’t know where it come from,” she said laughing some more.

I was a little disappointed I wasn’t Chinese. That would have been cool. We got up to go inside.

“One pot of rice and butter coming up for ma grandboy,” she said laughing even harder.

“Suzy ain’t nothing wrong with this boy. He won’t some rice and butter,” she yelled to the front room.

After enjoying something as simple as a pot of rice and butter that night, I went to bed thinking about all that Grandma Mae had told me, wondering if I would remember it all. Charles and Lynn were sound asleep as the light from the small black and white television set flickered through the room. I couldn’t sleep and found myself sitting up in bed listening to the adults on the front porch talking. Only the lamp next to my grandmother’s bed was on and all else was dark in the living room. It was around midnight I suppose as I peered at the small round alarm clock through the flickering shadows of light made by the television. I thought about Chicago and Green Elementary and all I had experienced there and I thought about what Grandma Mae had told me.

“You gots to fight with all yo might and strength or give in with the same,” she advised me.

I wanted to fight but was afraid and the thought made me angry. I saw a lighter on a milk crate used as a small table in the middle room where we were sleeping. It was a ceramic lighter that sat in the middle of a ceramic ashtray. I took it and flicked it on and off a couple of times then went to the corner of the room where a stack of old newspapers sat behind the door of the middle room. I tore a small corner of newspaper and lit it with the lighter and watched it go quickly up in flames as a moth to a flame burned by the fire. In my mind, I was burning those who had beat on me and talked about me and it felt good to see the pieces of newspaper go up in flames. It seemed like a good idea at the time but things got out of hand as they sometimes do playing with fire. The small pieces eventually graduated to bigger pieces and therein lies my mistake. Like a ritual sacrifice, I burned too large a piece that represented the mobs of kids who kicked and punched me while I was down on all fours in the cold snow waiting for Mr. Wilson’s whistle to blow to break up the names I was called like Casper, Nana short for banana, and white boy, while down absorbing those blows. I heard the sound of the blaze brush quickly through the air sending a bright flash through the house. It scared me so badly when the newspaper caught fires that I jumped back hitting my head on the iron rail of the bed frame knocking myself out cold. I wasn’t out for long because when I came to I was still holding the lighter in my hand and my mother was yelling at me as though she didn’t realize I had been knocked out.

“Suzy, he aint’ heard nothin you sayin’. That boy was knocked out cold. Look at his eyes,” Uncle Carter said pointing at my face.

She continued yelling and I'm not sure exactly what she was saying but I was sure it was about the last thing I remembered which was the huge blaze that shot through the house. My head was throbbing and a knot had developed where I hit it on the iron bed rail. Everything was a blur at that point. I remember my mother spanking me with a hair brush and watching blank stares on Charles and Lynn's faces. To this day, I have no idea what possessed me to nearly burn my grandmother's house down. I slept good that night and early the next morning we made the long drive back to Illinois. No one ever mentioned the newspaper burning incident again.

Upon returning home, I had the luxury of going next door to the Ross' to retrieve our mail. Johnny opened the door and handed me a nicely bundled packet of mail.

"Where did you guys go," he asked?

"Mississippi," I replied keeping it short.

"You got a sun tan down there." He said laughing through his wired braces and spaghetti sauce stained mouth.

"I guess I did. My dad says to tell your dad thanks for watching the house."

I passed the good sentiments of my father along.

"Okay. Hey, you want to shoot hoops later? I have a goal in my backyard," he said.

I could learn to like this guy. Basketball was my favorite.

"Sure! That'll be cool." I said trying to contain my enthusiasm.

What I remember about the Ross' the most was that we interacted well with Johnny and his father but Jenny and her mother were very standoffish at times. As I recalled details about our interactions I realized I did not know the mother's name. I called my brother and he didn't know it so I called my sisters and they didn't know it either. When I called my mother she

called out her name and told me the reason I probably didn't remember her name was because she was a bigot. She had as little to do with us as possible. It was very strange to live next door to white people where half of the family accepted you and the other half didn't. At times I wanted to lump them all together in the racist closet, but the interactions with Johnny and his father made that a difficult contradiction of lived experience for me.

Within the confines of the bundled mail were the school assignments for the upcoming school year. With the summer nearly gone, everyone was looking forward to who they would have for a teacher in the new school year. I saw my name on an envelope as my mother shuffled through the mail.

"Who I get ma? Open it," I said wondering who my third grade teacher would be. All I knew is I didn't want Ms. Hatcher. She was rumored to be prejudice and didn't like black kids. That would be some terrible luck. My mother saw how excited I was and teased me by opening Charles and Lynn's letters first. They weren't too excited because they didn't know who the teachers were and heard no rumors about any of them. Charles munched on a baloney sandwich freshly made from the kitchen and shrugged his shoulders when my mother told him the name of his new teacher. Lynn's reaction was almost identical save the shoulder shrug.

"Ma! Open mine, open mine," I pleaded!

She took her time and slowly tore the envelope open. When she read the teacher's name, my mouth dropped open in horror.

"Your third grade teacher is..." she made a drum roll sound with her tongue.

"Miss Prunnell?" She was surprised too.

"Mom? I flunked? But how?" I wanted to cry.

“Hold on there’s a letter in yours. She scanned the letter as knots developed in my stomach. Back in those days, it was an absolute disgrace to get held back a grade. I searched my brain for what I could’ve done wrong but couldn’t think of a thing. I thought I was doing well. At least that’s what Miss Prunnell told my mother at the parent teacher conference meeting earlier in the school year.

“Son, you’re in the third grade,” my mother said slow and deliberately.

Apparently because of the influx of children coming into the school district, Miss Prunnell had to teach second and third grade combined. That was sort of a relief but I still worried about what others would say when they found out I was in a class with second graders. I put it in the back of my mind and went into the bathroom. I marveled at my suntan and wished it would stay but as the fall and winter seasons set in, I peeled like a reptile and soon donned my very light complexion once again.

Poetic Discernment

An ‘Un-Caged Flame’ was a poem indicative of a physical reaction paralleling growth. After speaking with my grandmother, I felt a lot of emotions inside that night and I wanted to burn them up sending them away with the pieces of newspaper that dissolved in the flames. That was not my rationale at the time but presently it stood as a symbol of my emotional release. As I relived that moment through writing this story I felt a burning feeling singe my inner-being because all I had dealt with up to that point racially was hurtful. In my reflection of this story I have come to realize that the transcendence of race is not what we should be attempting to gain. We should be attempting to “transcend the biased meanings associated with race” (Dalmage, 2003, p. 15). Burning those pieces of newspaper was my unconscious attempt

at transcending those biased meanings associated with race. Those biases that were often directed toward me were what I desired to rid myself of at such a young age.

Best Friends

Like that older brother or cousin that was there
 You helped me through tough times I deemed unfair
 Since the third grade on to this very day
 You were there for me in a lot of ways
 From the rough beat downs in the public schools
 To the encouraging prep talks the mental tools
 A God send you made me see
 That there was so much more to me
 You picked up pieces small and broken
 So I offer this poem a small token
 Of my appreciation for enduing with me then
 For being there for me for being my best friend
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

That's My Best Friend

One cold winter morning, I rushed out of the house late and ran almost the whole way to school. I knew I should've worn my ski cap because my forehead felt like someone was raking razors across my forehead and had snapped clothes pins on my ears. When I got to the school, all the kids were still running around waiting for the bell to sound so they could line up on the black top to go in with their class. I spotted a new kid standing by himself. He was brown skinned and had a large forehead like mine; maybe even bigger than mine. He had a husky build and a sad look in his eyes. I approached him cautiously because he looked confused and somewhat stressed in his new surroundings.

"Hey, what's your name," I asked?

He looked at me and sounded relieved as he responded.

"Payton." His voice was light and friendly sounding so I engaged him more.

"Does Payton have a last name?" I asked hearing Brooke Dawson's voice in my head.

"Washington," he chuckled.

“I’m Mike, Mike Williams.”

I introduced myself extending my mitten covered hand to him and he shook it with a grip that indicated to me someone has taught him how to shake hands. We talked back and forth exchanging differences from the inner city schools we had come from and the suburban school we were currently attending. He had come from Dogwood in Chicago and was expecting to have to fight once he got to the suburbs because that’s what he had to do there. Older kids picked on him about his large forehead.

“Yeah, when I saw you coming, your forehead was as large as mine so I knew you couldn’t talk smack to me,” he laughed.

I laughed too because it made perfect sense to me. I told him about the Timber Towns and how fun they were and turned to run toward them when Bodie seemingly appeared out of nowhere and shoved me to the ground.

“Where’s your hat nappy headed white boy?” He yelled kicking and punching me in the head while I was down.

I covered up trying to figure out what I had done to deserve Bodie’s undivided attention on that cold morning. Then something strange happened.

“Hey, that’s my best friend! Leave him alone!”

Payton’s voice cut through the air with vengeance and rage in it and Bodie’s licks immediately stopped. Payton walked toward him and Bodie put his hands up in don’t shoot fashion.

“It’s cool big man. I was just teasing,” he said backing up slowly then taking off running.

The bell sounded and everyone rushed to get in line where their teachers stood. Ms. Prunnell was the third line from the door and longer than everyone else's line. Payton got in the back of Ms. Prunnell's line and faced the front without looking at me. He held his head up toward the sky and I didn't know why at first. I got in line behind him. I was last in line. I heard a sniffle coming from Payton and not a sniffle produced from the frigid weather. He was crying. I tapped him on the shoulder,

“Why are you crying,” I asked?

I genuinely wanted to know because it was me who should have been crying. After all, I was the one who had gotten beaten up. He turned slowly exposing the tears streaming down his face with his eyebrows frowned.

“Feeling sorry for your dumb butt,” he replied.

He answered with prided trying to cover the fact that he was crying at all but truth was truth. It was the start of a friendship that has lasted me to this very day in my life. Our birthdays are one day apart and we have never missed a year acknowledging each other on our birthdays. It was cool having him in class that third grade year and Bodie never bullied me after that even when Payton wasn't around. The teasing continued from others but isn't that what kids do?

Poetic Discernment

Best Friends is a poem that I connect to my ability to create relationships that stand strong without there being a racial factor involved. Payton is my friend to this very day and I'll never forget the friendship and support he provided when we were growing up. In my thoughts about race then and now, I desire to build relationships that have nothing to do with race beyond the simple mentioning of how one may identify themselves. I ascribe to Maalouf's (2012) notion that “I haven't got several identities: I've just got one, made up of many components in a

mixture that is unique to me, just as other people's identity is unique to them as individuals" (p. 2). Payton was a unique individual and he recognized my uniqueness as an individual, which is how relationships should be built upon in our society.

Exit Strategy

This is my exit strategy
 So please don't be mad at me
 Survival resides only with loyalty
 So I treat myself as honored royalty
 You don't know me so don't even try
 I may double cross you an unintended lie
 Covering myself like the bone does the marrow
 To avert your criticisms your stinging arrows
 Then without a word and nothing to say
 Like a snake down a hole I slither away
 You can't understand and want to be mad at me
 But it's simple my friend it's my exit strategy
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Puerto Rican and Fear Do Not Equal Loyalty

By the spring of third grade, I found myself in a predicament that bothered me deeply. I knew I was part Puerto Rican but to what degree I did not. My mother spoke little Spanish and I spoke even less. All I knew was the family name on my mother's father's side was Munoz when it came to the Puerto Rican in our family. With this small bit of knowledge, I befriended Adrian Munoz who was Puerto Rican. I shared my small Puerto Rican background with him and we hit it off instantly. My circle of friends was diverse as I played with White, Black, Asian, Indian and now Puerto Rican kids at random. I didn't care or at least I wasn't concerned about race. I didn't pay much attention to it until TJ Barnett and Trammell Gray, two black boys, jumped Adrian after school one day. Adrian told his father who complained to the school that his son was being bullied by black kids. This only inflamed the situation and they began to pick on him even more. I wanted to distance myself from him but he didn't have a lot of friends and always

looked sad to me so I continued to play with him. After school one day, I saw Adrian and he called out to me.

“Mike,” he called!

He was on the side of the school standing by himself from what I could initially tell. I walked over to him.

“What’s up man,” I asked?

“Hey Mike, will you walk home with me?” He asked out of breath with a wild stare in his eyes.

I had seen that look in myself before. He had been running from TJ Barnett and Trammell Gray. In reality, I believe we both could’ve taken them in a fight but the backlash would come from TJ’s three older brothers and Trammell’s five older brothers, which always happened when anybody stood up to them.

“Yeah, C’mon,” I said. We started walking down the side of the school building when TJ and Trammell came around the corner.

“There he is,” Trammell shouted!

TJ ran up and pushed him into the side of the building while Trammell egged him on. I was headed toward TJ in an attempt to pull him off of Adrian when a hand grabbed my shoulder pulling me back. It was Mr. Munoz, Adrian’s father. I saw the look in his eyes as he moved past me toward TJ.

“Get your damn hands off my son,” he yelled!

Trammell and I backed up watching the situation unfold. Mr. Munoz raised his opened hand as if he was going to strike TJ and TJ turned his face toward the brick ledge. Adrian got to

his feet and left with his father after telling me he would see me later. When TJ turned around, Trammell and I observed a small cut under his eye with a slight abrasion around the cheekbone.

“Man that was messed up,” Trammell told us staring at TJ’s eye.

“I thought he was going to smack fire from you,” Trammell continued.

“He did hit me. He punched me didn’t he,” TJ cried?

Trammell looked at me and shrugged his shoulders.

“Michael, you saw him punch me didn’t you?”

He was almost pleading with me as I peered closer into his eyes.

“Yeah, I guess he did,” was my response and I have no idea why. I only knew I didn’t want to be on their bad sides.

“Well, it looks like he did. Look at your eye man,” Trammell said alarming TJ about the severity of his wound.

We headed home and TJ quarterbacked our story about how Mr. Munoz had punched him in the eye. I thought that was the end of it but about a week later, TJ’s mother knocked on our door and explained to my mother that they were suing Mr. Munoz for punching TJ in the eye. She wanted me to testify in court as a character witness against Mr. Munoz. My heart sank because I knew he hadn’t hit TJ but that was the story his mother got and we were going to court because my mother offered me up like a sacrificial lamb.

“That’s fine with me. Michael will help anyway he can especially if he knows what happened,” She told TJ’s mother.

Poetic Discernment

This story illustrates my failed attempt at ‘situational ethnicity’ (Root, 1992). While I befriended Adrian citing that I was part Puerto Rican I also betrayed him siding with the black

kids who wanted to lie on his father. In order to keep from getting beaten up myself, I switched allegiance and followed the collective bonds of black folks due to a common struggle (Hooks, 1992). My situational ethnicity beamed with blackness in the eyes of TJ and Trammel. It was my way of fitting in and protecting myself from the stress of not being accepted among blacks (Root, 1992). The poem ‘Exit Strategy’ is my shameful cry describing myself as an untrusting person. It expresses my desire to leave everyone alone so I don’t have to choose sides. Choosing sides became a stressful agonizing moment where peer pressure overrode my sense of what was truly appropriate.

A Future Desire

I made a mistake so sad so sad
 Deep down in my heart it made me feel bad
 Destined to live through the impact it made
 Given a second chance I surely would’ve stayed
 In your corner by your side
 That awful choosing caused the lies
 Selfish I was protecting my own skin
 Forgetting my blood forgetting my kin
 No excuses about being too young
 But my inner feelings have never been sung
 In a song that’s sung clear and so well
 Know I can never ever un-ring that bell
 So please forgive me you know not I ask
 To rise above these feelings a difficult task
 Like a nightmare in reverse where negativity’s dispersed
 And a dream is cured of an awful curse
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

One Way or another You’re a Sellout

Testifying in court was exciting and scary all at the same time. I think the scary part was the lie that was being told as the lawyer for Mr. Munoz questioned me about the exact way he had allegedly punched TJ.

“Was it a closed fist or open hand,” the lawyer asked?

“Closed fist,” I replied.

I knew in my gut a closed fist would have done far more damage than TJ’s scratch under his eye.

“Was his fist half way back like this or all the way back like this?” He asked demonstrating each approach to the blow that had allegedly hit TJ.

“Uhm, like this,” I said showing my fist drawn all the way back.

We were all questioned separately so no others could hear what we were testifying to and this made TJ and Trammell suspicious of me, of what I said on the stand. At the conclusion of the case, TJ’s mother took us to McDonald’s and told us how we were going to get a lot of money. When the verdict came back, no one got paid a dime. If anything, TJ’s mother lost money on court fees and paying their lawyer. She was upset about it and took it out on TJ by beating him with a belt buckle right in front of us. When I got home, I told my mother and father how it went in court and confessed that Mr. Munoz didn’t hit TJ. They warned me to always tell the truth even if it meant losing friends. They also stressed how serious a situation like that was and how I could have ruined Mr. Munoz’s life. I felt terrible. A little later that day, I pulled my bike out of the garage and turned it upside down to try and fix the chain on the large sprocket. TJ, Trammell and a couple of other boys from the neighborhood approached me. Apparently, I was the reason they lost the trial. The nappy headed white boy sold out his race and told the truth on the stand.

“What’s up sellout,” TJ yelled!

“What’s going on man?” I asked not knowing what was going on initially.

“Yo white ass sold us out. You know that man hit TJ in the eye and you told the judge he didn’t,” Trammell said posturing for a fight.

Now I wasn't crazy. We all lied. They lied because they didn't like Adrian Munoz and thought they could get a lot of money by suing. I lied to avoid the very situation I was being faced with now. I knew if Mr. Munoz had hit TJ in the eye it would've swollen up like a baseball. I knew because Al Williams hit me in the face for kicks one day to show everybody I could turn black. I did turn black, blue and green on my right cheekbone for about three weeks. Eventually, it faded back to my light complexion. TJ walked up to me with his chest out and Trammell was right on his heels. I was going to have to fight. The front door opened as I stood my ground and my father came out of the house yelling,

“What's the bullshit? Huh?” He asked with his arms out.

TJ and Trammell stopped dead in their tracks, spooked by the tone in my father's voice. The sight of his wingspan alone was enough to make you buckle at the knees.

“You want to fight my son and he just testified for you. Go on home with that silliness or you're gona have a problem with me and you can tell yo mama, yo daddy and anybody else that want their ass whupped! Now try me!” he said eying them all in a challenging manner.

TJ put his head down and extended his hand.

“I'm sorry Michael. You were there for me. You still cool,” he said.

I gripped his hand relieved that I didn't have to fight. My dad went back inside and we all stood in my front yard laughing about the whole thing. When they were leaving, Trammell looked back and said, “We thought you were selling out cause you damn near white but you cool.”

I didn't know what to think. They convinced themselves I wasn't a sellout from pressure from my father and I was convinced I was a sellout for going against Adrian due to pressure from my peers.

Elementary school was up and down like that dealing with being light complexioned and navigating my way through prejudice and ridicule. Jr. High school was better because I dealt with kids on my own terms and learned to take sides in racial conflicts all the way up through high school. Jr. High school also opened the door to a world of sports which somewhat superseded issues of skin color. You were either good at a sport or considered a scrub and it almost always had nothing to do with being black, white or whatever. The adults were more of who I paid attention to as I got older and experiences with my peers were chocked up to juvenile teasing and horseplay.

Poetic Discernment

This final poem in this chapter expresses a desire reconcile my actions toward Adrian even beyond the present moment. In hindsight, I should have stuck it out with him because in the end the black kids still picked on my calling me white boy and even wanted to fight me after they discovered the lawsuit was not going to happen. Stuck in between Black and Puerto Rican and then no place at all (Janis, 2016), I longed to fit in among my peers anywhere I would be allowed. That experience led me to believe that regardless of whether I sided with blacks or not, I would always be shunned because I was light skinned. I would always experience conflict trying to fit in with my black peers. Knowing this, I would attempt to transcend social boundaries (Root, 1996) confidently while still fearing the repercussions from those in which I tried to find place.

CHAPTER THREE

BLACK BY MONORACIAL DEMAND

Forever Black

Young and naive he did not know
 Infatuation, puppy love, it could not grow
 With mixed signals and confusion swirling about
 The chance for young love was clearly out
 Brave and bold he wanted to scream
 I like you fair girl you're like a dream
 Turned into a nightmare as reality set in
 Rejection apparent from a simple sin
 The sin of mixing races which she could not bare
 The differences so subtle right down to our hair
 In her eyes I despised the judgment within
 Never to face her love or that plastic grin
 For her judgment proposed something I lacked
 All stemming from the fact that I'll forever be black
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

But He's Black

As much as I saw myself as mixed with Black, Italian, Indian, and Puerto Rican, I never made it a major factor in my life. On the inside I was very proud of my racial mix. It was like that feeling you get when you discover a cousin that you hadn't known before. You were happy about the family tie even though you knew nothing about the person. You loved them just the same though. I didn't have a problem being identified as black, as a matter of fact; I embraced it because it was all I really knew. I had been rejected because of it and even being so, I still accepted it but it made me see other races separately as opposed to what I felt I was and that was mixed.

The entire sixth grade class was on a trip to White Pines Ranch in Oregon, Illinois. It was an enrichment trip to expose us to livestock, agriculture, and scientific excavations. Charles had actually made the local newspaper for finding fossils in the quarry there when he went. My

experience was a little different. We were there for an entire week. It was fun but disappointing. An oxymoron at best, but that is how growing up was. In the midst of good times there were always pockets of disappointments and disasters. Each class was broken up and divided amongst each other so no one would be matched with anyone in their own class. I was matched with Nancy Graymoor, a brown haired brown eyed white girl, who looked excited to be my partner. Throughout the week, we laughed, played, talked about different things including our families. We competed against the other class during writing competitions and skits and ate breakfast, lunch and dinner together almost every day. We bonded in a special way in my eyes, but my eyes were not open to prejudice and rules of interracial mingling. Payton prepped me for the big let down because he knew I liked a white girl but I only heard what I wanted to hear.

“Michael, you know white girls from Flossmoor don’t get down with black boys in Serena Hills. You might get lucky with a white girl from our hood but Flossmoor? Forget it,” he warned me.

Flossmoor was a rich Jewish town where money and status reigned supreme. I learned later that your money mattered more than your color there. The Jr. High sat right in the center of town and because of the side of Serena that we lived on; we were zoned to attend Jr. High and High School in Flossmoor. Those schools were predominantly white and students on the other side of Serena Hills attended Bloom High School. I often wonder how my life would have turned out had I attended Bloom. Violet Mercer was a white girl who thought romance and love was the only thing that mattered in the world. This was reflected in a lot of her poems she read in competition. One poem she read was called Nancy and Michael. The embarrassment on our faces shone brightly as she ended her poem with,

“So you guys just need to hook up.”

My heart was pounding as I stared at Nancy and she stared back. I assumed her heart was pounding too when she smiled at me.

“C’mon, let’s get ready for supper.” She said as we left the room where the competition was held.

I saw Violet and a bunch of other girls surrounding her, chattering among each other. Finally, Violet broke away from the bunch and approached me with a wide grin on her face.

“Mike, like, she’s totally into you. Why don’t you ask her out,” She giddily asked?

I shook my head and stepped toward her but a hand on my shoulder stopped me.

“Michael, I’m telling you she ain’t our kind. Your light skin ain’t enough,” he said warning me further.

“But she’s real cool man and Violet says she likes me too,” I said trying to prove to him that this was different.

“Oh she likes you too? Man, that’s weird. Something’s wrong with this picture,” he said looking confused.

I walked over to her and the crowd of girls around her. She looked nervous as I approached and the crowd went,

“Whoooo!”

I was nervous too but got right up and asked,

“Hey you wanna go out?”

Her mouth dropped open and she turned away into a couple of her friends as though she were in shock. I felt like I was naked standing in front of over half the sixth grade class who was watching by now. Some kids laughed others giggled; some had the same expectant look on

their faces as I did. What was her answer? 90% of me knew she would say yes but the other 10% could hear Payton's voice in my head.

"Mike, I totally think you're cool but I can't. We can still be friends though," She said trying to soften the impact of the loco motion of rejections she just hit me with.

"See, I told yo dumb butt!" Payton said walking away seemingly more disappointed than I was. Violet screamed at Nancy, "But why not? You guys are totally cool for each other," she said.

She held her hands out in disgust probably feeling the poem she had written about us was a lie. Nancy hesitated with her reply then like a bullet out of a gun hitting me in the chest she said, "But he's black! C'mon you guys!"

Her words diffused the growing chatter immediately around us and a blank stare grew over my face. No doubt about it, I'm black but I actually, for a moment, didn't think that mattered. It would have been embarrassing enough if she had said yes but embarrassment entangled with rejection was a feeling that hit me deep in my gut. That feeling stayed with me on the long ride home from White Pines Ranch.

Poetic Discernment

Forever Black is a poem that expresses rejection based on race however, in hindsight today I am sure the rejection was due to economic status. Nancy surely would have rejected a poor white boy the same way. While I was attempting to find my identity in race opposite of how others identified me, Nancy was firm in a particular aspect of her identity which Gaztambide-Fernandez articulates as privilege. "Understood this way, privilege becomes a lens through which an individual understands self and self in relation to others. This means that values, perceptions, appreciations, and actions are shaped, created, re-created, and maintained

through this lens of privilege” (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2010, p. 81). But as the poem stresses I’ll forever be black, I maintain the truth within the last line of the poem because I am part Ethiopian which is considered black. Until the government rids itself of the practice of hypodescent or the one drop rule, I will be considered non-white and counted among the portion of the population that is identified as black in North America.

A Difficult Choice

What’s that shinning in the sky?
 The sun blinding the teacher’s eye
 Stuck in a time warp inside her head
 Confusion and hatred her words do wed
 In holy matrimony we promise to hate
 Even in the event the teacher becomes late
 And no remorse will be shared by us
 It’s much easier to sound off and violently cuss
 Because denigration and hatred hurt so much
 Forgiveness in love our hearts won’t touch
 But I do regret the feelings inside
 They are ultimately futile; a lonely ride
 Over potholes and dips there’s no magic potion
 That’ll fix or resolve the tragic emotions
 So I choose to see beyond the words she wed
 I choose forgiveness and love instead
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Visions of Knees Growing

One of the most memorable moments about Junior High School was Ms. Needle Nose Johnson. The few black kids that had her throughout the day called her Needle Nose because she talked with a high pitch nasal sound and her nose was pointy like the wicked witch of the west in the Wizard of Oz. I felt black and was black because Ms. Johnson was going to remind you that you were indirectly but emphatically. I had her third period for English and we were given an assignment on oratory skills. We were each assigned poems to read in front of the entire class with expression and feeling. Monica Barrington and I were the only two black kids

in the third period and being polar extremes in skin complexion did not matter in a sea of white kids. We were black no matter what kind of black we were. I was assigned Casey at the Bat by Ernest Lawrence Thayer. Ms. Johnson handed me the poem and I looked it over thinking to myself, "I got this!"

I was excited about my piece and looked forward to reading it with feeling and expression. Monica got her poem and shook her head.

"I don't want to read this mess," She whispered leaning in my direction.

"Ms. Barrington, do you have something you'd like to share with the class or was that just for Mike?" Ms. Johnson asked inciting giggles from the other students.

"I'm waiting for an answer Ms. Barrington," Ms. Johnson snapped!

"No ma'am, it was just for Mike." Monica said rolling her eyes at Ms. Johnson.

Ms. Johnson walked to her desk and leaned down in front of Monica's face.

"Perhaps your mama would like to know your eyes don't fit into that sassy little head of yours," she told her through gritted teeth.

"Care to share Mr. Williams?" She asked looking at me out of the corner of her eye but keeping focused on Monica.

She was threatening her subtly but calling attention to her in front of our white peers.

"I said I don't like this poem you gave me."

Monica with replied with even more attitude before I could say anything.

"Well you better learn to like it Missy because your grade depends on it and watch those lips. You people have a big problem with your mouths and attitudes. Try being like the rest of us sometimes. Your grade might be better in here if you did!" She said eyeing both of us but directing her comments to Monica.

My stomach turned greasy on the inside. We had just been effectively called out because of our color and placed in a negative light in front of a classroom full of white people. Now I had always made pretty good grades in English but this quarter was becoming a question mark. We were given a week to practice our poems and had to be ready to present when she called on us. During the week, Ms. Johnson reviewed some history about slavery. I had no idea what slavery had to do with poetry but apparently it was important because Ms. Johnson went over something about slavery every day. It was a bit unnerving to sit in a classroom full of white students when slavery was the topic of discussion because the white students would always stare at me and Monica for validation as if we were actually there at the time. What was even worse, Ms. Johnson had a way of saying Negro that sent a stinging sensation up my spinal cord and rotated around to my gut.

“Now class, the Neeeeegrows were not allowed to read and write and rightly so because the slave masters didn’t want the Neeeeegrows to rebel or harm their families,” she explained.

Her explicit enunciation of the word Negro made me sick to my stomach. The first time I heard it I envisioned knees growing on people’s legs where their knees should be. Upon hearing the word, every other word out of her mouth was like blah, blah, blah, blaaaaah. I tuned her out. I assumed Monica felt the same way and even more so because of her facial expression.

“I’m going to slap the taste out of this bitch’s mouth if she don’t come correct!” She whispered to me in jest but I could tell she was bothered by the way Ms. Johnson said Negro.

“Ms. Barrington, are you having a hard time understanding the way the Neeeeegrows were treated?” Ms. Johnson asked almost challenging Monica.

“No!” She said rolling her neck and eyes.

“I’m having a hard time... you know what? Just forget it.” Monica told her and put her head down on the desk.

“You see Monica the Neeeeeegrows gave up easily too but you are free today so why do you give up so easily?” She asked alluding to the idea that Monica had a Negro mentality.

I saw Monica’s fist clenched tightly and for a second I thought she might actually hit Ms. Needle Nose Johnson in the mouth.

“Class, they were violent and aggressive like animals, and this is why the slave master didn’t want them educated. Monica, I hope you don’t give up on your poem because your grade depends on it,” she said condescendingly.

I felt bad for her because getting good grades was important. This was my upbringing and mindset long before I knew grades were subjective. I experienced it first hand when I presented orally in front of the class. I was in a trance, scared stiff and delivered the worst rendition of Casey at the Bat ever. I was monotone, spoke low and didn’t raise my head once while reading and mostly stumbled over the lines. I was nervous, afraid because in my mind the only thing those white kids saw was an uneducated, violent, and aggressive free slave. I didn’t want to be up there and my stomach stayed tense until the last line was read. I knew I had failed and deservedly so for a performance that wasn’t worth the gum on the bottom of a homeless man’s shoe. Monica had a different mindset from me. She was determined to prove Ms. Johnson wrong. She recited a poem by Walt Whitman. I can’t remember the name of it but it was about a captain dying or something like that. She delivered the poem with strong conviction and expression. I was impressed and wished I had a second chance to do mine again. I didn’t have the nerve to ask Ms. Johnson if I could go again either. When she finished, some of our classmates clapped but Ms. Johnson didn’t. She just took her poem like everyone else’s and

made no comment. I gave her a nod of approval and thumbs up, under the table of course. I didn't want to draw any attention. We already seemed to be the odd ones out in the class. Nobody else read as well as Monica did. When Ms. Johnson passed our grades back, I knew mine would be an 'F' and Monica would surely get an 'A,' but as I said earlier grades are subjective. My paper had a big fat B minus on it while Monica had a big fat C minus on her paper. I was thoroughly confused and could not understand the grading Ms. Johnson was practicing. We didn't question it but Monica was clearly upset and dissatisfied with the results. "She's just a prejudiced old witch. I'm not going to stress this. I'll still get a 'B' in this class." She said downplaying the whole thing.

Thinking back on it some years later while in college, I realized Ms. Johnson graded Monica based on the fact that she didn't like her. I don't think she liked me either but looking at our grades and my recital of Casey at the Bat, she like me a whole lot more than she liked Monica. I didn't like her at all because of the way she treated me and Monica in class. We already felt like a couple of milk duds in a barrel of rotten eggs and Ms. Johnson always seemed to subtly point out the fact that we were different. Later in the school year, Ms. Johnson got really sick and was out for about three weeks. We had a sub that knew music and spent more time telling us about different classical composers than English. Nathan Marconi and a few others played instruments and told her about Jazz and the instruments they played. I had tried guitar and violin for about six weeks and love learning to play but my parents couldn't afford to keep up the monthly payments for the lessons or the rental of the instruments. Nathan and his band was made up of James Paglioni who played keyboard, Mark Winters who played saxophone, Tony Sabarro who played electric guitar, and Nathan himself played trumpet. I liked the sound of the saxophone and keyboard and initially when the sub came she invited them to

bring their instruments to practice classical music and they told her about Jazz and Rock and Roll. I wanted to play with them. I used to ask them a lot of questions but they always responded to me like I was interrupting their practice.

One day Nathan said, "Hey Mike, why don't you go and start your own band? Oh that's right, you don't have an instrument; never mind." He said laughing and the others laughed too.

The sub shook her head without sympathy.

"Mike, let the guys practice. It's really important." She said shooing me along like I was a fly ruining the family picnic.

I felt bad and Monica could see I was hurt.

"It's cool Mike. You can come to my house and play my mother's piano. She might even teach you how to play." She said scribbling on some notebook paper.

"What you writing," I asked?

She showed me the paper and it had poetry lines on it. I didn't realize she liked to write poetry.

"You would be better sticking with me and my friends. We do music better anyway." She said smiling at me.

I felt a little better realizing the 'we' was us, black people. I was accepted by Monica and her friends. It was cool because they were all girls. At the end of the week, the principal came over the intercom and announced that Ms. Johnson had passed away from her long battle with cancer. Some of the students in our class were stunned and some began to cry immediately. Others stared blankly out of the window perhaps recollecting the times she stood in front of us teaching us English while others had wide questioning stares anticipating the teacher's response to the principal's intercom announcement. Our substitute teacher dabbed tears from her face that held black mascara in the crows feet firmly established in the corner of her eyes. I looked over

at Monica. Her eyebrows were raised slightly, not in surprise but in a sort of satisfied pleasure. Her lips parted slightly into a curve that insinuated a smile but was it a smile? Could it have been her own personal and individual reaction to the sudden passing of our 8th grade teacher? After all, none of us, I believe, knew she was sick and could die so to hear she had passed was quite a shock.

“Wow, this is crazy!” I whispered to Monica who turned to me in gloating fashion.

“Well I’m glad old Needle Nose Johnson kicked the bucket,” she said turning her slightly raised brows downward.

I could see anger and pain in her eyes.

“Monica!” I whispered back somewhat alarmed and cautious not to let the others hear me.

“I don’t care Mike. God don’t like ugly.” She told me.

She faced forward looking as though I had to make a decision. I was either with her or with them. My feelings were mixed. I didn’t like the way she talked about blacks historically or the light she casted upon Monica and I as blacks in a classroom full of whites. I couldn’t help thinking though, how she never punched or kicked me or slammed my head into a brick wall for not being black enough. That was enough for me to give her a pass on her prejudiced pedagogy toward us. On the other hand, I could see how it made Monica feel and I felt bad and outcast as well. That being coupled with Nathan and his band’s non-acceptance of me sent feelings of resentment toward some white people in me. Out on the track, Monica talked and interacted with white people and so did I so I began to see that it was specific white people that deserved our anger and resentment. It was white people who were well to do and had money like Nathan and his band members. They had money and we didn’t so we didn’t mix. No matter how mixed

I was, my family didn't have enough money to mix with them. The following week, we had an assembly to remember Ms. Johnson. Monica played sick and stayed home. Nathan and his band played 'When the Saints Go Marching In' and it had a rhythm that sounded a few notes short of what Monica's mother had shown me on their piano. The sound should have been fuller, more connected to that thing called smooth. I wanted to tell them but I knew they wouldn't hear me so I left it alone.

Poetic Discernment

In the poem 'A Difficult Choice' I deliberate between hating my eight grade teacher or finding a way to forgive her racial transgressions toward myself and Monica. Trapped between compassion for humanity, loyalty to the black race, and fighting against the fact that I was also part European (Italian), caused me some inner turmoil that I don't believe was resolved until I wrote the poem. I understand it better when I look at Bhabha's explanation of Fanon's insight into the dark side of man. This dark side of man has desires that go beyond the visible identity of black and oppressed blacks know this (Bhabha, 1994). This desire is for a peaceful humanity for "Where there is no human nature, hope can hardly spring eternal; but it emerges surely and surreptitiously in the strategic return of that difference that informs and deforms the image of identity" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 88). My desire is to be better than a hateful person regardless of what race I or others identify.

Think Freely

My mind and my thinking so razor sharp
 It's hard for me not to pick it apart
 Like going under water then coming up for air
 Analytical thoughts result so please beware
 Broken pieces in a puzzle box
 Have been put together shattering the locks
 That keeps us away from our human side
 That closes many doors resembling our eyes

Because what we perceive is laced with opinion
But our thoughts and our minds we have no dominion
Suppressed in our thoughts we cannot be free
Till someone comes along and gives us the key
To loosen the chains on our ability to think
Think open and freely and put us on the brink
The brink of war on ignorance and shame
Eliminating the control making us all insane
(Michael G. Williams, 2016)

The White Man No One Wanted to See

I remember thinking I wasn't glad Ms. Johnson had died but I was extremely relieved she wasn't our teacher anymore. The rest of the year went smoothly with the substitute and she actually started teaching English too. School ended and I joyfully graduated from Jr. High School. Part of the way into the summer, the news announced that Ronald Reagan would be visiting our city. He was coming to speak on his tax plan at Bloom High School. I was interested in seeing the president of the United States but none of my black friends cared to go and see him. I didn't make a real big deal about going to see the president so no one took me seriously when I suggested we ride up to Bloom High School to see Ronald Reagan. They snubbed the current sitting president citing that he was ruining the economy and hadn't done anything for blacks. There were things that they parroted from hearing their parents talk about politics in their homes. I rode my bike up to Payton Washington's house to ask him if he wanted to go see the president. He was my best friend. I knew he would go just for the ride alone. I knocked on the side door of his house. He opened the door fully dressed looking ready to go and soot some hoops.

"Hey Vanilla bum, I was just about to ride down to your house to see if you wanted to get your butt whipped in some hoops," he said chuckling.

I laughed too. He made fun of my light complexion but it was in a light hearted joking way. Sometimes I got the feeling he was just trying to make me tough to deal with the other kids that did mean to be cruel.

“How about we ride up to Bloom to see ole Ronnie,” I suggested instead hoping he would agree to go.

“Nah, that old cracker ain’t saying nothing worth listening to. But don’t let me stop you. You go on and check him out. Tell me if I was right or wrong.” He said heading to his own bike with his basketball under one arm.

That’s why I liked Payton. He never judged me. He was always open-minded and supportive. I jumped on my bike and made the trip alone to Bloom High School. The streets were packed with people like the march on Washington during the Civil Rights era except they were mostly all white people. I don’t remember seeing any black people out there and to get a glimpse at one I would’ve needed to be starring in the mirror. I’m sure there were some out there though because there were a few black people at our school and in the neighborhood who were referred to as Oreos; black on the outside and white on the inside. I was called Oreo sometimes too because of the way I spoke and the fact that I liked to caddy at the Flossmoor Country Club. I didn’t like caddying so much as I like earning money but other black kids only saw it as carrying a rich white man’s bag for a couple of pennies. Me and a few other blacks, including my brother, Charles, did it religiously over the summer and weekends when school was in session.

As I rode down the street eyeing the police and military presence, I was excited, alone in my own skin and free from anyone’s opinion about seeing the president. I hadn’t even told my family where I was going. For all they knew, I was going to play basketball with Payton at the

elementary school. I assumed most of my friends thought I cared about Reagan because I wanted to be white or like white people. The real reason I wanted to go and see him was because four years prior he had been shot and almost died. I wanted to see what he looked like up close. I wanted to hear his raspy voice with the breathy rhythm and tone it had. It was pure curiosity on my part. In my mind it was like seeing a dead man walking. I got as close as I could to see him amongst the waves of people trying to see him as well. I did not understand what he was talking about but I enjoyed being there listening to the President of the United States. I was cherishing the moment as people were leaving. I felt good and as I rode down the street heading home, about a half block away from the area where he spoke, I saw a white army general standing post on the corner of the street. I knew he was a general because he had one star on both sides of his lapels. He wore dark sunglasses that reflected your image when you looked into his eyes. I was thrilled to see him standing there protecting a corner where the president would eventually travel. I rode up to him and smiled.

“It was good seeing the president huh General?” I asked hoping for a response worthy of going back and telling everyone that resisted and criticized my coming.

He looked down at me sharply, “Carry on boy!”

Then he directed his stare straight forward dismissing my question altogether. The butterflies I had in my stomach had now turned to sour milk. I was disappointed to say the least as I stared at him for a moment before carrying on as the boy I was. He never looked back in my direction and it was almost as if I had vanished into thin air. I wondered if Ronald Reagan would have treated me the same way; an assumption I couldn't bring myself to accept. After all, he was the president of the United States and surely that meant something. What it meant, I'm

not exactly certain of but I was very certain that it meant nothing to all my black friends and even some of my white friends that lived in our neighborhood.

I rode passed the elementary school and spotted Payton and a few others playing Hustle.

“Hey Mike, where you coming from?” Jarvis asked throwing the basketball at me.

“Probably up there playing white boy with those crackers trying to see that fag president!” Stephon Lewis added eyeballing me like he wanted to fight.

Payton stepped in front of Stephon and put his arm out.

“Hey we got enough for a full court game now. I got Michael on my team. Stephon don’t cry cause he can whip your ass in B-ball either,” Payton told him as we headed down to the other side of the court.

“Michael, did you get that album for my dad? My uncle should have been home by now,” he said winking at me.

“Yeah, I dropped it off at your house before I came here.”

I played along with his lie. He knew I had gone to see the president and that would probably have resulted in a fight with Stephon and ended the chance for a full court pickup game. As we walked down to the other end of the court, Payton looked straight forward without looking at me and said, “Don’t say nothing cause the look on your face says it all. I hate to say I told you but Michael... I told yo dumb butt.”

He laughed and I laughed harder because in a way he was right but at the same time he was wrong. I was satisfied with seeing the white man that none of my peers wanted to see.

Poetic Discernment

‘Think Freely’ was written to address the other kids in the neighborhood that had a problem with going to see President Reagan speak. It was a call for them to open their minds to

think freely instead of going on what others said they should think or following the crowd of collective common bonds (Hooks, 1992). This type of thinking goes back historically when the Germans resisted Roman invasion to their territories. They wouldn't let any other race in to mix with them in an attempt to keep their bloodline pure (Root, 1996). The reversal was happening in our neighborhood from what I could tell by the reactions a lot of black kids had to going to see the president speak. I was always a free thinker and did not want to miss an opportunity to experience an event that rarely occurs in life. I didn't think I was white for doing so but I was characterized as such for not being on the basketball court at the same time everyone else was. After seeing the president and experiencing the exchange with the General, momentarily I wondered if they were right. Today I believe firmly in free thinking because it frees us from oppression. "If we revolutionize the way we think about identity and the self... we begin to free ourselves from an oppressive structure" (Root, 1996, p. 14). The thinking displayed by the kids when I was growing up points squarely at an oppressive structure that is ruining our ability to think freely.

Honorable Attitudes

Lessons learned on the spoken curve
 Always heard and always observed
 The impressions made by those you look to
 Override the critics who seek to oppress you
 They say pride goeth before the fall
 But our pride is something that sustains us all
 Never will we succumb to dishonor
 As we always strive to maintain this honor
 This honor is ours filled with pride
 Something my family will never hide
 So keep your charity and your gratitude
 And perhaps one day you'll understand our attitude
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Pride before Dishonor

Johnny Ross, our neighbor was a pretty cool white boy on the surface. He played football, catch and basketball with me and my brother, Charles. He had an Atari video game that he let us play with as well when he was allowed to have company in the house. His father did not mind him playing with us black boys but his mother was very antisocial. It was as if she would have felt better if we didn't live next door let alone come into her house to play with her son. I'm speculating for the most part because she never said anything prejudice or racial toward us but sometimes omission speaks volumes. The only time I ever heard anything remotely racist come out of Johnny's mouth was once when we got into an argument over something petty, I can't remember what about and he commented,

“Why don't you all go back where you came from?”

Well that raised concerns from all of us even my mother and father once I told them what he had said.

“They probably sit around the dinner table saying nigger this and nigger that,” my mother said while we were sitting at the dinner table.

My father shook his head no.

“Baby, those crackers slip up and say nigger when they get comfortable around you. I see it every day on the job. Those are the ones that say it at their dinner table. Thomas is real down to arth. He's a pretty nice guy,” my father cautioned my mother.

“Maybe he gets it from his grandparents, I don't know. I only know I'm not going back to where I came from. They can go back to where they came from,” she said getting upset over the fact that anything of that nature was had been said.

“Be cool, be cool. They just kids. They’ll be arguing today and building snow forts tomorrow and fighting the next,” my father assured her.

“I suppose you’re right. I just don’t like it when people think they are better than you,” she said emphasizing her words to me and my siblings.

“Mama, maybe he meant go back to the city where we came from. Johnny’s cool. I don’t think he meant anything by it,” my sister said throwing her two cents worth of logic into the conversation.

“Hey ma, Johnny gave me and Michael these tank tops and t-shirts,” Charles said holding up a stack of nearly brand new hand me downs. Johnny couldn’t wear them anymore so his mother let him give them to us when they were spring cleaning.

“Oh hell no!”

My mother screeched snatching the shirts and briskly walking next door with them. We watched her ring their doorbell from our front porch. Mrs. Ross came to the door.

“Hello Suzy. What brings you by,” she asked?

My mother handed her the shirts.

“Johnny gave these shirts to my boys,” she said.

“Yes, he’s outgrown them and thought they might like them. They’re almost brand new,” she said sounding as if she had done her charitable deed for the year.

“Well thank you but we don’t need them. They have plenty of t-shirts and tank tops,” she told Mrs. Ross.

She handed her all of the shirts then walked off. We really didn’t have a lot of clothes but after returning them she drove us to the store and bought us several t-shirts.

To me, the really sad part about this memory is that a couple of years earlier the Henderson's, a black family, gave us some hand me down clothes too but Allen Henderson made fun of us. He told all the kids in the neighborhood that we were poor and couldn't afford new clothes. Whenever we were all in one area playing, Allen would yell that he was our daddy and had to take care of us. It was extremely demeaning and embarrassing. My mother returned the clothes just the same but she was nicer to Mrs. Henderson and Allen got a whipping for being mean to us. Johnny never did anything like that. If I had to take hand me downs I would have taken them from Johnny Ross. No one would have ever known we had hand me downs from the Ross's. My mother didn't care one way or the other.

“Pride before dishonor!”

She reminded me and my brother as a warning not to take anything from anyone. If we didn't have it we didn't need it and we could manage on our own.

Poetic Discernment

Honor Attitudes lends itself to my developing identity outside of race however the social interactions that spawned this piece are certainly laden with racial strife. I believe this is so because even though my mother didn't take hand-me-down clothes from the Henderson family who were black, when she returned the clothes to the Ross family who were white, she was not as nice. Werbner and Modood (1997) remind us that “Instead of conceiving of a subject as endowed with an essential nucleus defined metaphysically, we must direct our attention to the process by which individuals construct their identities” (p. 64). This event did not make me perceive race as a thing of pride because Allen Henderson was far crueller toward me than Johnny Ross was so I did not perceive pride in racial terms. I perceived it as something that

went along with personal integrity toward making it on your own. To this day I carry pride as a part of my identity.

Fear Revealed

Surprised and broken understanding is slow
 As I contemplate your words watching asphalt grow
 You wrestled with a growing spirit of fear
 You hesitate to acknowledge or even come near
 I too hear the whispers developing inside
 Those whispers that often make you sit as you cry
 You revealed your fear which is more than I could say
 My fears are being revealed on this very day
 A dissertation is written poetic methodology
 Curriculum theory has revealed fearful wordology
 Without I wonder if fear would be suppressed
 But with it I am certain that fear has been addressed
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Afraid of Me?

Across the street, there was a white family with a gold and white colored Boxer. We never had any interaction with them except for the time our German Shepherd and their Boxer locked up in a fight. My father and the white man who owned the Boxer got the two dogs separated but it was the strangest thing I had ever seen. Neither my dad nor the white man said two words to each other. There was this huge disconnect between two people being forced to interact because their dogs got into a fight and the interaction consisted only of separating the dogs.

The looks on their faces seem to say, “These damn dogs are nothing but trouble,” but it really wasn’t the dogs they were referring to.

About a week later, a u-haul truck pulled up and they moved. A lot of the white families started to move once we moved into the neighborhood. A mostly white neighborhood with a few black families was turning into a mostly black neighborhood with a few white families.

Soon, another black family moved into the house across the street where the Boxer lived. I refer to the Boxer as opposed to the white family because the Boxer interacted with us. At least he barked in our direction where the white family never batted an eye in our direction let alone said anything. The new family consisted of four people; two kids, a girl and a boy and their parents. I watched them unload their stuff all day. I was drawn to the boy. He looked around my age or Charles's age but what drew me to him was that he was very light complexioned like me. I wondered if he had experienced some of the same things I had. When the commotion at their house slowed down, he and his sister sat on the porch watching the street we lived on pulsate with comings and goings of neighborhood play. No one went over to greet them or welcome them to the neighborhood. I had stared at them long enough and motioned to Charles to go over with me to meet them. The closer we got, I recognized his sister was a brown peanut butter color, a shade darker than my brother. The boy's hazel colored eyes got as wide as saucers as we approached and he backed up to the top of the stairs toward the door.

"What's up man? I'm Mike and this is my bro, Charles." I said extending my hand out to him.

"Oh, oh hi. I'm Marshall and this is Felicia, my sister," he replied.

He came down the stairs and shook my hand.

"So what do you like to do," I asked?

"I play Dungeons and Dragons," he told us and eagerly introduced us to the game.

We played and talked about where he and his family came from and how strict his stepfather was. In the weeks to come we became good friends and I introduced him to Payton. We all got along well. One day Marshall and I were on the hill behind Hamilton woods throwing rocks and sticks into the stream. We discovered when you threw a small rock into the

stream, Rainbow Trout popped up to eat them. While we played with our discovery of nature, Marshall said he had something he had wanted to tell me but didn't quite know how to say it so he was just going to tell me. I was worried he was going to tell me he was gay or even worse, was going to die or something like that.

“Michael man, when I first met you I was scared shitless,” he told me.

I was shocked and wondered why he would have been afraid of me.

“You had on that old boy scout looking shirt and your hair was nappy as hell. I thought you and Charles were coming to beat me down,” he confessed.

Turns out that when he lived in the city, black boys with nappy hair like mine would beat him up for being too light and he was picked on for acting white. Playing Dungeons and Dragons wasn't exactly a black thing. I explained that I had similar experiences in the city as well and here in the suburbs doing things like caddying and playing chess could get you picked on because it was viewed as acting white. I introduced him to Mr. Oglesby, the caddy shack master and he started caddying to make a few extra bucks before school started.

Poetic Discernment

I was quite surprise when my friend, Marshall, revealed that he was afraid of me due to my nappy hair. This reminds me of when “New world Indians were considered “savages” and “heathens” by the Spanish, at the same time the Spaniards were burning “heretics” during the inquisition, to justify their imperial aims” (Zack, 1995, p. 134). The imperial aims for the whites in our neighborhood were not of a conquest nature but more of a retreat in order to avoid surrender. The white people had moved out of the neighborhood I'm sure because more blacks were moving into the neighborhood and the new black people that moved in were mixed. Marshall's fear of me challenged my own view of myself at the time. Looking back, my

phenotype was solidly black except for my light complexion. Marshall was also light complexioned but he still viewed me as a black boy, someone to be feared because my hair was nappy. Root states that “The idea that multiracial people are beautiful and handsome is one of the most persistent and commonly accepted stereotypes, both historically and contemporarily” (Root, 1992, p. 169). This apparently didn’t hold true for me at the time and is also why my friends wanted me to keep my hair cut later on growing up. I understand now why I couldn’t find place among whites or blacks however; I did amongst other light complexioned kids. Ultimately, my character and good nature changed Marshall’s perception of me.

Choosing to Succeed

Excitement uncertain I picture a stain
 The future it promised a pit full of pain
 The options before me I had to decide
 To take on adversity in mental strides
 Relaxing my mind to let childish things go
 To give myself an opportunity to fully grow
 Spending time always on the move
 In my little head always something to prove
 Focused and determined to succeed on the run
 Ignoring naysayers and those who would shun
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Freshman Initiation

There was a weird ritual our neighborhood participated in on the days before school started. All rising 9th graders would be initiated into their freshman year by being beaten up. It was weird because some of the older kids chased and hit you like they were playing while others hit you hard and didn’t care if you were hurt. Me and Marshall ran through the neighborhood trying to avoid an inevitable beat down from the older kids. We split up and I found myself being chase by Oliver Reynolds. He was one of the bigger boys and didn’t like me for obvious reasons. He was extremely dark skinned and couldn’t speak well. He was teased for

being a super senior. That was someone who had failed their 12th grade year and currently poised to repeat. I felt like if they were going to participate in weird rituals there should be some rules involved like only true seniors can participate. He caught up to me and slammed me onto the ground next to a big tree. The grass would have softened the blow but the roots were above ground and I hit my head on one of them.

“Nah you punk ass Oreo! Get you some of this!” He said pummeling me into the ground as I rolled over the other roots protruding from it compounding the pain I felt.

“Hey! Leave him alone!”

A voice called out seemingly from heaven. I assumed it was from heaven because initially I didn't see anyone. The barrage of punches Oliver was throwing ceased immediately at the voice's command and he ran. I had effectively been soundly beaten up by a college student to be but in reality he would be walking the same hallways in high school as me because he was a super senior. I got to my feet slowly adjusting to the pain in my ribs and back from the tree roots. I felt a hand brushing grass and leaves off of me which startled me at first but then I realized it was Mrs. Leonard. She lived down a few houses from ours but across the street. I had been running so hard that I didn't realize I was in her front yard. Oliver's beat down didn't help my awareness either.

“It's okay young man. Being half white is something to be proud of okay?” She said.

She consoled me while continuing to brush grass out of my hair with her hand.

“My mother says we have Italian and Indian in us,” I told her.

I was wondering why she said half white. I didn't know anything about halves or parts or anything that would sum up my racial mix. All I knew was I was a light skinned nappy headed boy who was mad fun of by other black kids because I wasn't black enough. I couldn't

dance. Break dancing, popping and locking were the styles at the time. I couldn't run fast, which was apparent by how quickly Oliver caught up to me. I couldn't rap and wasn't cool except on cold winter days but in that sense everybody was cool. I couldn't flow cool and smoothly in a conversation like the other black kids seemed to do naturally. Their colloquial dialect had a rhythm all its own that I could not seem to catch on to. Mrs. Leonard put her hands on my shoulders and leaned in close to my face.

"I'm light skinned, half white and hated by my own black people too. You listen to me. Don't you dare let these Negroes get under your skin! Your color doesn't determine who you are, you do. You hear me young man," She asked?

I nodded slowly staring deeply into her hazel eyes. I suppose I should have gathered confidence and pride from her pep talk but my real focus was getting back across the street without getting jumped again.

"You come see me or my husband Lester, if you ever need to talk okay? I see how these kids treat you and it's just wrong but you'll be alright," she said turning me toward the street.

"Yes Mrs. Leonard," I replied.

I stood briefly facing the street scanning for upper classmen. Seeing none, I made a mad dash toward my house.

"Hey Michael, watch out!" Marshall's voice rang out of nowhere.

I frantically searched my surroundings as I continued toward the house. Upper classmen started coming out of nowhere it seemed and the next thing I knew I was over into a garbage can sitting on the curb waiting for pick up the next morning. Allen Henderson had ridden by on his bicycle and shoved me into the garbage can. The others laughed.

“Hey look, it’s a white garbage pail boy!” He shouted while the others burst into more laughter.

I was so embarrassed, I subconsciously began to pick up the turned over garbage can and put the trash back into it.

“Yeah pick up that trash white boy.”

Someone else I didn’t recognize joined in on the fun.

“Hey fellas look, a white boy with BB shots in his head,” Allen continued to poke fun.

I walked cautiously to the front gate of our house. It was open. I went through and headed toward the back of the house hoping not to be followed. I found Marshall sitting up against the back of our house with his head buried in his knees like I remembered doing so many times before.

“You alright Marshall,” I asked?

He looked up with a frown on his face and a black eye.

“What do you think,” he asked solemnly?

“I think we are officially freshmen now,” I told him sitting down beside him as he buried his head in his knees again.

Poetic Discernment

‘Choosing to Succeed’ was written as an anthem to disregard all of the teasing, bullying, and intimidation because I was determined to succeed. I was tired of feeling as Deborah Ramirez felt in Root’s (1996) book, *The Multiracial Experience*. She states, “I was not black; I was not white; I was not European; to many, I was not Latino. What was I? I felt the frustration, anger, and confusion of someone whose true identity remains unknown, ignored or disparaged,” (Root, 1996, p. 50). Even then as a budding freshman in high school, I did not want to feel those

feelings and I decided to ignore a lot of them, which in hindsight forced me to do more observing than feeling later in my life experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR

FAST FORWARD TO BLACK

My Therapy

My therapy is to look away
 Look away to a better day
 Where questions are constantly raised
 So our mentalities can possibly be phased
 In a good and progressive way
 Not progressive in a political way
 Because politics have paved this racial fray
 In the midst of the dark and light of the day
 I'd pray but its not good therapy
 And doesn't address who takes care of me
 I sit in silence during the night and day
 Encompassed in my therapy of looking away
 Looking away from a racial paradigm
 Focusing only on this race of mine
 It is OpianChocTaliRican that I see
 A mixture of races I believe is me
 But as I travel further down the rabbit hole
 I find my gaze upon something old
 A cell diving from one into many
 So many the end results is I cannot see any
 Save the human masses upon this great planet
 Greed and oppression caused one group to plan it
 This racial paradigm which controls in various ways
 Forcing my therapy in life of constantly looking away
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Color Vexing Me

High School was a confusing roller coaster that forced me to face some harsh realities behind identifying myself. I didn't want to be black for some of the same reasons why I didn't want to be white. Blacks accepted me in their circles far more than whites did but both shaded circles had bumps in the road for me. In my mind, I clung to the idea that I was part Native American and Part Puerto Rican because at times I was not black enough and at other times I certainly wasn't white. White students made that perfectly clear and black students tended to

pull me into the black social circles when it supported their resistance to the white prejudice that clearly existed among us. What was even more confusing were rich white and black kids got along well and snubbed poor blacks and whites. Sometimes neutral ground could be found with the poor students from India and Asia but like the blacks, their rich counterparts pulled them over to their side when it supported their resistance to black resistance of prejudice. In a school of nearly 3,000 students, there was always some pocket of refuge to be found even if it was only temporary. What I found to be the most oxymoronic phenomenon in my whole high school career was at the time of graduation, everybody liked and was cool with everybody. Sworn enemies signed each other's year books upon graduating wishing each other well. Very superficial indeed, but I digress. While I struggled to be black and to find a balance between accepting and non-accepting white people, I excelled in sports. I was an all around athlete four years in a row, which means I competed in sports every season of every high school year. Freshman year, I wrestled, played football, and ran track. I was a wiry kid about 103 pounds and not much more. My mother would say I weight that much wet with bricks in my pockets. But my dad called me 'Awesome Bones' because I tried everything you could try athletically. When I signed up for wrestling, I quickly learned it was a way for white boys to take out their prejudices on you. Payton Washington signed up too. He wrestled at a heavier weight class than I did. I asked Marshall to sign up but he said they were moving to Richton Park just south of where we lived. I was saddened because we had a common connection. When he left we still stayed in touch but the friendship wasn't the same. The wrestling coach paired me up with Zach Troxell, a blond haired blue eyed white boy who made it known that he didn't like blacks. He was short and stocky and had wrestled in camps and Junior High School. That meant nothing to Payton as he gave me a pep talk before wrestling for the first string spot.

“Now Michael, you gotta beat this white boy down or he ain’t never gonna let you forget it, you hear me Michael?” Payton asked slapping me on the back of my head.

“Ouch! Yeah man I hear you,” I said.

I was nervous and focused on Zack Troxell pacing back and forth shaking his hands like he was trying to shake water off of them. I was intimidated to say the least and not initially because he was white. That came after Payton’s pep talk. The coach motioned me to the mat, explained some directions I vaguely heard then blew the whistle. Zack shot in towards me and wrapped his arms around my legs and sent me to the mat flat on my back. I turned over quickly and tried to scramble to my feet but he hooked a Half Nelson on me and flipped me on my back like a flap jack. The coach slammed his hand on the mat and blew his whistle. I had been pinned by Zack Troxell giving him the first string spot in our weight class. Payton stood shaking his head in a tsk, tsk manner as I made my way off the mat. If I had a tail it would have been promptly between my legs with my head hung low.

“Let me show you how it’s done,” he said heading to the mat.

He decisively annihilated his opponent quickly pinning him to the mat. Everybody respected his impressive athletic ability and applauded his first string capture. After practice, he told me why I would never beat Zack Troxell. I looked for excuses I thought were valid.

“He is strong and wrestled in Junior High I have never...”

Payton cut me off. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. He’s strong; he wrestled before blah, blah, blah. You gotta find pride in who you are then get mad as hell Michael. That’s what my father told me and I beat these boys down. Don’t matter what they know, I win,” he said poking me in the chest.

“I’m gonna get him next time,” I assured him.

“Well you better cause you starting to make me wonder about you.” He said insinuating I might like being pinned by boys.

The sad thing was I didn't know who I was but I did know how to get mad. I watched Zach Troxell win the following tournament and after each win he would point at me like you're next. That didn't assuage my fear of having to face him again the following week. The next week at school, Zach told a lot of his friends how he pinned a monkey in practice and was going to do it again. The whispers circulated around school and some of the black kids whispered back that I didn't even know how to be white and part of the reason was because of my nappy hair. Payton met me after the seventh period bell before practice.

“I told you Michael. They ain't never gonna let you forget this,” he told me.

I heard his words as we walked to the gym for practice in the north building. I was still afraid and highly intimidated by Zach's wrestling ability. Zach eyed me throughout warm-ups and pointed at me a couple of times while coached talked to us about the upcoming tournament. When it was time to wrestle for spots, a murmur went through the gym when the coach blew his whistle.

“Troxell, Williams, on the mat,” he commanded.

“Ooh,” several members of the team moaned.

Troxell paced the mat shaking his hands still eyeing me like a victim waiting to be violated. The coach blew his whistle and Zach Troxell charged at me hooking me up into a fireman's carry and slamming me to the mat.

“Ooh!”

The others moaned again and in that moment all the fear I had slowly began oozing out of me. I stiffened up thwarting his effort to promptly place me on my back and pin me.

He put his lips close to my ear and whispered, “Just make it easy on yourself monkey boy and get on your back,” as he struggled to put me in a Half Nelson. Rage filled my body as I pulled my knees and arms under me forming a tight ball with myself.

“The nigger actually learned something huh,” he whispered?

I pulled his arm under my own and rolled forcing him on his back. He struggled to get me off of him as I pinned both of his shoulders to the mat. It seemed like forever before the coach blew his whistle and I kept thinking he was just being prejudice because he wanted the white boy to win. The whistle blew and coach slammed his hand on the mat.

“Yeah, you’re the man this week Mike!” The coach yelled completely surprising me.

“Thanks coach,” I said out of breath.

“I knew you had it in you son. Let’s get to work,” he said.

I expected Payton to be thrilled that I had won but he wasn’t. He just gave me a nod of approval and then won his match. We would both wrestle and win in the tournament the following weekend. From then forward I would compete as though someone had insulted me. It served me well on several occasions. At other times I believe I needed to know who I was.

Poetic Discernment

It is very difficult to make a connection here because the experience was an emotional rollercoaster. While reliving the experience through writing, the feelings produced were anxieties, butterflies and feelings of pride. The poem ‘My Therapy’ gives an analogous example of responding to my own abilities and looking away from who I was as a race. I knew I was mixed but accepted being labeled black by whites because some of them seemed to have another agenda toward me as a person. Instead of focusing on my race ‘I traveled further down the rabbit hole’ and looked within myself to find that pride my friend, Payton was telling me

about. Race was something I began to see in other people and not so much in myself. “My experiences require that I think and rethink my cultural, social, and political interactions, while I try to deconstruct the boundaries that are constructed for me” (Janis, 2016, p. 5). This was how I began to negotiate race in society and it impacted how I saw myself however, the desire for commonality and fitting in never subsided.

Love Two-Fold

A magnetic attraction without color
 All eyes on me there are no others
 No black no white no red no brown
 A love experienced from leaving the ground
 A love two fold that never gets old
 From people to action this love is gold
 It soothes my mind each and every time
 Knowing the love given is totally mine
 So I carry this love one fold to the grave
 And the other two fold a future it paved
 Carved into existence opportunities in love
 From the great spirit of old in the skies above
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Everybody Loved Me

I ran track four straight years and found that I was very successful running track. In track and field, people are typically identified as runners but I was a jumper pure and simple. Although I ran the 400 meters and mile relay, I excelled in the high jump. I currently hold the school record in the high jump for each grade level except 12th grade. Louis Calloway has that record at 7 feet 1 inch. For me, the most outstanding year was my sophomore year when I jumped 6 feet 5 inches and qualified to go down state to compete in the Illinois 6A State High School Championship Meet. I accomplished a feat that only one other sophomore had done in the entire state. It was at the sectional meet held at Bloom High School. The day before the meet, I attempted 6 feet 5 inches in practice I know at least 700 times. Each time I clipped it

with my heels or landed on the bar. I was angry that I couldn't make the height knowing it was the goal for the next day's sectional meet. To not make the jump meant letting down the team and everyone expected me to qualify for state. I wanted to make the height so badly I could taste it. Clearing the height, in my mind, would separate me from everyone else. It wouldn't matter what color I was, whether my hair was nappy or not or whether people liked me or not. I would be able to stand in my own world as a high jumper that people admired because not everyone could jump high. Coach Beebe, the head coach, saw the disappointment mixed with anger on my face and patted me on the back.

“You'll get it when you make it about the jump. Leave all that other stuff on the apron.”

He said calmly walking into the field house.

Coach Crissy, my jump coach, motioned to me.

“How bad do you want it Mike,” he asked?

I looked him with fire in my eyes.

“I don't want it coach, I need it.” I told him.

I was hoping he had some magical solution to getting me over the bar at 6 feet 5 inches.

He took me to his office in the field house.

“Mike this is all I have.”

He showed me a video of Dwight Stone, the former World and American record holder in the high jump.

“A white man holds the American and World record in the high jump and people think that's amazing because he's white but guess what?” He asked with his eyebrows raised staring at me.

“What,” I asked?

“Doesn’t have anything to do with being black or white. He perfected the Fosbury Flop and that technique gained him the American and World records. Now listen, you can dunk a basketball better than a lot of kids out there. I’ve seen you do it and that means you can get your hips well above 6 feet 5 inches. Tomorrow, you go out there and concentrate on your form over the bar and you’ll get what you need... I promise,” he said with the utmost confidence in me.

I felt a little better about the whole thing but still dreamed about qualifying for the state in the high jump the night before. At the meet, I competed only in the high jump instead of the usual triple jump, long jump, high jump, 400 meters and mile relay. I didn’t qualify for those events and really didn’t care because my only focus was on the high jump. After checking in and warming up, the competition started. There were jumpers from all over the region trying to make the qualifying height to go down state. I was the only sophomore in our region competing and that was special but not good enough for me. My usual starting height was 5 feet 4 inches but Coach Crissy told me to come in at 5 feet 10 inches.

“You can do it Mike. It will save your legs,” he said.

I did as I was told and let the official know that I would start at 5 feet 10 inches. I watched the older guys clear heights and miss and once the bar reached 6 feet 5 inches only a few of us were still in the competition. My first attempt was clipped by my heels as my teammates yelled and cheered me on. The other guys left in the field cleared on their first attempts leaving me as the sole competitor with two attempts left. On my second attempt, I felt like everyone was watching me and it was nerve racking. I ran my J pattern, took a misstep and jumped into the bar. It was embarrassing to say the least but what was even worse was I only had one attempt left.

“Final attempt at 6 feet 5 inches, state qualifying. Williams up. Take your time. You have one minute and thirty seconds,” the official advised me.

I looked around and saw everyone staring at me anticipating me making the jump more than I was anticipating. I had one last chance to make it or as we used to say, choke. I didn't want to choke but everyone's eyes felt like they were around my throat squeezing tighter and tighter with each anticipating blink. A lot of things ran through my mind and the final thought was Coach Beebe's voice, “Make it about the jump. Leave all that other stuff on the apron.”

I cleared my mind and saw Dwight Stone clearing 7 feet 7 inches perfectly. I could do it. I had been so close so many times.

“Here goes nothing,” I thought as I took off running toward the bar.

I popped my left foot to the ground hard and drove my right knee up above the bar while driving my right arm the same. I looked over my right shoulder and saw my butt scrape the top of the bar shaking it wildly just before I arched my hips. I dipped my chin and saw my feet clear the bar still shaking and the world stood still at that moment for me as I rolled over to see the bar still shaking but slowing down still solidly placed between the standards. My teammates, girls and guys, rushed the pit screaming, “Yeah Mike, you did it! You did it!”

I was tackled and mobbed with hugs from the entire team. It was a feeling I couldn't describe in words but the beating sensation of my heart articulated well the feeling. Coach Beebe scolded everyone for jumping on the pit because it could have made the bar fall and that would've been it for me. The official waived his white flag signaling a good jump and Coach Beebe and Coach Crissy both hugged and congratulated me. Competition was still ongoing and the bar went to 6 feet 6 inches, which I missed all three attempts badly. I couldn't concentrate after qualifying for state. Interestingly enough, at school, everyone loved me. I was the only

sophomore in the region to make it down state. White kids, black kids, Indians and Asians all respected me after that. Even Zach Troxell shook my hand and told me way to go. There was a write up about me in the local newspaper and for a while I felt like a hero. Most of the teachers liked me but not all of them.

Poetic Discernment

The poem ‘Love Two-Fold’ is about competing successfully in athletics – love 1 and people admiring and respecting the ability to do so love 2 and race did not matter. All of my athletic successes were, in my mind, triumphs over race because I wasn’t always accepted as black or white and I didn’t interact culturally with any of my racial mix. I couldn’t pass for anything other than black because of my phenotype however; I was still outcast as black on many occasions because I did not fully aspire to black culture. While ‘passing’ is considered “Concealment of “true” identity” (Root, 1992, p. 79), I could not conceal my black features so I focused more on my athletic abilities. Doing so allowed me to believe that identity was better suited in my actions rather than my race. If I did well athletically, I would be loved by all. In my experience as an athlete that held true for me most of the time.

The Black Creation

Lights out so what do you see?
 A black boy in the dark mimicking me
 I am the past, the future and the present
 And the things I do are not always pleasant
 I developed Jim Crow and the slave trade
 Exhausted all that could grow in the black men made
 An installed mentality forced perceptions so bleak
 The white man’s reality is all that he seeks
 But I place him on the bottom of the racial paradigm
 So he’d never look within and discover the divine
 Now his actions have him pegged as the scum of life
 Always caught up in the world and its earthly vice
 I did create it I’ll admit I must
 But I did for one reason, so blacks you would not trust

This would make them have to search deep down and far
To ultimately discover who they really are
(Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Blacks can't be Trusted

In High School, I had a choice of taking Spanish, German, French or Latin for a foreign language elective. I wasn't interested in French or Latin and most of the black kids had signed up for Spanish so German was the only foreign language class left to take. I had the opportunity to switch to Spanish the following year but I decided to stick with German. I learned the language quickly and loved my German teacher Frau Weiß, which is German for Mrs. White. She taught us well and I would go to my other classes speaking the German I had learned. Mr. Embers, my math teacher, had it in for me for some reason. I didn't know why and really didn't care. I used to tick him off speaking German in class.

“Guten Tag Herr Embers. Wie ghet es dir,” I asked in German?

He looked at me and shifted his eyebrows downward.

“Mike, don't start that German crap. Take your seat and cut it out!”

He demanded as he passed out the day's lesson. I laughed and took my seat. There were three other black boys in the class all of whom were in the preppy group. They didn't get along well with poor black kids or poor white kids for that matter. They loved Mr. Embers and he loved them too. They could do no wrong. If spitballs went flying across the room and they started it, Mr. Embers would side with them against whoever they said threw the spit balls. I stayed clear of that whole social scene because they always came off as superficial to me. One day, toward the end of class, Mr. Embers had candy bars to sell. I was good at hustling for money. I would rake leaves, cut grass, and shovel snow around the neighborhood. I even painted a neighbor's garage with my brother once. Selling candy bars would be easy, I thought.

Mr. Embers was offering the white kids in class the opportunity to sell candy bars. He never asked me or the three preppy black kids. There were 24 candy bars to a box that sold for one dollar a piece. Some kids received two boxes to sell because they assured Mr. Embers that they could sell 48 dollars worth of candy bars in two weeks. I looked over at the three preppy boys who seemed disappointed that they weren't asked to sell candy bars. I know they wanted to because every time Mr. Embers called a student up to receive a box their eyes would turn toward him in anticipation and their ears would sit up like a dog awakened from a nap. The bell rang and their faces drooped with disappointment. I stopped Justin Riley outside of class. He had a box of candy bars to sell and I wanted to sell some too.

“Justin, dude, what gives bro? How can I get a box to sell,” I asked?

He lowered his head and exhaled hard through his thin lips.

“Look dude, I'm not supposed to say but you're cool you know?” He said dragging out what he wanted to say.

“Well spit it out man! I can sell a lot of those bars,” I told him confidently.

“Yeah sure. See, well... Look I'm just gonna say it... and you didn't hear it from me but...” he continued to hesitate.

“Hear what? I won't tell,” I assured him.

“Mr. Embers says blacks can't be trusted with money so you guys can't sell any,” he confided in me.

“What?” I almost yelled. Justin's eyes got big.

“Mike, you totally didn't hear that from me,” he said hurrying off to class.

I stood at Mr. Embers's door for a second thinking about what Justin had said Mr. Embers said. I walked back into the classroom and found him sitting behind his desk.

“Mike, now don’t start with that German,” he said looking up from his desk.

“No, no Mr. Embers. I just want to sell a box of candy. You can trust me,” I said winking like I was keeping a secret. He slowly reached to the other side of his desk and retrieved a box of candy bars. He handed it to me as though it pained him to do so but he did anyway.

“Okay but this is a big responsibility. You sell every candy bar for a dollar and that’s 24 dollars you see. You need to turn the money in to me in 2 weeks, whatever you’ve sold,” he said reluctantly handing the box of candy bars over to me.

“Sure thing Mr. Embers, you can trust me.” I told him as I took the box of candy from him.

I could see 24 dollars going up in flames in his stare. I laughed on the inside as I turned to leave the class room.

“Oh, Mr. Embers? I need a pass to class. Don’t want to get a tardy,” I said smiling cheekily.

He wrote me a pass and ushered me along.

“Danke schön Herr Embers,” I said running out of the classroom.

That weekend, I went all throughout the neighborhood selling candy bars. I sold all 24 bars with future orders and repeat customers. Mr. Embers was thrilled I had sold all the candy bars over the weekend. I think he was more thrilled that I had brought the 24 dollars back. He gave me two more boxes to sell highlighting the fact that I would need to turn in 48 dollars this time. I know my math grade was a ‘C’ but I knew how to add and subtract money. I sold both boxes in a week and returned 48 dollars to Mr. Embers who gladly offered me another two boxes to sell. I successfully sold the candy bars throughout the spring semester and I always

turned in all of the money. I wanted to show him I could be trusted. I wanted him to know that I was black and I could be trusted but once the candy bars started selling, I didn't feel like it was a trust issue with blacks. It was all about the money. Incidentally, all races bought candy bars from me. I sold quite a few of the dark chocolate bars to women of all races.

Poetic Discernment

The poem 'The Black Creation' speaks solidly to the Ethiopian portion of my racial mix. It forces the reader to know that black is not bad or something to be despised. The poem juggles between black subjugation and white dominance. Who created Jim Crow? Who seeks the white man's reality (Baldwin, 1998)? I desired to be as Baldwin was when he told his father he could do anything a white boy could (Baldwin, 1998). I knew I could sell candy bars better than those white kids Mr. Embers trusted over black kids. Baldwin (1998) states "The white man's unadmitted – and apparently, to him, unspeakable – private fears and longings are projected onto the Negro" (p. 341) and this held true even for me. Mr. Embers was ultimately afraid of losing money and his experience, I suppose, did not allow him to believe black kids could do anything other than losing money. It is not explicitly stated in the story however, I was deathly afraid of not selling any candy bars at first. But once I sold the first one all my fears dissolved into drive and motivation. I ultimately discovered, I was one with the gift of gab and could probably sell anything I set my mind too.

A Hermit's Desire

Leave me alone I think I'm fine
 But on the contrary think these friends of mine
 Subtle contradictions based on stereotypes
 Ultimately lead to inner fights
 The struggle to trust your inner instincts
 Lead to conflict with what friends think
 So I stay quiet like no one's home
 In hopes that everybody will leave me alone

(Michael G. Williams, 2016)

That Black Boy Needs Help

That summer, I had gotten a job at a German restaurant called Ada's. The owner, Mr. Schwartz, hired me because I put on my application that I could speak German.

"Mike, I'm going to help you out", he told me.

I was told I could start right there on the spot. I was also told my duties would be to translate for German speaking patrons by Mr. Schwartz and then he gave me an apron and took me to the back where the kitchen was. The dishwasher had quite that day and I inherited the position by a means of necessity. I felt like a heel and not because I had to wash but because I didn't apply for a dishwasher's job. I applied for the waiter's position, landed a translator's position and ended up washing dishes. After a couple of hours, I washed two big pots and a rack of glasses before I went home. I didn't return because washing dishes literally made me sick to my stomach. A couple of weeks later, I received a check in the mail for \$8.63. My father took me up to the bank to open a savings account. I had earned more money from cutting grass, raking leaves, and shoveling snow but the job at Ada's was my first official payroll check. I gladly used it to open up the savings account and I was proud of it because most of the kids I knew didn't have a bank account. I didn't file for a tax return the year either.

I wasn't big on fashion and really didn't have a style. Jeans and t-shirts or sweats and joggers were standard for me. I remember being teased a lot for the way I dressed. The funny thing was by the time I entered high school, I didn't care what people said or thought about me. I had grown very thick skin from my past experiences. Being a high yellow, nappy headed, no dressing, white boy wannabe, nerd didn't faze me at all by then. I was nice to all who was nice to me and I talked trash about those who weren't so nice or even remotely looked like they

wanted to say something negative about me. I realized I loved to read and write because it was an escape for me. School came relatively easy for me and that made some students envious. I had very few friends but a huge number of acquaintances and associates. My few friends always encouraged me to dress better and groom my hair. Sharon Howard was a good friend of mine who knew Monica Barrington from the track team. They would come to my house on the weekends to take me shopping. The mall would be crowded and I dreaded going because they would force me to tell them what I liked in clothes and I really didn't know. I didn't see clothes as a big deal so I didn't pay any attention to them. I had on blinders with respect to people and how they dressed. I mixed and mingled with all races and missed their fashion styles. I didn't harp on color or race because I honestly didn't care. Even though racial tension and strife existed here and there I didn't hold a grudge against entire races because of the actions of a few. Sharon Howard and Monica Barrington did. If a white person made them angry, all white people were to blame. At least that's how it came out in discussions surrounding such incidents. When I told them about my first job experience at Ada's, Sharon told me I should get a lawyer and sue. On the way to the mall, she couldn't let it go.

“And they made you wash dishes. Man you speak German. They were just using you. I would've sent my brothers up there to kick his butt. That's some bull Mike. You know white ain't right. They just prejudice...” Sharon rambled on rapid fire.

She spoke extremely fast and once she got started it was hard to get her to stop.

“If he was so prejudice why did he hire me in the first place?”

I shot back just as fast trying to rationalize with her and determine what happened in my won head.

“You put ‘Other’ for your race didn't you,” she asked?

I hesitated in answering at first.

“Well, yeah. I mean I am...” she shook her head and put her hand up.

“Shoot, he was using your butt Mike! Look, you’re high yellow and closer to white than me or Monica. We wouldn’t have even gotten hired. He probably wouldn’t even talk to us. Application says race, black; hell knoll throw it in the trash. How many blacks did you see working there?” She asked getting what I would have to coin as extremely passionate.

She was otherwise a very sweet person.

“I don’t remember seeing any other blacks there,” I told her.

I was trying to minimize the thought of prejudice. After all, he did hire me.

“That’s because there weren’t any,” she snapped!

Monica laughed and I did too because she had a funny way of saying things even when she was being serious.

“No, I’m saying I don’t remember cause they...”

She put her hand up.

“Duh, duh, duh! Mike, you’re my brother and I love you to death but you need help bro. Can’t you see he was just using you?” She said turning into the mall.

I didn’t want to think they were using me but she was very convincing and I liked them both very much.

“Perhaps you are right but...” she cut me off again.

“See, that’s what I mean. Who says perhaps,” she asked?

“White people that’s who!”

Her and Monica both responded at the same time.

“Coach says it all the time,” I countered.

“And he’s white, duh,” Monica added.

“But that’s where I got it from,” I said.

“Well you need to give it back. That’s not what we say,” Sharon expressed.

“Yeah we would say maybe you are right or you’re right because there’s no maybe about it.

White people are prejudice just like Ms. Needle Nose Johnson was. They were so sad that she died, but I almost hate to say it, well no I ain’t. I’m glad she died. She needed to with her prejudice self!”

Monica went on a diatribe that shocked both Sharon and I.

“Wow Monica that’s cold blooded,” Sharon said.

“You still holding on to that? That was like in junior high,” I added.

“It ain’t gonna ever go away as long as I’m black,” she said emphatically.

We all sat in the parking lot of the mall for a moment on silent because Monica’s words were intense and I assumed like me Sharon was absorbing the impact of them. We might not like white people’s actions sometimes but we don’t wish death on anyone. In Monica’s case, she got her wish and was pretty satisfied with the fruition of that wish. We went into the mall and it was time to switch gears. Their objective was to help me dress better. I was merely a mannequin they could play with that day. We looked at clothes in Marshall’s, JC Penny’s, TJ Max, and Montgomery Wards.

“What do you like Mike,” Sharon asked?

I thumbed through the shirts on the rack and pick a blue and white striped polo shirt.

“Ewe that’s something a white boy would wear. See you need help mike but don’t worry, I got you my bro,” Sharon said.

Monica laughed and concurred with her and agreed to help me find a better style of clothing beyond jeans and t-shirts. I didn't know where my sense of style was and to this day I have no idea. I like what I like but it wouldn't float for black taste. I've always let other people dress me up because they seemed to get so much enjoyment from doing so. I didn't care about style one way or the other. I just needed to look neat. After trying on different outfits they put together, I came home with three shirts and two pairs of pants. They gave me instructions on how to wear the clothes and whether a brown or black belt was more appropriate.

"Now, every other week or so you go and buy a new shirt and pair of pants," Sharon said.

"And before you know it, you'll have a fly wardrobe," Monica said smiling at their accomplishment with me.

I was oblivious to the entire process and they didn't seem to notice or perhaps they didn't care.

"Next my bro is that head. My brother gets his hair cut every two weeks religiously and his hair is always fresh. Promise me you'll get your hair cut," Sharon begged.

"And keep it cut," Monica joined in pleading for the same.

"I'm headed to East End now. Hey, I appreciate you guys," I told them sincerely.

They hugged me.

"You our brother so we got your back. Stay black!" Monica said as they were leaving.

I followed their instructions to the letter and even though I didn't keep my hair cut every two weeks religiously, I did manage to keep it neatly groomed with the help of Sharon's brothers and Payton's father. Lynn and Charles were more concerned about their appearance than I was and I don't know why I wasn't more concerned about mine. Maybe I was just lazy or

simply unaware of what made it so important to others. My father was always cool and sharp when he wasn't at work but it never grabbed my attention. My mother was a bit of a plain Jane girl but she knew how to mix and match and often helped Lynn and my baby sister, Tonnette, with their outfits. She came along by the time I was in the fourth grade and bumped me out of the baby spot. My mother said that it had a slight affect on me and reassured me that I was the baby boy and Tonnette was the baby girl. She was born light complexioned with slanted eyes like mine so they all said she was my twin sister. Of course we were fraternal twins because she came out 9 years later and that made me the oldest, my mother would joke. No one in my family ever forced me to be anything other than who I was so I was at liberty to be accepting of all who came into my circle and open to going into other circles.

Poetic Discernment

I loved my black girl friends because I felt they genuinely cared for me and wanted to see me thrive successfully... as a black boy. I didn't mind the support and help but it caused much consternation and inner turmoil inside because I was always battling with my ability to succumb to black ways and how I really was. This story exemplifies the true tenants of a Triumvirate Mental Diaspora of my lived experience. The poem, 'A Hermit's Desire', is a reflection of Triumvirate Mental Diaspora. While I placated my friends' desires to change my image to black, I mentally fought against the implication. "It is a peculiar sensation, this [Triumvirate Mental Diaspora], this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of other, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 134). At times, I did feel as though they were simply taking pity on me and doing their best to make me into the black boy that they saw regardless of who I saw. The poem merely stresses my desire to be left alone when it comes to who I am.

Recognize the Good in Man

I've seen it myself with my own eyes
 People that love and people that despise
 People that uplift and people that tear down
 I see good and bad people all around
 Some of them white some of them black
 Some of them other races in fact
 Some of them share as if they care
 Some of them don't so please beware
 It's nice to be important that's no sin
 But it's more important to be nice; everybody wins
 Hold on to the good that you see in man
 And avoid the bad that's the truest stand
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Good People, Bad People, Rich People, Poor People

One summer in high school, my parents took us to Wisconsin Dells for a week on vacation. We stayed in a little cabin and enjoyed the week fishing and playing card games with each other. One afternoon, in the cool of the day, I went outside to the back of the cabin. I spotted three white kids tossing a football around.

“Come, would like to play?” One of them asked me after observing my observation of them for a while.

“Sure,” I replied thinking to myself, “They have a strange sounding accent.”

We tossed the football around and I couldn't help but think they must be German with their heavy accents. I caught the football and stopped the game with a bold assumption.

“Wo kommen sie her? Bist du Deutscher?” I asked in German hoping and anticipating a reply in German.

They all looked at each other and then one spoke up.

“No, we are Russian,” the biggest one said with a thick heavy accent. I was amused and intrigued but disappointed at the same time.

“Oh, so you don’t speak German,” I asked?

They looked at each other again and then the same one spoke up again.

“Nein, nur ein wenig.” He replied indicating he only spoke a little German.

“Let’s throw ball, hey?” The other boy asked.

I threw him the ball. I felt a little awkward after being so presumptuously wrong. I didn’t say anything else until the ball was thrown over my head. I went a little further from where I originally was to retrieve it and it felt like someone had thumped me in the side of the head six or seven times. I dropped the ball and grabbed my head as a painful stinging sensation began to increase on the side of my head. I screamed and ran toward them in shock. Now I was familiar with bees, wasps, hornets, yellow jackets etc., in bushes, trees, or around your garage or house but I had never experienced black jacks coming up from out of the ground in an open field. As I ran toward them, their eyes got big and they began speaking in Russian to each other. I didn’t know what was going on at the time other than this intense burning and stinging sensation on the side of my head. Their father, at least I think it was their father, came out and lead me into their cabin. He observed my head then took a bottle with a thick, sticky clear liquid in it and applied it to my head.

“This will make feel better. Go home,” he said.

He had a thicker accent than the other boys. I went home without saying thank you or anything and by the time I told my mother and father what had happened, the pain subsided to a cool tingling sensation. I laid down and fell asleep. When I awakened, I felt nothing on the side of my head as if nothing had ever happened. It was like it was all a dream even playing with the Russian kids. It was real though because my mother told me they stopped by to check on me

and left us with a little bottle of the clear sticky liquid in case we needed it. Fortunately, we did not.

Poetic Discernment

This story is straight forward and connects to the poem, 'Recognize the Good in Man' in linear fashion. My experience led me to believe that there are good people in the world no matter what color or race they are. I've had good experiences with White people, Black people, Hispanic people, Asian people and others but I've also had bad experiences with those same races. This is why it is difficult for me to form collective bonds due to common struggles (Hooks, 1992). Seeing myself as 'other', I was willing to give everybody the benefit of the doubt even though the common struggle among blacks was very apparent.

The Treasure Inside

I thought I was black it's what mother said
 See look at your hair tight curls in your head
 Full lips and broad nose makes it a fact
 But others around me say you don't act black
 So black is a play and I must play my part
 But I move to the rhythm of my beating heart
 The rhythm is off beat in the black play
 And surprisingly unaccepted in the white play
 I'll do myself a favor and write my own script
 It's the only way I can get a full grip
 On the treasures that lie deep down within me
 The jewels that make up my own identity
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Revocation of the Invisible Black Card

I didn't give much thought to the incident until one day after a track meet senior year. It was an invitational meet held at our school. An invitational meet was a meet where 10 schools or more are invited to compete against each other. I had won the high jump with a leap of 6 feet 10 inches. When I got on the podium to accept my medal, I could see the preppy kids, black and

white in the stands. They were arguing with some of the other black kids in the stands. I received my award, waived to the crowd and felt pretty good about myself as I exited the field. I had to go past them all in the stands on my way to the field house.

“Mike, come on up bro!” Clarence Simpson called me.

He was a preppy kid but we got along pretty good. I didn't want to go up into the stands because all rival factions surrounded me. I wasn't dark enough to be totally accepted by the blacks. Not being able to dance and going out to house parties didn't help either. I couldn't go because my mother and father didn't feel it was safe or appropriate. I didn't fit in with the preppy kids because I didn't have their money. Some of them drove Beamers (BMWs) and Ferraris to school. They wore all name brand clothes from head to toe and went to social clubs like Jack and Jill. The only place I fit in was the sports world where if you were good that earned you acceptance. They were arguing about what being black was and the poor black kids were pulling cards from the preppy kids for not being black enough. Ironically, the preppy black kids felt they were black (and they were) and Clarence wanted me to clear some things up for them. I didn't want to get involved in the conversation because I got along with everyone at one time or another and this would be one of those times when I didn't.

“Oh don't pull Mike into this cause all you guys got your Black Cards pulled,” Xavier Chance said waiving me off.

I had already made it to the bleachers and it would have been awkward to turn around. Your Black Card was an unspoken identifier that was mentioned only when you did or said something that was not considered a black thing to do or say. Now I don't know who championed these rules or who certified them but they stood amongst a mixed Jewish, Italian (White) Black community. Things that could get your Black Card revoked were if you couldn't

dance, you didn't like candy, chicken or water melon, you played soccer instead of football or baseball instead of basketball or running track; you liked ice skating or had never eaten chitterlings or anything pickled from a pig; taking swimming for a P.E. elective or Fencing. If you like to read or deemed school fun because of what you could learn would certainly get your Black Card revoked. Talking white, trying to get a tan in the summer or listening to music from artists like Guns and Roses, Twisted Sister, Wham, The Police, etc, having grandparents who appear white or who actually were white, knowing all the words to a Neil Diamond song, playing volley ball or water polo, and getting hype off of Queen's 'Another One Bites the Dust' would do the trick for getting your Black Card pulled. The funny thing was the black kids liked Queen's song because the beat was cool but you couldn't let loose and dance like you liked it because that would make you a wannabe white person. Now to earn and deserve your Black Card or to keep it intact as much as possible you had to follow a few rules and do a few things. This is all stereotypical, superficial stuff but it created an invisible bond between black kids.

Point in case, I have never laid eyes on anyone's Black Card, not even those who were supremely considered black because they followed the rules to the letter. I always imagined it to be black in color of course, with gold or silver writing displaying your name and black credentials. Wearing a jheri curl from the 80s made you supremely black no matter what your shade was. I always thought it made you look girly so I missed the black boat on hairstyle. You had to like the Tom & Jerry episode where Tom swoons a female cat (white cat by the way) by singing, "Is you is or is you ain't my baby," because it puts you on the black list. Why? Because everyone knows blacks don't speak proper English. You had to like the dark skinned Vivian on the Fresh Prince of Bel Air over the light skinned Vivian who took Janet Hubert's place because of differences with the show's star, Will Smith. Liking dark skin over light skin was

quintessential to keeping your Black Card. Liking Democrats over Republicans was required because apparently the Democrats did way more for blacks than Republicans. I honestly couldn't figure that one out because it was the Republican, Abe Lincoln, who had freed the slaves. Where was the loyalty? Perhaps they were won over by John F. Kennedy in the 60s, a Democrat, prior to his assassination and all the growing entitlements to date but I digress. Unfortunately, I had my Black Card pulled on numerous occasions and didn't feel like getting it pulled this day. I had already won my event at the invitational and was feeling good as a black athlete. Playing golf, caddying, swimming, reading, articulating, ice skating, having a white looking grandmother, and making the mistake of telling black friends, acquaintances, and associates I was part Italian were all things that had gotten my Black Card pulled and success in sports had finally gotten me some remnants of the card back. To side with the preppy kids would definitely be Black Card suicide and mine would be revoked for all times to come. Clarence pointed at me and put me on the spot.

“Mike, be real now, does slavery matter now? I mean we're all free and have the same opportunities as everyone else right?” Clarence asked.

He was seeing black and white worlds equal in the face of freedom for all. Pause and reflect. I had a boat anchor develop in the center of my stomach. At that time in my life I had not given it any thought. Blacks seemed to be angry about slavery because it happened not because they were still under the yoke of slavery. Talking with Monica, Sharon and others, it seemed that they were angry and wanted someone to pay for slavery because prejudiced white folks were still holding onto remnants of that yoke which suppressed us into a world of unfairness and inequality. I felt the same way but only toward those who were prejudiced against blacks.

“We are free so...”

I didn't have the words to express my feelings on the matter but my partial answer was interrupted by Xavier.

“Damn bro! I thought you were down with us,” he said in a low disappointing defeated tone.

I hadn't even given an answer but anything other than, “No Clarence, you are wrong and slavery definitely does matter, you sellout,” would be taken as an offense. And then the onslaught of ridicule began from the blacks.

“You a uncle Tom just like them,” Xavier said.

“Nah he worse than them cause they got money he don't got. I see you cut them naps outta your head white boy wannabe.” Carl Hill said sounding disappointed as well.

“You aint even got a car but you with them. That's sad niggah. No car, BB shot head ass niggah you ain't never gon be white,” Phillip Thompson said coming toward me.

“Hey cool it you guys or I'll tell,” one of the guys standing next to Clarence threatened.

I didn't know who he was but had seen him around school before. He was like me in that he hung around whoever accepted him. He was dark complexioned and dressed preppy and didn't cause problems. The black kids who were fuming with me by now waived us all off dismissively.

“Forget you Mike. By the way, your Black Card has been completely pulled bro, or should I say dude,” he remarked mocking the way white people talked.

I turned and partially frowned at Clarence and the others.

“Sorry Mike,” Clarence said remorsefully.

“It’s cool dude. I didn’t even say what I was thinking. It doesn’t matter. You guys take it easy,” I said walking down the bleachers to head toward the field house.

“Hey Mike, if it makes you feel better, we had our Black Cards pulled a long time ago,” Clarence said almost giggling.

“Yeah, I figured. This is like my 10th time so whatever,” I said and walked to the field house.

I kept wondering what that damn card looked like. Having never seen one, I tossed the incident into the ‘who cares’ coffers of my mind.

Poetic Discernment

In my mind, I could hardly wait to tell the story of the ‘Black Card’ because it was a stereotypical characterization of what black was supposed to be. If you did not ascribe to these stereotypes then you were told, “Your Black Card has been pulled!” I didn’t act black. I only looked black. I never caught onto much of the slang used, the ability to dance, and dressing in stylish fashions to be seen by all. I played golf, articulated when I spoke, and watched everyone else dance when the music came on because I had my own rhythm which was not considered black rhythm. Root (1992) explains that literature on cultural assimilation may explain my experience. “This literature shows that difficulties in assimilating the values, roles, norms, and behaviors of the majority are often a source of stress for minority group members,” (p. 58). Looking at my life in retrospect, I understand now why I was always so tense and uptight in groups initially regardless of race or color. Having experiences alienation and low-self-esteem at times, I usually withdrew from social events at school or in the neighborhood. This happened infrequently but I do recognize where it came from now.

Butterflies in the Sky

Butterflies high butterflies low
 There comes a time when foolishness will go
 My experiences plagued with listless drama
 Finding no one prayed for the good kind karma
 Save myself but prayers went unheard
 But a voice in my head whispered good words
 You made it this far so you will survive
 You'll go even further as long as you're alive
 Butterflies low and butterflies high
 It's time you realized you're a wonderful guy
 And no matter the drama or whatever is said
 Pay attention to the voice in the back of your head
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

High School Graduation

The end of the track season was phenomenal. Plans for prom had been made and prom was on the same night as the state championships for which I qualified. Sharon asked me to take her friend, Tosha Willard, to the prom. I agreed because no one else had asked and I didn't ask anyone because my black card had been pulled. Sharon was true blue and always looked out for me.

"It will be nice to see my brother at the prom. You deserve it," she told me.

I didn't know why I deserved it but Sharon said I did so it must be true.

"Tosha is really nice and you guys would make a great couple," she said excitedly.

She gave me her phone number and I called without reservation because I knew Sharon wouldn't steer me wrong. We talked and discussed colors for our outfits and limousine rental. Then her mother spoke to my mother and discussed the times for picking up and returning home. She had a 12:30 am curfew, which was plenty of time because Prom ended by 11:00 pm. The day of the prom, I was in down state Illinois, Champagne-Urbana; competing in the high jump for the State Track and Field, Class 6A Championships. I and a couple of other teammates

qualified to go down. Dave Kenzlie was a sprinter who turned out to be the fastest in the 100 meter dash that year. The interesting thing was Dave was a blonde haired blue eyed white kid from Flossmoor. He had money but didn't dress preppy and was cool with everyone. He drove a Mercedes Benz and would give anybody a ride that needed one and wouldn't even ask for gas money. He was faster than all the black kids on the track team and everyone in our conference and region. The joke among the blacks on the team was that he had black in him. He was given an honorary Black Card for his abilities on the track. He just laughed and went with the flow not saying much about being assumed part black and receiving a Black Card. He didn't have to say anything because his jack rabbit speed said it all. In the finals of the 100 meter dash, he pulled off a win so close; they took over a half hour trying to decide the winner. In the end, he was crowned the victor and that was 10 points for our team.

On the high jump apron, I was psyched and pumped up. I was happy for Dave but I had some work to take care of on the apron. Darrin Plab from Mascouta, Illinois, had jumped 7 feet 2 inches consistently all year and my best was only 6 feet 10 inches. In my mind, I had to rise to the occasion and match his best. If I beat him then fine but if I lost to him at 7 feet 2 inches I would still walk away with the school record by defeating Louis Calloway's 7 foot 1 inch jump. The field had dwindled down to three jumpers by 6 feet 9 inches. Darrin Plab had not entered yet and 6 feet 9 inches would be his starting height.

"Williams up, Johnson on deck, Plab in the hole," the official called out.

Darrin Plab was long, tall and lanky looking. I refused to be intimidated by his entry at 6 feet 9 inches. Sometimes jumpers would come in high to intimidate the other jumpers. When I got up to make my attempt, Darrin winked at me, clapped his hand and nodded.

"You got this dude, good luck," he said sounding sincere.

I noticed he had a yellow rubber brace fixed just below his knee. At the time it meant nothing to me though. I approached my mark, heart pounding and hardly able to breathe. There were hundreds of spectators in the stands eyeballing my every movement it seemed. I poised myself, lurched forward bounding in the curve as I built up speed along the way and pop! I sailed over the bar clean and heard the roar from the crowd's cheers. My heart was about to explode in my chest because 6 feet 9 inches was mine and I was going to use Darrin Plab to push me to 7 feet 2 inches. He nodded at me and shook my hand.

"Good job man, let's do this," he said pumping up for his first attempt.

Briefly, it felt like we were teammates competing against Johnson.

"Johnson up, Plab on deck," the official called out.

Johnson missed his first attempt and surprisingly so did Plab.

"2nd attempt; Johnson up, Plab on deck," the official called out once again.

Johnson's second attempt was horrible as he jumped into the bar. Plab almost cleared but clipped the bar with his heels making my heart jump out of rhythm. Johnson and Plab were facing their third and final attempts at 6 feet 9 inches and I was keeping my fingers crossed that Plab would make it because I needed him to push me to 7 feet 2 inches. I remember walking over to encourage him.

"C'mon man, you got this. Pretend its 6 feet 6 inches. Let's do this right?" I pumped him up.

He nodded breathing in and out hard and watching Johnson fault on his last attempt.

"Plab up," the official called out.

Plab poised himself and got the crowd behind him by clapping his hands causing the crowd to follow suit. He was pumped and so was I. I got to my feet and clapped with the crowd

as he took off and pop! Shoulders shot straight into the bar knocking it to the back of the pits. My mind went blank as the officials raised the bar to 6 feet 10 inches. Darrin came over and shook my hand.

“Do great dude. It’s all yours this year,” he said.

He was looking like he was merely grateful for having had the opportunity to be there.

“What happened man,” I asked?

“Torn meniscus been killing me all year,” he said pointing to the yellow rubber brace under his knee cap.

I expressed subtle sympathies to him and thanked him for his good sportsmanship then faced the 6 foot 10 inch obstacle in my way. I was four inches away from the school record with nobody to compete against. A blank stare fell across my face and my legs felt like all the energy had slowly seep out of them. I had won the state high jump in my last year of high school and didn’t realize it until after I missed my first attempt at the next height. I hit the bar with my but coming out of my arch way too soon. I knew better as I laid flat on my back in the pits thinking to myself,

“I’m the Illinois State Champion. I won.”

The next voice I heard was my coach.

“Get out of there. You already won!” He yelled from across the fence.

The coaches weren’t allowed on the apron with us. I could hear in his voice that he knew the air had been let out of my tires. There was nothing else to prove in that moment. I took my last two attempts blindly and missed, but I was the Illinois State High Jump Champion. It felt great and disappointing all at the same time. On the 3 hour ride home, my coach consoled me.

“I know you wanted Louis Calloway’s record but look on the bright side. He never won state and you did. Now get ready enjoy yourself at prom tonight.” He said as only a coach could. His words made me feel better and I looked forward to prom.

Prom was fun. I was congratulated by a lot of students, White, Black, Indian, and Asian. They were all in separate groups at the dance and I mingled with all of them throughout the night. Tosha hung close to me the entire time like I was some sort of superhero that had dropped into town. I had my state championship medal around my neck and I did feel like I had saved our entire school. We produced state champions like any other school. It was a pride thing that everybody benefitted from no matter what your race was and I was actually proud of that. While our differences ranged from race, colors, clicks, intelligence, athletic ability, and socio-economic status, we were all united under the same banner of pride produced by state champions in Dave and myself. Oreon Jackson, who had berated me earlier in high school for being a sellout on the all white basketball team congratulated me and told me track was my thing.

“You took us to another level, Mike. They can’t say nothing about black people and sports. We own their asses!” He said throwing up his fist.

“Yeah, I guess we do, Oreon.” I said trying not to rock the boat.

I couldn’t help but think how Dave Kenzlie owned every black ass that stepped on the track in the state of Illinois and he was white. Maybe he did have black in him but he never admitted to it and I didn’t see one drop of black in him but what did I know? When prom was over, I asked the limo driver to drive us around the city of Chicago. It was calm and nice in the back with Tosha.

“Sharon said you can act white sometimes so be careful,” she said shyly.

“She did huh? Well what color have you seen tonight?” I asked.

I was genuinely curious because I had no idea what it meant for me to act white. I just did what I enjoyed and went with what came naturally to me.

“I don’t know. Whatever it is, I like it,” she said.

She snuggled up closer to me. We didn’t say anything for a moment then she looked up into my eyes and I saw something in hers I had never seen before - desire. I leaned forward slowly like I had seen people do in the movies and pressed my lips firmly against hers as she closed her eyes and opened her mouth. My eyes were still open as we passionately kissed. I had never kissed a girl before and to my surprise, I was analyzing the moment taking notice of the movement of her tongue and mouth and how she kept her eyes closed the entire time.

I broke away and asked, “How do you like kissing a black boy who acts white?”

She looked toward the front of the limo and the privacy shade rolled up. She turned to me and said, “It was sweet black or white,” then she leaned in and we kissed again.

I closed my eyes this time thinking, “Me too!”

After I took Tosha home, I met up with Sharon and Monica at Club Foton. It was a club for teenagers and on prom night it stayed open until 4 am.

“Sooo, how did it go with you and Tosha? I mean do you like her or what,” Sharon asked?

I smiled a smile that let her know I liked her.

“Ooh, I knew it! I knew you guys would hit it off,” she said excitedly.

Monica was excited too.

“I saw her glued to you at prom. I knew she was into you,” she agreed.

We danced, drank club soda and talked about graduation coming up until the night turned into the wee hours of the morning.

Two weeks later, we were all marching onto the football field with our caps and gowns on anticipating our names being called. When the caps were thrown into the air, everyone mixed and mingled like they had been buddies all year long. It was strange to see but at the same time no different from five year olds playing in the sandbox. Back then the only thing that separated you from others was whether you wanted to get on the swings or go down the slide. As you get older, the differences become more complex and unfortunately race place a significant role in those complex differences. As we moved forward to the next chapter of our lives, we vowed to write, call and stay in touch whether you got along with each other or not. It was amazing to me how this one event, graduation, had pulled everyone together in a single day. The next day, reality had set in and things were back to normal full throttle.

Poetic Discernment

At this point, I've experienced many bouts of rejection due to not assimilating to black but I also recognized the racial strife from blacks and whites. The poem 'Butterflies in the Sky' attempts to show those ups and downs I experienced in high school and even my successes athletically. The stress and alienation felt due to my thoughts on my mixed race heritage (Root, 1992) caused me to begin thinking, I suppose selfishly in terms of dealing with my black friends. I would outwardly agree with them and go along with their attempts to change who I felt I was but inwardly I had other feelings about who I was. To me it was foolish to fight against my inner yearnings thus the line 'There comes a time when foolishness will go'. I started believing I was okay as the person I was but I wasn't clear on whom that was and

racially it was a blurred thought because my athletic experiences welcomed praise from all races with which I interacted.

Rejecting Ignorance

Don't let anyone suppress your spirit
 Let it shine forth so all can hear it
 Let your tongue be your sword
 The results of your actions will be your reward
 Don't let ignorance force your tears
 Realize some ignorance stems from fear
 The actions of others can make you lose your cool
 Not if you realize they are simply fools
 You want consequences for actions that suppress
 Go about it the wrong way and you'll only be depressed
 Finding comfort in only who you think you are
 Makes it easier for others to determine you are
 Less than yourself making it easy to oppress
 A population of people who are not at their best
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Black Face Sorority Prank

I was recruited to run track at the University of Alabama. I was in a new world where the 2% black population was adamant about sticking together because after all, the south was known for its racist ways and upholding slavery. Payton's family was from Alabama and he used to tell me about his fun summer visits there but failed to mention the overt prejudice and racism that existed there. I was recruited by the university to specifically high jump. After being introduced to the current members of the track team, I was invited to a mixer held by the upper classmen. The team consisted of Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, Indians, and Asians. My teammates came from all over the world like Africa, Sweden, Germany, Canada, Mexico, Japan, India, and various islands in the Caribbean. I was surrounded by a melting pot of cultures rich in traditions and ceremonies. We were a team and all got along pretty well. We had a few spats here and there but nothing that was racially motivated. The track team was my safe haven from the racial

consternation that existed outside of the world of track and field. At the mixer, one of the girls on the team, Frances Hill, offered to show me around the campus. She was an upper classman and had medaled in the Olympics before. I was impressed by the number of current and former athletes who had done the same. It was like it was the norm to medal in the World Games or Olympics. Frances was from the Virgin Islands and had a heavy accent. She told me about another student, who was from the Virgin Islands but didn't run track, Eddie Williams. She said it was scary how much I sounded like him. When I finally met him, I didn't hear the similarity but others swore by it and it was sort of flattering. We walked over to sorority row and watched the fall rush taking place. She was explaining to me what sororities and fraternities were because I had never heard of them. In the midst of her explanation, she stopped and her mouth dropped open.

“What the bloody hell man! Do you see that?” She asked.

She stared in awe as she spoke and her tone was indicative of someone who had been offended. I gathered that when I looked up at the balcony of the sorority house we were standing in front of and was shocked. Sorority members were standing over Rush initiates with Ku Klux Klan hoods on and the candidates wore black face and masks with big pink lips.

“And they wonder why black people act a damn fool here,” she said shaking her head.

“Cmon! We'll fix these raasclot honkies!” She shouted.

She pulled me toward an unfamiliar building on campus. It was the CW (Crimson White) the school newspaper. She reported the incident to them and they told her to calm down because they already knew and were running a story on the incident. We went back to the mixer and told the other what we saw. Frances was visibly upset as she detailed what we witnessed on sorority row. The head coach made a broad statement about the incident, apologized for being a

white man and reminded us that we were all teammates and here for each other. I felt a little better because it was a messed up thing for the sorority to do but with only 2% blacks on campus, I don't suppose they felt they were offending anyone. For me, the offense was that type of behavior existed at all. The blacks on campus protested and demanded that they be punished for their racist actions. I don't remember exactly what happened to them but nothing of that nature ever occurred again that I was aware of at the university.

Poetic Discernment

This story highlights my racial experiences in college as viewed from the eyes of others. The black sorority prank was something less than appropriate and the reaction from my friend from the Virgin Islands was understandable but I felt a different reaction on the inside. The poem 'Rejecting ignorance' was a message to all black people which furtively addressed who I believe they are racially. 'Finding comfort in only who you think you are, makes it easier for others to determine your are, less than yourself making it easy to oppress, a population of people who are not at their best'. I speak in the interest of seeing the situation differently as Korgen (2010) urges, "our institutions, discourses, social constructions, and, thus, our identities and cognitions, seem to do one thing – categorize, limit, bound, silence, mark, etc. – and we as a people lose out as a result. We have to learn to see differently" (p. xviii). My intent is to encourage all races to see differently not just the black race.

Resisting Adverse Control

I find myself with blinders on
 A chess game in mind I am the pawn
 Programmed to move forward one step or two
 Realizing that life can be so blue
 But I can be better with patience and time
 Reap my rewards and claim all that's mine
 Never forgetting the choices I made
 Experiences so negative begin to fade

Now life is better as I graduate
From your grip and control your plan is too late
A positive direction releasing the hate
You won't hold me down it's my turn, checkmate!
(Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Yellow in the Wrong Place at the Wrong Time

Blacks banded together when whites offended them either on a large scale like the black face incident or individual racial tensions that occurred throughout my college career. Those were far and few in between compared to the racial spats blacks had with each other. It bothered me to see blacks at each other more than whites were. I met a nice looking dark skinned girl name Rose. I can't remember her last name or maybe I never knew it but I remember her skin being smoother and she smelled good. Her hair was natural and I just stared at her when I first met her in a dormitory where I had met some friends who hailed from Eutaw, Alabama. They were nice and eager to make new friends as I was too. There were three of them all just as dark as Rose. Solomon, Rodney and Ron hung together like peas in a pod. They were brothers. They had a cousin named Wallace who didn't attend the university but stayed in their dorm room sometimes. Wallace didn't like me at all and was very direct in showing me when I first met him. Solomon introduced him to me as his cousin and I extended my hand to shake his.

"I don't care bout yo name bwah," he said leaving my hand in the air capturing wind.

"Aw Wallace don't be that way. He real cool man," Ron said as Rodney and Solomon shook their heads in agreement.

That's how I know he didn't like me. Rose was standing in the lobby waiting on the elevator while I just stood and stared at her.

She glanced at me a few times then finally asked, "What you starin' at bwah?" she asked rolling her eyes flirtatiously.

“Pure beauty,” I replied.

She dipped her head and smiled.

“So what’s your name,” I asked breaking the ice.

“Rose,” she told me smiling.

“Rose like the flower huh?” I asked continuing to flirt with her.

“Duh, you so crazy,” she said laughing.

“No, no I’m not crazy... I’m very crazy,” I said making her laugh even more.

“Hey I gotta go but let me get your number. I’ll call you sometime,” she said batting her eyes at me.

I was surprised because usually the guy asked the girl for their number. I was stalling with jokes and being flirtatious because I didn’t have the nerve to ask. She did so I gave her my number and watched her get onto the elevator. Later, I learned through phone conversation that they were all cousins but Wallace was related on their father’s side and Rose was related on their mother’s side so,

“no harm,” is what she told me.

“What do you mean no harm,” I asked?

There was a mediocre pause on the phone.

“Hellooo?” I thought she had fallen asleep or something.

“I’m here. Well you know Wallace is my boyfriend and all, right?” She asked as if I knew all along.

My heart sank in the moment.

“I told him about the kiss too,” she admitted.

“What? Why?”

I couldn't believe she said anything considering I was just finding out she had a boyfriend.

"I'm sorry Mike. I like you and all but like Wallace said, you was just a yella niggah in the wrong place at the wrong time," she said apologetically.

I was shocked and my roommate, Donald, could tell because my mouth was open. I heard a voice in the background say,

"Now tell 'em don't call you no mo!"

I was still in shock because even though I had been rejected as black by being referred to as white or yellow I had never experienced anything like that before.

"Don't call me no mo," she said quickly and hung up the phone.

I explained what had occurred to drop my mouth open and wash shock over my face to my roommate and he laughed. I explained my racial make up to him and my experiences at home with being light skinned.

"I put 'Other' for my race and you should too," he told me.

He was brown complexioned and said I would darken up from the Alabama sun soon enough. He disclosed that he identified as 'Other' because he was Black, White, and Cherokee Indian. He introduced me to some of Malcolm X's work and the Nation of Islam. He wasn't part of the Nation but he like what they had to say about black pride and eating healthy. I learned to like the Black Muslim's dogma as well. I also learned that being light skinned and in the wrong place was equal to being dark skinned and in the wrong place.

Poetic Discernment

White against Black is a far less common occurrence than Blacks against Blacks. This story appears to be about jealousy and control on the surface however, what I learned from the

experience is that we have conformed to the ways of destructiveness when it comes to our fellow human being. Maalouf (2012) believes that “we should tend toward universality, and even, if necessary, towards uniformity, because humanity, while it is also multiple, is primarily one” (p. 106-107). I agree with Maalouf which is why I wrote ‘Resisting Adverse Control’. It furthers my attempt to look past controversy when race is an issue. Being a “yellow niggah in the wrong place at the wrong time” was the defining moment in that experience for me because it was like I could not shake the adversity surrounding race. Why couldn’t I just be the wrong guy at the wrong time? It was closer to reality for me. It may be a small notion to get hung up on but the words stung me deeply. Little things are what bring us to deeper thinking and deeper understanding (Janis, 2016) and this is why I view it as a situation to rise above and see life as Maalouf (2012) suggests, one that is “always open to the future,” (p. 107).

Anger Hides Hurt

Fueled with anger it covers my fear
 It blocks my desire to shed a tear
 Cause I’m not really angry just hurt inside
 And anger’s the mask that covers my pride
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

The Angry Black Man

I became a walking contradiction on campus. I joined Phi Beta Sigma fraternity and the theater program. I discovered that if you went around talking about what Malcolm X said, white people would consider you to be angry and of course it’s most likely because you were black and naturally under privileged. I also learned from my fraternity brothers that theater was a white thing to do and so was playing golf. I enjoyed the arts and didn’t see it as a black or white. For me, it was a chance to interact with others and express words, thoughts, and ideas in various ways. It allowed me to become who I felt I was at times and at other times it allowed

me to explore the possibility of who I could be without looking like someone with multiple personalities. I was cast into the play 'Turning Crimson' which we performed over the summer for new students coming to the University of Alabama. I shaved my head ball for the role of Kyle. My fraternity brothers, while not agreeing with the social legitimacy of theater for blacks, supported me by coming to the show.

They sat on the front row and teased me while I was on stage by yelling out, "Buddha, Buddha!"

My nerves were rattled because not only was I performing in front of my peers but also in front of a large audience of 350 patrons or more. I don't know where the courage came from but I found myself saying yes to roles and boldly showing up to perform. It was like I driven to be someone, some character other than myself quite possible to find that individual that resonated soundly with me. I had a monologue to do and as I stepped onto the stage and hit my mark, I heard a frat brother yell,

"Buddha!" followed by,

"Shh!"

From several members of the audience who apparently knew theater etiquette. Mentally, I began to assume responsibility for my frat brother's rudeness coupled with feeling guilty about performing at all because I was black. Their pressure had gotten the best of me as the spotlight landed on me.

"I read a good book..."

I began but the lines jumped clean out of my head. I froze momentarily, palms sweating and a greasy feeling coated my stomach trapping the butterflies whose wings flapped vigorously to be free. "I read a great book, by Ursula Le Gin..." I started again but paused because the lines

weren't there. I panicked and got angry at the same time wiping the audience out of my mind and definitely my frat brothers.

“Now this book was amazing... you should read it sometime when you get the chance. Ursula Le Guin is an awesome writer.”

I made up things to say until I pulled myself back on track and recited the monologue to the end. When I went back stage, the other cast members had their mouths and eyes opened wide all the same because they knew the performance was almost a train wreck.

“My God Mike, you totally pulled that off. I'm proud of you bro!”

A cast member named Steve praised me. At the end of the show, Niambi Williams, the only other black cast member told me the same.

“I was so afraid for you that I was about to run out on stage and do a monologue from last year,” she told me breathing like she had just finished a race.

We went into the cafeteria to mix and mingle with the audience and I asked several patrons what they thought of my monologue. No one noticed I had forgotten my lines. Everyone loved the show. My frat brothers approached me and slapped me on the back of my head playfully.

“You did pretty good Buddha,” one of them said.

“Yeah, not bad for a black guy acting white,” another remarked.

“Hey Kyle is a black character.” I reminded them.

“Kyle is a white boy's name. You're just a token black.”

I heard the ignorance flow out of their mouths so easily that I was convinced that nothing I said would make them understand it wasn't a black or white thing but I foolishly tried anyway.

“Besides guys, I’m Black, White, Indian, and Puerto Rican,” I told them.

I was trying to steer away from the black and white racial tensions that already existed on campus.

“Look, I see the black and hell, we all got Indian in us but white? Hell no! You black bro!”

They all laughed at his comment and continued badgering.

“No, no he Puerto Rican. Taco Bell, grassy ass!”

They laughed some more and I self consciously laughed along with them because they were my brothers and it really didn’t matter at the end of the day.

“Look guys I have to get to the meeting for next rehearsal. See you later,” I said heading back to the theater.

Michael Johnson, our director, hugged me out of the blue and surprised the living daylights out of me.

“Mike you are a prime example of what I’ve been teaching for years. Damn it, the show must go on no matter what,” he said talking to everyone in the cast.

“Yeah you pulled it off Mike. The angry black man pulled it off,” Jason said standing up to applaud.

“No, he did what I hopefully taught him and you all to do. To flow the script you sometimes need to improvise. That’s the point behind the improve classes. Make it up within the context of the script; helps tremendously when you lose your lines and trust me, it has happened to the best of us. Great job Mike,” he said and outlined the rehearsal schedule for the following week.

We left the theater and Niambi invited me to Michaels, a gay bar, later that evening where other cast members would hang out from time to time. I respectfully declined because although I wasn't gay, my frat brothers would never let me live that down. Save the conflict and I would have gladly gone.

"It's no big deal. I just want the other cast members to see you as someone other than an angry black man. I mean I know you're not but if you're going to be in theater you want to make everyone feel comfortable, you know what I mean," She asked?

She was hoping I would change my mind.

"If a man doesn't stand for something he'll fall for anything," I told her. "

Sure, Malcolm X, Grass Roots, but you're not falling. You don't even have to stand, just be yourself and not some angry black man. I know you're a sweet person and you should let everyone else know it too," she said rubbing my shoulders.

"But I'm not gay," I said still trying to politely reject her invitation.

"I'm not either. A lot of straight people go to Michael's. Hey I understand. Call me if you change your mind," she said then walked away.

I never did change my mind to go but I told her I would think about going one day. What I did think about was being myself and for me that was a multifaceted individual.

Poetic Discernment

'Anger hides hurt' addresses the hurt stemmed from the mental battles spent countering the jabs and pokes at my racial heritages. Afraid to reach out into realms completely ostracized by machismo because of the circles I spent much time in, I rejected one of the truest friends I ever had. With my thoughts running amuck between my identity, associations, and various social circles, I could not face the pressure of negative comments I created in my head coming

from my “friends.” I had already portrayed an image of an angry black man so I worried about how I would be viewed going into a gay bar. A Triumvirate Mental Diaspora was clearly in affect (Baldwin, 1998) at the time as I stress over my racial identity and identity from various perspectives. I didn’t have many people around me that were open and understanding like my best friend, Payton. I even wondered what he would have thought about going into a gay bar. Today, I am comfortable with my sexual identity and am more at ease with it than I had been with my racial identity prior to my doctoral journey at Georgia Southern University. Baldwin (1998) points out that “To be ANDROGYNOUS... is to have both male and female characteristics. This means that there is a man in every woman and a woman in every man” (p. 814). I could feel those points of reasons then and even now however; this is not about sexuality for me. It is about explaining the connection between the poem and the story written. In essence, I pretended to be angry to hide the hurt I felt for not being racially accepted as who I knew myself to be. I was also angry at myself, which was not pretend, because I rejected the very invitation to being free which I deeply desired.

CHAPTER FIVE

WELCOME TO THE 'OTHER' WORLD

The Great Spirit Watching Over Me

Confusion and fear on a prideful ride
 My heart and my mind violently collide
 See I know what I know which is not what I feel
 And to feel what I know makes my ego squeal
 So I steal away to a deep river of trust
 Where the chains of consequence may possibly rust
 And though it is painful to resist human care
 My ego keeps screaming young soul beware
 I give in to temptation no other way out
 My curiosity is peaked what's this human about
 A true spirit indeed with my best interest at heart
 Led with divine guidance from the very start
 (Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Trained by an Inmate

After receiving my Bachelor's and Master's in college, my professor, Dr. Sigler, got me hired at a level 6 maximum security prison about 50 miles away from the university. He helped me with the paperwork and a couple of months later I was in the DOC academy (Department of Corrections). After 90 days of learning how not to get the prison named after you, I reported to duty on 2nd shift. I was excited and felt I was prepared to handle the job. The shift commander assigned me to B dorm. I was instructed to relieve Officer Brown. He was supposed to give me a fully charged radio, the dorm key, shift log, and brief me on the unit before leaving. I headed down the back corridor toward the sally port. I saw a tall heavy set dark skinned officer heading my way. When he was close enough, he looked above my head, didn't speak and handed me a radio and a huge medieval looking key.

"Hey, I'm Officer Williams," I tried greeting the silent giant of a man. "Hey tell it to somebody that gives a damn!" He said and walked away without saying another word.

That felt very strange. I hadn't been briefed on the unit, didn't know what to do with the key, and when I keyed up the radio it made 3 beeps and the LED indicator flashed red, which meant it was dead. I stood stunned and confused for a moment, thinking don't get the prison named after you. I finally figured out the huge key didn't work for the door to B dorm but it was unlocked so I went inside. I stood just inside the doorway and observed for approximately 30 minutes not knowing what to do.

"You don't know what you're doing do you?"

An old man asked. He had been sitting on the bed next to the door the entire time I was observing everyone and everyone was observing me. He told me his name was Willie Mills. He was the first inmate to say anything to me. Everyone else just observed as I did and kept doing their daily routine. I was thinking it was going to be a long eight hours but I played it cool.

"I'm good," I replied knowing full well I wasn't.

I didn't know what to do and they had not said specifically in the academy how to run a dorm. That was what Officer Brown was supposed to do but he just walked away. I didn't feel comfortable talking to inmate Willie Mills because well, he was an inmate. In the academy, we were told not to ever trust an inmate because they are liars and will get you caught up. I stepped to my left still standing close to the door so I could see him other than out of my peripheral view.

"Hey, hey I ain't gon bit you. They got us locked up like animals but I ain't one. Willie Mills," he said extending his hand.

I didn't respond.

"Oh I forgot. They train you guys not to shake hands with inmates, treat 'em like humans huh? Yeah but you don't know what you doin'," he reminded me.

It was a painful reminder because I really didn't know what to do. I had to let my guard down a little bit to figure out what to do.

"I don't think you're an animal," I assured him.

He sat back further on his bed and looked at me.

"What you gona do if one of these old buzzards do something like try to cut your throat?" He asked directly anticipating an answer.

"I'd call for back up and probably have to fight," I replied.

I was still observing the men in the unit.

"Fight yeah, but back up? Be pretty hard with that radio... battery's dead," he reminded me.

I felt clumsy looking at the radio remembering it was dead. I panicked on the inside but I stayed calm on the outside trying to figure out what to do.

"You sure you belong in here? You know once you in here you locked up just like us," he said.

I recalled the bars rolling shut making that slamming echoing sound prison bars make.

"Uh huh. You got a point there," I said caving to his words.

He was charming and charismatic in his speech. A well trained officer would have a difficult time resisting engaging him, I thought to myself. Roughly a half hour had passed and I had to trust him because there was nothing else for me to do.

"You wised up huh? You gona learn, it's not us inmates you need to worry about," he said laughing.

I listened to him though. He told me where the paperwork was to conduct counts and complete inventory checks. They were in the cubicle upstairs which was next door to the dorm.

That door was unlocked by the huge key Officer Brown had given me. I told Willie Mills to come on up with me.

“Oh hell no! We don’t go up there ever and don’t you ever take an inmate up there. That’s the quickest way to lose your job,” he warned me.

His warning opened a flood gate of relief in me because it meant I could trust him. I found freshly charged batteries for the radio and check in with the shift commander according to the procedures on the Time Shift Log.

“Officer Williams 10-42 over,” I said into the radio.

“10-4 Williams. What took you so long,” The shift commander asked?

“I was looking around up here and found the procedures sir,” I replied.

“Brown didn’t brief you like I told you he would,” he asked?

“No sir, he didn’t say anything to me,” I told him frowning at the radio.

“10-4,” was his response and nothing else was ever said about the incident.

I came back down and found two inmates arguing over some playing cards.

“I beat your pair. You cheatin’, you cheatin’!” An inmate yelled at the other.

Willie Mills looked at me as if to say, ‘well do your job!’ I started walking toward them.

“Hey Williams take them cards. They ain’t sposed to have ‘em in here,” Willie instructed me almost whispering.

I approached the two inmates and they stopped arguing immediately.

“Give ‘em up guys. You know you’re not supposed to have cards,” I told them with flat authority in my voice.

“Come on Officer,” he looked at my name badge,

“Officer Williams. Be cool man. We won’t tell if you don’t,” he pleaded.

The other inmate scooped the cards up and gave them to me. I walked back over to Willie's bed and smiled.

"Don't be so nice. If they give you any problems just pull that pen out on 'em. A write up will send they ass to seg," he told me.

"Why didn't the other Officer I relieved tell me all of this," I asked curiously?

"Officer Brown is a motherfucker! I don't say nothing to him cause he prejudiced against his own people. He evil man. You too light so I can already tell you he don't like you one bit. He'll get you killed in here if he can," Willie told me.

He told me how the prison got its name, Williams E. Donaldson. William Donaldson was an officer on shift in place of an Officer Johnson who an inmate wanted to kill because Johnson treated him like a caged animal. They put the inmate in segregation and when pill call time came around, Donaldson was the officer who rolled the door to let the nurse in to give him his pill. When the door to the cell opened, the inmate jumped out and stabbed Donaldson in the neck with a shank. He bled to death on the upper tier before anyone could get to him to help him. That's why they cuff violent inmates from the slide panel now before rolling the locks to open the door. Come to find out, Johnson called in sick because Brown had told him the inmate was planning to shank him. Brown recommended Donaldson to relieve Johnson because he was a white officer. He liked whites even less than blacks who were light complexioned. So essentially, Officer Brown set up Donaldson which led to his death. I had an opportunity to meet the inmate that killed Donaldson. He was housed on the death row unit. He was a very fair skinned black man with brownish blonde colored hair, hazel eyes and aquiline features. I asked him why he killed Officer Donaldson and his answer sent chills up my spine.

“I pray to God for forgiveness every day cause I didn’t mean to kill him. I also pray to God that he let Officer Johnson and Brown die a brutal death for the way they treated me in here. You know they can’t even come on this death row unit cause I’m in here. Afraid I’ll kill ‘em and God damn it they right!” He said with strong conviction in his eyes and voice.

I was glad he shared that with me because it confirmed Willie’s words my first day on the job.

“You gona find out it ain’t the inmates you have to worry about in here.”

I worked the night shift with Officer Johnson once and he seemed like a pretty mellow laid back person. He confided in me about the Donaldson incident admitting that it was him the inmate wanted to get all along. I felt bad for him until an inmate came out of ‘A’ dorm, a south end unit poised outside the internal portion of the prison. At any given time during the day you could have 500 inmates roaming around there. Because it was night time, the inmate shouldn’t have been outside.

“Officer, can you get somebody to fix the water pipe? I’m real thirsty,” he said in a calm sleepy haze.

Officer Johnson walked up to him just as calm and took his PR 24, a baton, and stroked him over the head a couple of times.

“Get yo dog ass back in the kennel,” he yelled!

The inmate crawled slowly back into the dorm and Officer Johnson slammed the door. It was like watching two different people in one. He walked back over to me and continued talking like nothing had ever happened.

“Yeah, you gotta let ‘em know you’re in charge or they’ll run you over,” he warned me.

I was grateful for my time and experience in prison because it helped me open my eyes to racial prejudice no matter who it was coming from or why. The inmates were caring, concerned and most times, helpful to me possibly because I treated them humanely; the officers, not so much. They brought a lot of deep rooted issues to the job and made the environment more dangerous than it already was.

Poetic Discernment

The poem ‘The Great Spirit Watching over Me’ was written to show my deepest gratitude toward a man who is still incarcerated to this day. Under the pressure of conforming to the codes of a prison population and adhering to the policies that regulated the institution, I had to endure racial strife that came from black people. The animosity could have very well stemmed from issues related to their own lives and experiences however; the prison environment had a way of showing reality in the rawest sense. What I learned from the experience is that some people hated me for my race and they were black while other blacks were more curious about the social interactions rather than race. Willie Mills was a black man who protected me and watched over me during my days and nights in the prison system and I am forever grateful to him. He reminded me of an individual who saw himself as he was (Gay, 1995). He wasn’t concerned about his race or anyone’s reaction to his race (Gaskin, 1999). Teaching me the ropes in an environment where people are constantly preyed upon made me feel as though he was an angel sent to guide me. Ultimately, his guidance allowed me to be myself, which served me well while I worked there.

Beyond Black

Do you know what black is? Not sure that you do
 Everything black does cannot be attributed to you
 Locked into a world best described as a shade
 Where everyone else simply looked and forbade

Forbade you to experience and faithfully live
Forbade you to reach down and ultimately give
Give the best of who you are
Because black is your soul that shines like a star
If black is where you stand in identified terms
Let no one make you feel like a cesspool of germs
Move and work beyond your identified color
And accomplish your goals in the world like no other
(Michael G. Williams, 2016)

Officer Williams

I crossed over into law enforcement from corrections and the circumstances were similar to some degree. There was a racial divide that existed and I broke through the barrier via a pending law suit which almost cost me my life. I had to get out of the prison system because it was far too dangerous. When inmates tell you that you don't belong there it's a sure sign that you don't. I applied to the city police department and received notification to take the test. I was excited because each step in the hiring process was a step away from prison. I called the police department and they told me I didn't meet the point total on the test and would have to take it again in six months if I still wanted to be considered for the police force. I asked for my score and they told me to call Human Resources because they weren't allowed to give that information out. I called Human Resources and they told me to call the police department. I just wanted to know my score because not meeting the point total sounded like failing to me and I had never failed anything academically before; came close a couple of times but never outright failed. I had obtained a Master's degree in Criminal Justice and one of the last classes I took was policing the community. I made an 'A' in the class and graduated overall with a 3.8 GPA so a police exam should have been very easy to pass. I was upset and complained to my Godmother. She was a civil rights black activist in the 60s and was community organizer at the time. She knew people and directed me to see a man name Mr. Hasan.

“Mr. Hasan is the Director over the housing authority. He’ll get you in there,” she assured me.

I went to see him early the next morning. The wait to see him was brief and when he came to the door he was a short dark skinned man with salt and pepper beard and hair.

“Mike? Ben Hasan. Pleasure to meet you son.”

I shook his hand and sat down. He sat down behind his desk and sat back in his chair looking as though he were in deep thought. I didn’t quite know what to think or say at first and it didn’t look as though he did either but he finally leaned forward and clasped his hand together.

“So you want to work for Chief Swindle huh,” he asked?

I nodded yes anticipating he had more to say.

“Ann, your Godmother, tells me you’re thinking about suing for discrimination,” he said.

“Yeah, something like that. I think it goes further than discrimination though because I put other for race on my application,” I revealed.

“Well I see a young black man in front of me. Other, biracial, whatever, all boils down to black. But listen, Chief Swindle is no racist and suing the department will only get you black-balled here in Alabama. What would you do then?” He asked seriously and appeared to be concerned for my welfare.

“I’d just go back home and work on the railroad with my father,” I told him with no qualms about being black-balled.

“Well, we need more intelligent young black men on the force like you. Let me talk to Chief Swindle. We’ll get you in there. Take the test again in six months and you’ll get in there,” he said with the utmost confidence.

I thanked him and went back to my Godmother’s house. His words made me feel confident that I would get hired but I was still a bit disgruntled because it meant six more months in prison. My Godmother insisted it was racism.

“But GM,” I called her, “There are black police officers on the force and Mr. Hasan said Chief Swindle isn’t racist,” I argued.

“Boy, 7 blacks out of 100 whites is racist, discrimination. They have the number of blacks they want and don’t want no more. Don’t let the smooth taste fool you,” she’d always say.

I thought about it and she was right.

“So I should go ahead and sue then huh,” I asked?

She looked at me despairingly.

“All the good it will do is none with the possibility of you getting killed,” she warned.

I wasn’t worried about or concerned about that. Young and stupid flowing blindly into the grips of a corrupt system, I contacted a lawyer.

I told my Godmother I had done so and she hugged me like I was going away...for good.

“I’m proud of you. If you don’t stand for something...”

I finished the quote by Malcolm X,

“You’ll fall for anything,” I said smiling.

Foolishly, I wasn't afraid. I don't think I knew how to be afraid or even that I should've been afraid.

I had my consultation with my lawyer and we filed a complaint with the EEOC, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The complaint was rejected and I was disappointed until my lawyer told me they almost always reject such complaints where there are black people already employed no matter how few.

“We will move forward with a firm in Birmingham but you have to be sure you're in this for the long haul. We don't want to waste their time because that could cost you thousands,” she told me.

I was all in and after consulting with the attorneys, I had officially filed to sue the police department. To my surprise, a week after filing, I was invited to take the test again this was well before six months had passed. Needless to say, I met the point total this time and was hired as a police officer. I went to the police academy and did very well there graduating at the top of my class and I gave the commencement speech for our class. I was excited and ready to start field training but when you have a lawsuit out against a police department, strange things begin to happen. The first day of firearms training I did excellent shooting expert and qualifying with the Sig Sauer 9mm weapon issued to me. It was time for a break and the FTOs, field training officers, offered to buy us breakfast from McDonald's. I had given up pork early in my college career and only ate fish and chicken. They had breakfast sandwiches with bacon and sausage on them. I declined because they didn't have any plain egg and cheese biscuits.

“What are you Muslim or something?”

An FTO asked slightly annoyed that I turned down the food they were offering.

“No sir, I just don't eat pork,” I told him.

“Well why the hell not? It’s food for Christ’s sake!” He said adamantly as if to forcibly change my convictions on eating pork.

“The doctors tell you not to eat it, the scientists say don’t eat it, and even the bible has strict rules against eating pork. What more does anybody have to tell me about not eating it?” I asked politely sticking to my choice not to eat it.

“Well that sounds like some Black Muslim crap. You sure you ain’t...”

Another FTO tapped him on the shoulder and walked outside with him. At the end of the day’s training, he and the other FTO asked me to stay after for a brief briefing.

“Officer Williams, I want to apologize for calling you a Black Muslim. It was wrong, unfair, and I shouldn’t treat fellow officers that way,” he said.

“No problem sir. I didn’t take any offense to it, no big deal,” I replied.

“Great! Go get some rest because we have shotgun training tomorrow. You should do well,” he said.

I was looking forward to qualifying with the shotgun because I had qualified with the state of Alabama for the Department of Corrections with a score of 91. Sergeant Pearson was lead instructor for the day and he greeted everyone kindly but me.

“Anybody suing the department is no friend of mine,” he whispered as he walked past me on the range.

Practice had gone well all day and evening was approaching for night time qualification. Everyone had their opportunity to qualify and passed. They saved my turn for last and sent all the other candidates home. It was just me and a few FTOs left on the range. I had seen everyone go through the course so I knew it very well. I just had to hit the targets. Sgt. Pearson stood behind me as I waited for the whistle to blow to begin the course.

“This is where your black ass goes home,” he said very clearly.

“You don’t certify with this shotgun and we can’t hire you.”

I went through the course on the first trial and scored a 62, which was not enough to qualify the round. I had two more chances to score 75 or better.

“You don’t certify with this shot gun and we can’t hire you. What if an incident occurs where I have to hand you a shot gun? You’re not certified boy,” he said stressing the word boy.

I was a little dull witted but I was beginning to get the picture. I went through the second round and scored a 67 better than the first but not enough to qualify. Sgt. Pearson walked up to me with the others and smirked.

“We don’t need you boy. Hell you can’t even qualify on a single barrel shotgun. Go on home,” he said dusting his hands off like he had just finished taking the trash out.

Any other time I would have been highly frustrated and upset but I wasn’t. I went to the FTO standing next to Sgt. Pearson and pulled out my state certification.

“If the state showed up to support they could give me a shotgun,” I said handing him my certification card.

“Well I’ll be damned, a 91. Their course is more difficult too,” he said looking the card over.

“I’ll give you a shotgun Officer Williams. You’ve earned my respect buddy,” he said handing me my card back.

Sgt. Pearson appeared to bite his bottom lip and walked away without saying anything. My experience with the staff was like that my entire law enforcement career. Some white officers treated me extremely kind and others would have like to have seen me shot dead like a dog in the streets. When it was time to turn in my summer uniforms for fall and winter gear, the

issuing officer told me to keep them. I even received an extra pair of pants and Hi-Tech boots which was highly unusual. I spoke to Captain West about the special treatment I was receiving. He was the only black captain in the department.

“Yes, that is odd. You let me know if anything out of the ordinary occurs,” he advised me.

“I will sir,” I said.

He looked at me and sighed as I left his office.

I was on 2nd shift looking to get some felony packets under my belt. There were a few black officers on the force and they had their own FOP lodge separate from the white officers. FOP stands for Fraternal Order of Police. I remember telling Officer Span, a black officer, that I had been invited to the white lodge and he looked at me as if he had seen a ghost.

“Now that’s crazy. I wouldn’t go,” he warned me.

“Why not,” I asked?

He explained that the black officers never go to the white lodge and vice versa no matter how cool they were with each other.

“I personally wouldn’t go bruh,” he warned again.

I went anyway and was pleasantly surprised to find that they were very welcoming and encouraging. A few plain clothed CID detectives were among uniformed Lieutenants and Captains. They introduced me to everyone and made a toast to me congratulating me on almost completing field training.

“This is Officer Byrd. He’s going to ride with you your last week. He’s been on the force 25 years and retires in... how long Byrd?” A lieutenant asked him.

Officer Byrd sat in a corner by himself looking like he’d rather be somewhere else.

“3 weeks LT and not a day longer,” he said flatly.

Everyone laughed and drank grape juice. We were all still on duty. I left the white lodge feeling pretty good about the experience. When I told Captain West he said,

“Byrd is a good officer but keep your eyes peeled Williams. Black officers don’t go to the white lodge and they don’t come to ours,” he said looking me in the eyes.

His eyes seemed to ask, why I didn’t tell him before going but maybe that was my own paranoia.

The first day on patrol with Officer Byrd was routine and normal as 2nd shift could be. The next day was quite different. We were assigned to beat five. It was a square in the center of the city and very easy to navigate.

“2 Bravo 50, 10-38, at 2552 Greensboro Avenue, code 2,” the dispatcher called us on the radio.

Officer Byrd looked at me.

“Well, respond son. I’m a ghost,” he said reminding me he was merely observing me for my last week of field training.

“10-4, 2 Bravo 50 en-route,” I said into the radio.

I turned on my lights with no siren and drove to the address of the domestic violence dispute. A husband and wife had been fighting which was evident by the bruise on the woman’s cheek and her busted lip.

“Can you tell me what happened ma’am?” I asked her politely.

She was clearly upset and visibly distressed over the incident. She wouldn’t say anything. She just stood there crying. Her husband was a rather large man who stood on the porch of their house with his arms out.

“Yeah I beat her stupid ass and what? She ought to do what I tell her,” he yelled!

Officer Byrd stood by our unit and watched me.

“Sir, I’m going to ask you to lower your voice. Now you’re wrong. I have to place you under arrest at this time,” I told him as I aggressively approached him.

I thought Officer Byrd would be helping so I wasn’t afraid or reluctant to approach the large man. He put his hands up and turned around easily allowing me to handcuff him and place him under arrest.

“It’s cool! Let her dumb ass pay the bills,” he said as I began to escort him to the car.

His wife screamed a blood curdling scream and jumped on my back hitting me all over the top of my head.

“You yellow sellout. Do the white man’s job for him. You sorry,” she screamed while continuing to beat me.

I finally managed to get her off of my back and tackled her to the ground. Her husband stood up against the car next to Officer Byrd who did nothing but observe. I asked him for his cuffs because mine were on the husband. He nonchalantly tossed them to me and I placed her under arrest as well. My blood was boiling because I expected some help and got none from Officer Byrd. I booked them both into the county jail and filed a report for domestic violence. Once we were back out on patrol, I was tight lipped. Officer Byrd talked about everything under the sun and I said nothing until he directed his conversation toward me.

“Officer Williams, I have to give you credit. You’re no slouch. Most newbies woulda folded at that scene earlier but you, you handled yourself well. I been doing this for too long and I don’t need any more drama. I know you’re ticked I didn’t help you back there and you have

every right to be. What do you feel about life? Pick up and get as far away from here as possible,” he said sort of babbling.

I didn't know what he was talking about or why he was talking.

“What do you mean,” I asked?

“I mean I've been doing this a long time. It used to be if you have to pull your gun out and shoot. Today it's when you pull your gun and shot. I mean is this the life you really want?” He asked steadying his eyes down the road.

“It is my life. I always wanted to be a police officer,” I said caving to the conversation.

He pulled over to a horse ranch just outside of beat five. He had a friend that gave us lemon aid, which was really good and told us about the horses she owned.

“Officer Williams, this is what I dream about, drinking lemon aid in the cool of the day and watching horses,” Officer Byrd said looking up at the sky.

“Hey let's go get a felony packet,” I suggested.

“Look, my friend here has a few things to tell you then we'll go. I'll meet you at the car,” he told me.

His friend was named Helena. She sat down in the chair next to me and looked at me squarely.

“Byrd is a good man, a very good man. He's watching over you, you know. Not gona let anything happen to ya,” she said.

“Why couldn't he tell me that,” I asked?

“It goes against the code. More lemon aid,” She calmly asked?

She poured up more before I could answer.

“You were supposed to fail today in a big way and he was supposed to see to it that you did but he couldn’t do it,” she told me.

“He’s about to retire in a few weeks and doesn’t need any drama. They’ll set you up and kill you for the code,” she said leaning forward almost whispering.

All sorts of bells and whistles went off in my head and I saw everyone who was being nice to me and those who weren’t so nice. The invitation to the white lodge was the last thing that went through my mind and it all came clear to me. I hurried to the car and Officer Byrd was on the phone with a supervisor.

“No sir, he’s a smart kid... I can’t, I’m retiring in 3 weeks,” was all I heard him say. I was starting to get afraid. At the end of the shift, I told Captain West who supervised the night shift and he immediately had me placed on the night shift where he could keep an eye on me as he put it. Every call I went to where someone had died or had been shot, he pulled up and asked,

“You sure you want to do this job?”

I always responded, “Sure Cap, I’m a police officer.”

But in reality I didn’t know who I was among the blue and white. One night I received a shots fired call over the radio. Captain West looked at me.

“We’re the only one’s foolish enough to go toward the shooting. You can turn around and I would understand, this isn’t for you,” he said.

I nodded and headed over to beat one where the housing projects were. I got out of my unit and took cover. Shots were whipping past my unit and I was afraid but I stood my ground, pulled my weapon and looked for the shooter. Other units arrived and the shooting stopped. A white man with acid washed jeans on, no shoes or shirt came from around the side of the housing projects with his hands up.

“Where’s the weapon,” an officer yelled!

The man pointed toward the bushes. He was instructed to turn around with his hand in the air and back up toward the sound of the commanding officer’s voice. They arrested him and I was relieved momentarily. Back at the station all officers present on scene gave their statements to build the report for the case against the man. As I wrote my statement, I kept recalling the whipping sound of the rounds coming toward me. It’s part of what helped me make the decision to leave Alabama and head to Georgia. Captain West said he was proud of me although he understood my leaving.

“You’re too smart to be a patrolman. You have a Master’s degree. Use it to become a lawyer or better yet a teacher. I think you’d do well with that,” he said smiling and shaking my hand.

My attorney contacted me after I moved to Georgia and told me the city wanted to settle. I accepted and upon doing so, I learned that it was discrimination that originally kept me off the force. My suit opened the doors for blacks. Previously, the attorneys couldn’t get the couple of blacks that had been discriminated against to stick with a lawsuit. Ironically, that same discrimination ultimately drove me off the force coupled with the possibility of losing my life. Losing my life wasn’t worth playing in the mud of discrimination but the injunction imposed by the court forced the city to do away with their black hiring list and allowed for more blacks to be hired. Shortly thereafter, I moved to August, Georgia and started a career in teaching.

Poetic Discernment

The poem ‘Beyond Black’ was written to connect to my attitude and thought process in the story. I recall feeling beyond my identified race of black by others which is why I began checking ‘Other’ consistently on applications and other documents that required a response for

race. Zack (1995) opines that “Race is socially and economically constructed to the interests of the privileged, whoever they may be,” (p. 39). Even choosing ‘Other’ as my choice of race, I still experienced racial strife but in this story it was from the whites in the agency itself. I was determined not to let my perceived race hold me back from being the best officer I could be but some white officers were bent on reminding me that I was just a black man most likely in the wrong profession. I discovered that regardless of what anyone said, felt, or believed about my race, I had the final say on who I wanted to be racially (Root, 1992) and that was ‘Other’ because multiracial had not been defined in my life at that time.

CHAPTER SIX

BLOOD SILENTLY RUNNING THROUGH MY VEINS

My Black People

Braided hair twists and locks
 You can go bald if that's how you rock
 Male or female doesn't matter
 The air is filled with listless chatter
 Talking about the humble spirit
 Brown skin people can you hear it?
 Sitting in the twilight on the front steps
 Laughing about the secrets we always kept
 How can we laugh and look so happy
 When our struggle was hard and our hair so nappy?
 Through all the oppression, suppression, and depression
 Many look up and ask us this question
 The answer lies deep in our souls
 Our souls know all our future goals
 Together forever shall we always be bound
 To a common source found all around
 Links to the past no matter what we had
 Are always with us no matter good or bad
 So remember your history while straightening your hair
 There's a reason you laugh and act like you don't care
 My black people what does it mean?
 Means no slavery, no Jim Crow, no segregation can deem
 A race of people desolate without a dream
 Not even the elimination of the voice of King
 For the vibrations still hum throughout our cells
 Sometimes we don't notice and cannot tell
 What Parks, X, King, and Gauvey said
 The voices of Civil Rights leaders and Black Panthers seem dead
 They are not dead you are merely asleep
 Wake up brothers and sisters and earn your keep
 Dispel the myths and tricks that are played
 Undo the chaos and atrocities made
 On our minds and eventually our souls
 Don't give up that which is worth more than gold
 Continue to laugh and always be happy
 Even my black people when your hair is nappy
 (Michael G. Williams, 2010)

Uneducated Folks Teaching

After leaving law enforcement, I took Captain West at his words and started teaching school. I always liked helping kids, which was one reason I decided to leave law enforcement. The only help I could give them while patrolling the streets was after they had done something wrong and the help came in the form of handcuffs and a ride to juvenile hall. I had the opportunity to teach elementary through high school. The most amazing thing about teaching was that most days I actually believed I was teaching when in fact, I was being taught. Children have an uncanny way of simply saying what is on their minds with no ability to filter the information dispensed from their vastly opened brains. On the other hand, I learned that in the educational world there were many teachers whose minds were simply closed, closed to logic and reason but vastly open to their own internal prejudices and stubbornness. I started out teaching elementary school and the class I was given was an EBD self-contained class. EBD is an acronym for emotional behavior disorder. I most likely fit the description of a student with an emotional behavior disorder because I was recently divorced, unaware that I was clinically depressed and took a pay cut to start teaching in Rockdale County. I pretty much stayed to myself and didn't talk to co-workers beyond what needed to be said. In hindsight, I believe this gave some of the teachers I worked with ammunition to make things up about me. I wanted my students to learn to think and write creatively using things around them so I brought two gargoyle statues to school. When I entered the building to sign in for the day, the office secretary shrieked.

“What’s the matter,” I asked?

I was unaware that she was focused on the gargoyles I was carrying.

“Those things you have! What are they,” She asked hysterically?

“Calm down, they’re just gargoyle statues. I’m going to let the kids use them as a muse for their creative writing,” I told her.

She looked at me over the top of her glasses.

“That ain’t nothing but the devil. You sure they need to see those,” she asked?

All the fear she had was magically gone making me think it was all an act initially.

“Gargoyles are actually protectors of mankind. They will like them,” I said heading out to my classroom.

The day went well and the kids liked the gargoyles. At the end of the day, the data clerk, Ms. Leonard, motioned to me to come to her office.

“Mr. Williams tell me it ain’t true,” she said looking surprised.

She was the only one I really talked to at the school because she was down to earth and an overall nice person.

“What?” I asked attempting to dispel what needed to be deciphered as not true.

“Rumor is going around that you worship the devil,” she said.

My face twisted up in complete confusion.

“Where’d you get that from,” I asked?

She looked relieved at my reaction.

“I didn’t think it was true,” she said turning her computer off for the day.

“I know the devil but I don’t worship him. That wouldn’t be beneficial. Who told you I worshipped the devil,” I asked her?

She explained that everyone was saying it when they came to the office. No one told her personally, just something she heard. Another day I came to work and Ms. Leonard stopped me at the sign in desk.

“Come see me when you get a chance. You won’t believe what I heard about you,” She told me.

It seemed like I was working in an environment of gossiping women whose day was made by making up things about me. Why was the question that interested me? I saw Ms. Leonard at the end of the day and she told me that they were saying that I take medication for schizophrenia and they were questioning how the school system could hire someone with mental health issues. I couldn’t understand why these things were being said about me.

“Why are they saying these things,” I asked?

She thought for a moment then said, “It’s probably because you don’t really talk to anyone. I’ll ask next time I hear some of them talking about you. I keep to myself as well so I can only imagine what they say about me,” she said attempting to give me some insight on the rumors.

I thought about what she said and decided to open up a little. I talked to a 4th grade teacher about a trip to Florida. I only talked to her because she was telling me she was thinking about going to Florida as well. It was nice communicating with her and I felt like I was starting to slowly open up to co-workers in a new work environment. Low and behold, Ms. Leonard told me that another teacher told her personally that I had kicked the door open to that 4th grade teacher’s classroom and pushed her because she told others that I was going to Florida.

“But I don’t believe it Mr. Williams. That just doesn’t make sense,” she said reassuring me that it was just another silly rumor.

“But why do they insist on making up lies about me,” I asked?

“Oh yeah, I asked a couple of the teachers and they said you are one of those light skinned Negroes who thinks you’re better than everyone else,” she said looking disappointed.

“Well do you believe that,” I asked her?

She shook her head no quickly and chuckled.

“They just don’t know you,” she said.

“Well that’s definitely not the way to get to know me,” I said.

I never did really get to know anyone in elementary school except the students who, even in all their childish immaturity, were far more mature than many of the adults charged with teaching them.

The longer I stayed in education the more I realized that the field of education was made up of a diverse, dynamic group of thinkers whose identities were influenced by a plethora of variables. While I was teaching high school ELA, I came across an article in a French magazine that highlighted a white woman as an African queen. This wasn’t the North Carolina native born model, Ondria Hardin, who has posed in Numero Magazine in blackface as an African Queen. This was a model that was born and raised in South Africa and her phenotype was solidly European. I thought it was very interesting and wanted to know what some of the black teachers thought about the idea. Every conversation I had went directly to racism and white people being dead wrong because everyone knows that Africans are black and if they wanted to represent Africa the model should be a black woman. I had a different view point seeing as no one really argued about the lack of racial diversity in the fashion industry, which was the problem with Ondria Hardin’s blackface feature in Numero Magazine. The peculiar detail that everyone seemed to miss in my opinion was that none of the teachers that I asked could have represented the continent of Africa as an African Queen because they were all from America. The white model who did represent Africa was born and raised in South Africa and had more connections to African culture and tradition than any teacher I asked. Was it so wrong to make the white

woman an African Queen when her race and nationality was actually African? Ancestrally, most likely no but being a native born South African definitely yes would be the answer. But that brings me back to my own race. If I were to use this same logic and apply it to myself, what race would I have to be in order to represent the United States of America as king? I would have to be American, born and raised with ancestral roots to Ethiopia, America, Italy, and Puerto Rico. My view wasn't taken well by many of the teachers I talked to and was taken as shortsighted and misguided. I was the confused light skinned, Uncle Tom sellout because I was not standing with my black people. I was told I should know better and have enough sense to recognize the struggle that blacks have gone through and be willing to stand up for that struggle because apparently my view pits me against those struggles blacks have faced throughout the years. All these judgments were in light of the fact that they were not aware that I am part Ethiopian, Choctaw Indian, Italian, and Puerto Rican.

Poetic Discernment

There's a spiritual discernment that calls out to my soul, giving me a choice in identity don't fold (Root, 1996). The classification of my race singularly perceived as mono (Zack, 1995), is a reified notion and not *mano y mano*, with the desire of a man whose thoughts are particular, spread out over his race - a true Triumvirate Mental Diaspora (Baldwin, 1998, Bhabha, 1994; & Frantz, 2008). I can't deny 'Beyond Black' is controversial, but ever changing, fluid and dynamic; I am multiracial (Janis, 2016). I'd rather be seen as human, a man of love (Maalouf, 2012), to only receive judgment from the Great Spirit above. The social interactions I've experienced as a man; cannot disrupt my heritage of OpianChocTaliRican. Do you know who you are, your true identity? It's development so fragile, that's why you intimidate me? Truly dispel the myths and tricks that are played, undo the chaos and atrocities

made, on our minds and eventually our souls, don't give up on that which is worth more than gold. See beyond who you think you are, be a force in the dark like a shining star. Be the best you can be for them, you and me, and together let's work to build strong identities.

CHAPTER SEVEN

REFLECTIONS: FROM THE UNKNOWN TO BLACK TO MULTIRACIAL

At the beginning of my doctoral journey, I knew myself to be many things. Racially, I outwardly accepted societies that labeled me as Black or African-American; but inwardly I understood myself to be ‘Other’ because I knew my heritage consisted of more than Black and I knew that my interaction in society was accepted as Black at times and rejected at other times. My lack of knowledge on multiracial studies had to grow, just as my racial identity has done over the years of lived experience so that I could begin to discuss the complex nature of multiracial identity as it relates to my experiences. In order to theorize my experience, I compose a memoir expressed through poetry and fiction to broaden my understanding of my multiracial identities. Even though I was aware of my mixed heritages, I was unfamiliar with the term multiracial let alone the complexity of being multiracial or mixed. As I explored my experience and dived into the literature, I recognized a substantial need to research on the multiracial and mixed race experience. The literature explored connects to stories I tell in various ways, which made the organization of my work quite difficult. Through exploring multiracial and identity theory, it became apparent how my life stories as a multiracial person could fit in as a contribution to the field of curriculum studies.

Diving into my multiracial experience, I have made ten discoveries: (1) Multiracial identity, such as OpianChocTaliRican, is a complex issue that cannot be ignored due to its pervasiveness in society. (2) Multiracial identity, that goes far beyond racial categorizations, is an act of continual becoming (Ibrahim, 2014). (3) There exists a natural yearning or desire to fit in or belong. (4) Recognizing and being comfortable with one’s own mixed heritages fosters positive social interactions and cultivates a more peaceful society as opposed to violent and

murderous one (Maalouf, 2012). (5) Fixation on phenotypes and colors perpetuates the killing of Black bodies and other violence. (6) Since Black people tend to form collective bonds due to common struggles as a people (hooks, 1992), could mixed peoples also build bonds based upon their common struggles? (7) The notion of double consciousness can be expanded to multiracial consciousness for “triumvirate mental diaspora” where a multiracial person’s thinking exceeds a dualistic way of thinking about the mixed identities beyond race and place. (8)

OpianChocTaliRican is the race I have created for myself because my racial background is rooted in Ethiopian, Choctaw Native American, Italian, and Puerto Rican heritages. (9)

Researching or writing about multiracial experiences evokes complexity and contradiction. (10) Diverse forms of inquiry and modes of expression, such as memoirs, fiction, and poetry, represent the experience of becoming multiracial.

Curriculum theorists make many contributions to the field of curriculum studies through their life stories, autobiographies, or memoirs. In this chapter, I illuminate how I make meaning out of my life experience drawn upon the works of theorists in and outside the field of curriculum studies (e.g., Baldwin, 2008; Bhabha, 2004; Coates, 2015; Fanon, 2004, 2008; Gaztembide-Fernandez, 2009; Ibrahim, 2014; Janis, 2016; Maalouf, 2012; Root, 1992; Spencer, 1999). Based upon my memories, I have composed a memoir where I fictionalize characters, events, settings, etc. tied to political conflicts between advocates for and against multiracial identities. At the end of each story, I create poetic discernment to make meaning out of the fictional stories I have created and to capture philosophical implications towards my feelings and emotions. Using memoir, fiction, and poetry helps explore the boundaries between races and develop a better understanding of who I am as an OpianChocTaliRican: A Black man in a multiracial world.

Multiracial identity is a complex issue that cannot be ignored due to its pervasiveness in society (**Discovery 1**). While it is complex, it exhibits a conflicting nature when deliberating about its status as a racial designation. I am bound by the complexities of multiracial identity and cannot identify monoracially as black. There were not any studies on multiracial identity I could find in the field of curriculum studies so I began searching theorists in other fields and theorists with political agendas. Upon researching works from psychologist, sociologists and those with political agendas, I discovered just how complex the issues of multiracial identities were as a notion positioned in a narrow perspective unsettled on marginality. Root (1992) reveals the growing number of multiracial individuals in the United States however, the research into the lives and perspectives of multiracial individuals is quite limited and with the limited research there is disagreement and conflict. The conflict arises from particular positions of multiracial identity. There are those who advocate for a multiracial category on the US Census and those who are staunchly opposed to it for political reasons. Theorists in these fields advocate for the new racial category for non-marginalized social status of multiracial individuals (Root, 1996), while others are against the new racial category because the impact, which would most likely be negative or futile, are unknown (Spencer, 1999).

These early research findings made me wonder why there was not any research in the field of curriculum studies that spoke specifically to multiracial identity. I was directed toward Sonia Janis' (2016) work, *Are you Mixed?: A War Bride's Granddaughter's Narrative of Lives In-Between Contested Race, Gender, Class, and Power*. The title of her work captivated me because I could answer yes to the question. In her book, she discusses the problem of fitting into a monoracial system as a multiracial individual. In telling her stories autobiographically, Janis (2016) reveals that "The spaces in between a person's beginning and her end harness significant

meanings toward understanding one another in more just ways” (p. xvii). Her stories of being in-between often relate closely to others who have been living in in-between spaces. When studying her work, I didn’t get the impression that she was for or against a multiracial category on the US Census. Her focus on the betterment of multicultural education seeks to enlighten the field on the fact that “literature on multiculturalism and multicultural education has done very little to address the contested spaces of living in-between races by including considerations for multiracial individuals and families” (Janis, 2016, p. xx). Her multiracial lens speaks to how we are thinking about multirace as a whole.

Janis’ ideas are in line with Root’s (1996) notion that “our tendency to think simplistically about complex relationships has resulted in dichotomous, hierarchical classification systems that have become vehicles of oppression” (p. 4) while supporting Spencer’s (2011) argument that advocating for a multiracial category or identity falls into the belief that race actually exists biologically. Spencer (2011) opines “We must recognize... that biological race, hypodescent, mulattoes, monoracial people, and multiracial people today are all figments of the American imagery, as they have been for centuries” (p. 4). Spencer steadfastly believes that the ideas of multirace can eliminate the idea that race is biological but not the way advocates for a multiracial category are perpetuating its ideas (Spencer, 2011). This may sound contradictory on the surface however; Spencer delves into the historical constructions of race by uplifting the term mulatto to shine a bright light on hypodescent. “Hypodescent applies de facto only to blacks, [but] it is the basis for the entire structuring of the US racial paradigm” (Spencer, 2011, p. 4). Spencer’s work has a different agenda from Janis’ work and my own in that it attempts to combat white supremacy, which has bearing on any work that is racially oriented,

however; it is beyond the specific scope of our work. I believe there is room for further study in that area as it relates to blacks, whites, biracial, multiracial, race theory and critical race theory.

The basis and foundation of my dissertation lays a path for critical multiracial identity theory. My dissertation seeks to free me from the “classification systems that have become vehicles of oppression” (Root, 1996). Understanding my identity racially as I grew up slowly recognizing the social interactions that attempted to keep me bound to the black label has been possible through much erudition. Janis (2016) reveals that “ethnic identity is something Whites often get to choose; it is not imposed upon them. Racial choice is not an option for non-whites or minorities,” (p. 125). Being classified as Black or African-American places me in the non-white or minority category thus giving me no choice in choosing my ethnic identity. This may be true for governmental statistics but mentally I could not hold onto the monoracial label of Black.

Identity goes far beyond racial categorizations (**Discovery 2**). It is in constant development, thus one of my racial heritages, Ethiopian (Black), is also in constant development. Due to this phenomenon, I have seen growth in myself from a given identity to an assumed identity to self-identification which will continue to grow (Ibrahim, 2014). This continued growth has blossomed into multiracial identity (OpianChocTaliRican), an act of continual becoming (Ibrahim, 2014).

In order to begin to understand multiracial identity, I had to research identity theory. The stories I tell in my memoir project themes of intimidation and attempting to fit in socially based on identity that, in my mind, minimizes racial identity. To connect and theorize my multiracial stories to the field of curriculum studies, I trace theorists’ writings about identity and developing identity. Theorists such as [Ibrahim, 2014; Maalouf, 2012; Coates, 2015; &

Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009] speak about identity in ways which relate to my experiences as a multiracial person attempting to navigate my world being labeled black but mentally feeling out of place and growing into an ‘Other.’ Ibrahim’s work opened my eyes to the reality that is no easy task nailing down identity because it is in constant development, thus he titles his book, *The Rhizomes of Blackness*. It suggests that when Blackness encounters identity, due to identity’s rhizomatic nature, it grows into dimensions beyond its initial inception (Ibrahim, 2014). In other words, one is not born black but in fact, becomes black through identified cultures, social constructs, language, and location. Ibrahim (2014) states “In short, [his] book is about the processes – the politics of becoming Black” (p. 2).

Throughout my memoir, I show growth from a given identity to an assumed identity to self-identification, which is still changing this very moment. Likened to the rhizome, my identity is forever becoming as a complicated, fluid and dynamic phenomenon. It is as Ibrahim states, “a constant flow or movement of deterritorialization. It is not a point we reach and finally say we are finally here! Rather, it is a way of becoming that we are forever struggling to attain” (Ibrahim, 2014, p. 3). This notion speaks solidly to the inquiry of who am I? Abstractly speaking, it is constantly unknown because one is always in a state of becoming. Ibrahim explains coming to Blackness by showing how people from other localities come to Canada and are perceived a Black. Ibrahim (2014) describes this as an “encounter between the Black body and the syntactic structure of identity” (p. 6). Ironically, my encounter with the syntactic structure of identity is already embedded in the social fabrics of our society.

Upon further inquiry, I find myself in the same position as Clifton Joseph, a West Indian Ibrahim (2014) mentions in his explanation of becoming Black, who states upon coming to Canada, “we had to check/out for ourselves what this blackness was” (p.189). Once I

discovered what this Blackness was – a set of principles, values, language, culture etc. – I found myself in a common space with all people perceived as black and this is something Ibrahim coins as a rhizomatic space. “In this space, the New mixes with the Old in ways that do not polarize or oppose each other... A third rhizomatic space is thus created and given birth to” (Ibrahim, 2014, p. 189). In direct correspondence to this rhizomatic space, Ibrahim’s work has helped me to make a new connection. Being mixed allows for a fourth rhizomatic space where I am becoming multiracial. “Being open to the unknown, the rhizome is an uncontainable dimension or rather directions in motion” (Ibrahim, 2014, p. 2), which is Ibrahim’s approach to the process of becoming Black. Logically speaking, this same process can be applied to any individual of any race or nationality because identity as its fundamental function “requires repetitive, parodic, and continual acts of becoming” (Ibrahim, 2014, p. 7).

There exists a natural yearning or desire to fit in or belong (**Discovery 3**). Regardless of race, I only wanted to be accepted among my peers. However, it was important for me to understand who I am racially. As I delved further into identity theory, I began to understand my own suppressed desire to belong. In my memoir, I expressed the inner turmoil and agony experienced from the rejection and intimidation. Upon reading Amin Maalouf’s work, I discovered that my expression of those experiences was an ambiguous cry for acceptance and desire to belong. Maalouf states that “We are concerned here with two fundamental aspirations, both of which are in differing degrees natural and permissible, but which we must be careful to distinguish” (Maalouf, 2012, p. 95). He feels that every individual has a need or desire to belong or be a part of “a community which accepts and recognizes him and within which he can be understood easily” (Maalouf, 2012, p. 96).

The hours spent writing my memoir pulled this nostalgic notion of belonging from deep within my being as I only wanted to be understood and recognized for who I was and am. Call it mixed, multiracial, black or other; I only desired to be accepted among my peers without being negatively judged. Maalouf (2012) argues that there are those who accept their diversity who will become instruments for strengthening the societies in which they live. However, “those who cannot accept their own diversity may be among the most virulent of those prepared to kill for the sake of identity, attacking those who embody that part of themselves which they would like to see forgotten” (Maalouf, 2012, p. 36).

During my law enforcement career, I often wondered why some officers and supervisors were very negative toward me. I can recall Officer Brown’s negative attitude toward me, leaving me stranded in a brand new environment filled with individuals who could harm me unto death. What portion of me did he see that he wanted to forget in himself? Was it my nappy hair or full lips? Was it my light skin that he did not possess which he desired because he was filled with so much self hate that allowed him to leave me at the sacrificial alter of greenery. To answer in any vane would only be me speculating or surmising on the subject altogether but I truly wonder at this point in my life. I can surmise that Officer Brown viewed himself monoracially as Black or African-American because he left me on the chopping block to fend for myself in a highly unfamiliar and dangerous environment.

Maalouf (2012) argues that those who accept their dual affiliation would never do such a horrid deed. “The Franco-Algerian lad, nor the young man of mixed German and Turkish origin... will ever be on the side of the fanatics if they succeed in living peacefully in the context of their own complex identity” (p. 35). That is to say, recognizing and being comfortable with one’s own mixed heritages fosters positive social interactions and cultivates a

more peaceful society as opposed to violent and murderous one (**Discovery 4**). I concur with Maalouf (2012) but only as an optimistic concurrence because violence still exists in the world even though “the emergence of a racially mixed population is transforming the “face” of the United States” (Root, 1992, P. 3). Realistically, this transformation is no different than the transformation that took place on the North American Continent when the settlers from Europe intermixed with the Native Americans and eventually replaced them or when the slaves were brought to the same shores transforming a white society to a society of domination and subjugation of a group of people.

My optimistic agreeing results from the inner feelings of loyalty I quietly reserved for the White Italian portion of my heritage and the Puerto Rican portion of my heritage. I still, to this day, harbor feelings of guilt over betraying my Puerto Rican friend, Adrian. I also attempt to give everyone the benefit of the doubt including white people because a portion of myself is also white (Italian) and conflict with whites could possibly result in my finding myself against myself. This is only true when that conflict is not in contrast to black people who often times go against white people because of the historical institution of slavery. Many of the treacherous acts perpetrated against the race identified as Black are still being perpetrated to this very day albeit it not in as great a frequency as it had once been in the past. It pains me to know that the human race often times do not get along peacefully due to race. Growing beyond this type of social interaction was not a direct intention on my part because I never really gave it any thought until I read Maalouf’s (2012) work, which subtly suggested that mixed race heritage could possibly bridge the gap between the races. In essence, if people accept the fact that they are racially and ethnically dynamic and fluid, ever changing and growing, it would be the common variable between us all and quite possibly resurrect a more peaceful society. Growing

is an inevitable function of life and lived experience with identity being the ever changing variable along that growth continuum.

Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) writes a memoir to his son describing that growth while at the same time warning of being oppressed by the current racial paradigm due to the stubborn fixated thinking on monoracial categorizations of mixed people's phenotypes and identified color. In fact, "It is confusing to our linear models of identity to consider that a multiracial Black-Indian-European person who looks African American self-identifies as multiracial when someone of a similar heritage identifies as a monoracial African American" (Root, 1992, pp. 6-7). This stubborn fixation on phenotypes, colors, and race perpetuates the killing of Black bodies and other violence (**Discovery 5**). I say mixed people because as Root (1992) points out, "the United States suppressed the historical reality that a significant portion of its citizenry has multigenerational multiracial roots" (p. 7). So, the Black body Coates refers to is very likely to be a mixed body, which Spencer (2011) believes is a threat to the white establishment that once held Blacks in physical bondage.

Reading Coates' (2015) work made me feel choked inside. I felt more connected to my multiracial heritage as he eloquently explains how the racial paradigm in this country was created as the foundation of institutionalized racism, which is furtively embedded within the fabrics of our society. He alludes to the fact that historically, the word "people" did not apply to everyone under a democracy defied (Coates, 2015) and this leads me to believe that we have all been deceived for the benefit of a few. The deception runs deep as "Americans believe in the reality of "race" as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism – the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them – inevitably follows from this in alterable condition" (Coates, 2015, p. 7). In my memoir, I am confronted

with racism, bigotry, and prejudice not only from white people but black people as well and I have grown to a point of opposition to both races. This opposition occurs at varying degrees and times in my life now and is illustrated throughout my memoir.

In some sense, I liken myself to W. E. B. Dubois' theory of double consciousness multiplied. Before I begin articulating the meaning garnered from this theory, I'd like to explain where the thoughts of consciousness were personally engendered. Within my memoir, I discuss my interactions and experiences with those around me from kindergarten to my career as an educator and I narrate from a first person point of view in an attempt to give the reader insight into my thought process at particular moments in my life. Once I began to accept that I was Black based on what others told me, my mother told me and white kids reminded me through verbal declarations about how different we were from each other, I created points of resistance to rejection received from any race. I did this by accepting and associating with those who accepted and willingly associated with me. I did not associate with others based on race however, the socially accepted characteristics attributed to any particular race plagued my mind making me self-conscious about the way I acted, the way I spoke and even the way I walked. To this day, I am conscious of my gait particularly when others are around. My choices for social interaction forced me into "situational ethnicity" which is a way "multiracial people identify themselves differently in different situations, depending on what aspects of identity are salient" (Root, 1996, p. 11). The aspects of identity most salient for me around white people were my black features but around black people my light complexion, lack of rhythm and speech appraised me as White. This contradicted "situational ethnicity" for me because the only aspects of my identity that could fit in with white people were my light complexion and speech but I was rejected as White and my nappy hair, full lips and broad nose surely would fit me in with

blacks but I was rejected as Black many times growing up. To clarify, I never desired to be White. I simply knew had I desired so rejection would have been apparent.

Throughout my memoir, I tried to show a position of neutrality when I came to race. This is why when I was older, I began identifying as 'Other.' While bell hooks believes that black people form collective bonds due to common struggles as a people (hooks, 1992), I wonder whether mixed peoples could also build bonds based upon their common struggles **(Discovery 6)**. I was persuaded to join in the bonding once my black friends decided that I should. I agreed by association but mentally, consciously I found it difficult to sympathize with the notion of sticking together based on common struggles. My struggle stemmed from trying to fit in where I wasn't fully accepted as Black or White and when partially accepted by blacks, they spent a lot of time trying to improve and correct my image which was considered less than Black. I even tried to fit in with the rich population by asking a rich White girl to go out with me without having the foresight to see the struggles that I would incur. Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez discusses those struggles of fitting into two worlds whereby one acts differently while attending an elite prep school than they do when at home far away from that world (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2010). I've watched other rich Black kids do that very same thing. Around whites they speak the language of the whites, dress and cop the mannerisms and demeanor of whites but suppress it all in the presence of blacks if only for fear of being ostracized or beaten up because they don't share the common struggle economically. Their economic status sets them apart from poor blacks and they feel they are a better fit in the rich white world and this comes across as being 'stuck up' or bourgeoisie. How can blacks accept them without trampling on their allegiance to a common struggle? This somewhat speaks to the

focus and intent of Gaztambide-Fernandez's (2010) work in which he desires to bring attention to social inequality,

While the small body of literature on elite schools has addressed a range of other topics... most researchers have focused their work in ways that divert attention from the role of these institutions in reinforcing inequality. Most have not situated their research in ways that address the social, cultural, and economic divisions of the larger society. (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2010, p. 3)

The implication here suggests that the economic status of some in the larger society has an impact on those of lesser economic status. What I gather is that rich and poor can associate through eye contact, cordial associations consisting of greetings, courtesies and even brief interactions that can't be avoided due to enrollment in the same institution of learning but you cannot mix and mingle willingly where social economic status does not meet. Had I been able to read Gaztambide-Fernandez's (2010) work back then I never would have asked her out because it would have been clear to me that I did not have enough money. It's not that she needed my money. It was that I did not meet her economic standards – social economic inequality 101. In my mind I was mixed and my black friends viewed me as partially black while white friends viewed me as black. I had three ways of thinking about myself and often times wished I was full-blooded Choctaw Native American as my grandmother was. In several attempts of explaining my thoughts on how others view me racially, I struggled to articulate it in ways that didn't conjure up thoughts about dissociative disorder and schizophrenia.

The notion of double consciousness can be expanded to multiracial consciousness for "triumvirate mental diaspora," a term I have coined, where a multiracial person's thinking exceeds a dualistic way of thinking about the mixed identities beyond race and place

(Discovery 7). Thoughts are spread out over race and place struggling against adversaries with thoughts on identified race as singular. This struggle becomes necessary when one is open to the idea of self-identification, a life transforming action. Multiple consciousness or split consciousness seemed to lead me down a path to the psych ward without a valid explanation or supporting theory, at least that's how I felt. One of my committee members, Dr. Weaver, suggested W. E. B. Dubois' theory of "Double Consciousness" as theorized by Paul Gilroy's work, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Gilroy brilliantly unfolds the experiences of black people, who were contributors of modernity and how their intellectual works could be found embedded in modern times (Gilroy, 1993). The Diaspora of black culture is in constant motion according to Gilroy (1993) and loosely corresponds to Dubois' (1903/1994), *The Souls of Black Folk*. Of the three phases of evolution for this Diaspora of black culture, the third corresponds with multiracial identity. It "can be defined by its pursuit of an independent space in which black [multiracial] community and autonomy can develop at their own pace and in their own direction" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 122).

Homi Bhabha (1990, 1994), James Baldwin (1998), and Frantz Fanon (2004, 2008) have discussed the notion of double consciousness in their work and its impact on the psyche of the Negro. Embarked upon the study of racism and colonialism, Fanon delves into the study of the black psyche in a world of white people who indeed, have a psyche of their own that cannot be ignored. My inquiry focuses on who am I as a multiracial person perceived as a black man. The Ethiopian portion of my racial make-up resonates soundly with Fanon's (2008) *Black Skins, White Masks* because it captivates the opposition face by black people while at the same time giving me some sense of who I am as a black man. One strand of opposition faced is conforming to the dress of Europeans and speaking their language. Surely in terms of language,

I have lost all but Spanish and it has been Europeanized to a great degree. I speak neither the language of my Ethiopian ancestors nor do I speak the language of my Choctaw Native American ancestors. I have not forgotten, but purposely left out the language of my Italian ancestors because they are of European descent. Dressing in my shirt, tie and neatly starched slacks when going to work, I sometimes find myself going into the poor neighborhoods to deal with parents of black children and I feel absurdly awkward. Why? Fanon opines,

The wearing of European clothes, whether rags or the most up-to-date style, using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; adorning the native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements. (Fanon, 2008, p. 9)

I believe that absurd awkwardness stems from feelings of guilt on many levels. On one hand, I seem to have made it and they have not, on the other hand, I feel as though they are judging me for the latter and then I desire not to be seen at all to erase the feelings entirely. Ironically, I don't feel the same around white parents even when I feel judged by them. Perhaps this is because as Fanon states "In every country in the world there are social climbers, those who think they've arrived. And opposite them there are those who keep the notion of their origins" (Fanon, 2008, p. 20). I typically, even now, oscillate between the two.

My poem 'My Therapy' speaks to this oscillation between loyalty and naiveté by expressing the use of therapy which forces me to look away from my origins to get away from the repression felt however, this same therapy brings me back to my racial origins as I realize it helps me to clear away the repression suppression, oppression and depression caused by the racial paradigm that controls the idea of racism in the first place.

Fanon (2008) speaks of racism as something that is prevalent in society or it is not and it stems from the economic structure of a particular society. When one group of people treats another group as inferior, it simply reaffirms that the dominant group belongs to an elite class. In comparing the white class to the black class in South Africa “we could retort that [the] shift of the white proletariat’s aggressiveness onto the black proletariat is basically a result of South Africa’s economic structure,” (Fanon, 2008, p. 68). Due to this white elitist power structure being put in place, blacks remain in a position of inferiority and are constantly trying to remove the impact of this racist structure. Blacks do this by trying to fit in through means that transcend their color. They act and think in ways they hope will make their color/race invisible to the elitists they dwell among. Invocation of double consciousness is impossible to avoid as Fanon (2008) points to its impact on the Black man. “Moral standards require the black, the dark, and the black man to be eliminated from this consciousness. A black man, therefore, is constantly struggling against his own image,” (p. 170). For me as a multiracial person, that struggle is amplified beyond double.

James Baldwin identifies similar struggles for the black man observing too, the nature of double consciousness. Baldwin’s (1998) *Baldwin: Collected Essays* discusses the deep rooted issue of identity and race for the black man. Having lived the majority of his life in France, Baldwin (1998) gives an inimitable view on racial inequality and identity from the perspective of a black man. In his essay, *The Fire Next Time*, he eloquently demonstrates through abrupt and harsh realities, the condition of the black man in a subjugated state. Due to the servile conditions blacks were subjected to in his adolescent years, Baldwin was determined to beat the odds of being oppressed and becoming a criminal as many around him did. “I did not intend to allow the white people of this country to tell me who I was, and limit me that way, and polish

me off that way” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 301). It was his own struggle with double consciousness that led him to a career in the church (Baldwin, 1998). He wanted a life beyond the sordid confines of American streets because he recognized his own shortcomings in that world, which were stereotypical black characteristics he lacked like being able to sing and dance. Mentally, Baldwin believed he could do anything a white boy could do and it put fear in his father’s voice when he realized that Baldwin was serious as he told him “I really believe I could do anything a white boy could do and had every intention of proving it” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 302). Challenging the white establishment worried his father because he felt it would lead him on a path of destruction (Baldwin, 1998). This path of destruction is actualized by the very nature of the white man which incisively reveals somewhat of a double-consciousness in their thinking as well. Baldwin profoundly explains,

Therefore, a vast amount of the energy that goes into what we call the Negro problem is produced by the white man’s profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is, and at the same time a vast amount of the white anguish is rooted in the white man’s equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from the tyranny of his mirror. (Baldwin, 1998, p. 341)

It is clear that the white man has two ways of thinking about his own perception and apparently desires one over the other however; his mental struggle with these conflicting thoughts causes him anguish. This is the same anguish that drove me to prove to my math teacher in high school that I could sell candy bars just as well as any white student. I wanted to be seen for my own abilities and not judged by color. This anguish is what I feel when I am not seen as who I am, when blacks are not seen as who they are yet all the while desiring to be seen in truth. Baldwin’s words analytically drive home the idea of double consciousness being present in all

men who desire to be identified as they truly are and perhaps most stunning indeed, is the fact that the conflict between the races appears to not only be economic but the results of an identity crisis. My poem, *The Black Creation*, speaks solidly to this notion as it points to the Triumvirate Mental Diaspora experienced by the speaker. Seeking the white man's reality then searching deep within only to discover who you really are is the complete objective. Baldwin writes in such a fashion that it is impossible to ignore who you are on the inside without feeling some force of guilt upon your heart, your consciousness, your soul.

In *Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha (1994) discusses cultural differences based on location, race, gender, politics, and the negotiation of cultural value in search of identity in the modern world. I was particularly drawn to his work for his discussion on identity. Utilizing the work of Frantz Fanon (1967, 1986), Bhabha (1994) uncovers the psychoanalytic ambivalence of the unconscious within the oppressed colonized world. Readdressing the desire of men as it points toward double consciousness, Bhabha (1994) makes note of Fanon's question of what does the black man want? The desire aligns with what seems to be everyone's desire, which is a reflection of self. The problem as Bhabha (1994) sees it is that "There is no master narrative or realist perspective that provides a background of social and historical facts against which emerge the problems of the individual or collective psyche" (p. 61). The problems of individual or collective psyche being ignored causes issues within society as a whole. Society and psyche being synonymous to one another ultimately produce mirrored images of one another (Bhabha, 1994) creating the civil status of any society. When the psyche is ignored or pushed aside with reasoning that masks its true fruition, the result is "the ultimate misrecognition of man" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 62).

I can see the impact of this reality on our society as it relates to people who identify as black or multiracial because both racial identifications experience the same alienation of psyche at some point or another in their lived experience. Recurrently, I have experienced it as an individual racially identified as black as well as my own desire to racially identify as multiracial. Bhabha writes that there are three points to take note of in order to understand identity, “First: to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus... Second: the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 63). The second point furtively illustrates double consciousness as Bhabha continues “... it is a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once that makes it impossible for the devalued, insatiable ‘evolve’... to accept the colonizer’s invitation to identity” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 64). In like manner, my poem, *A Hermit’s Desire*, surreptitiously illustrates a doubling of consciousness by desiring solidarity with my thoughts of struggle against my would be colonizers – friends. Bhabha (1994) states that Fanon recognizes this dark side of myself. It is “closed consciousness or ‘dual narcissism’ to which he attributes to the depersonalization of colonial man” (p. 87). The complex struggle of identifying as a multiracial person appears to stem from the same factors as oppressed individuals identified as Black. These profound writers have brought me to the realization that multiracial identity maybe problematic for the US Census and social constructions of race in society however, the catalyst to the problem continues to get glossed over making multiracial identity an expansion of a problem that already exists. My stories will hopefully bring more attention to the problem by revealing the complex experiences multiracial people deal with opening up new ways of thinking about the relevant reasons and need for self-identifying racially. It is a powerful, transformative action that endures until one decides to change. Each individual seeking their

own identity without governmental and societal influences are empowered to change the landscape of race as we know it today.

No one is going to tell me it is alright to call myself multiracial (Janis, 2016), therefore I call myself OpianChocTaliRican. OpianChocTaliRican is the race I have created for myself because my racial background is rooted in Ethiopian, Choctaw Native American, Italian, and Puerto Rican heritages (**Discovery 8**). At times, I feel torn between who I am in terms of my racial mixedness and the black and white company with which I often found myself associated. Gilroy (1993) documents that Dubois produced a concept of Double Consciousness that suggests “One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (p. 126). This dualistic way of thinking about one’s own identity helps me to clarify my thinking in even more analytic ways. I see myself as Black as Whites do and I see myself as an American as we all should however, I see myself as a mixture of races which complicates the “two warring ideals in one dark body” extending it to three warring ideals. I would rephrase the concept as Triumvirate Mental Diaspora, which suggests that the thoughts of one’s own identity are spread out over race and place (as it relates to fitting in), struggling against adversaries with fixated thoughts on identified race as mono, singular when racial identity is intrinsically fluid, dynamic and ever changing. My racial features alone speaks sympathetically to double consciousness however, my racial mix finds it circumscribed within the race of black. Beyond that portion of myself, I find the sensation of double consciousness expanding to the Triumvirate Mental Diaspora, “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 134). Thus, when blacks see me as partially Black or not

Black enough, I retreat to the knowledge that they may be seeing the mix in me that is other than black. My memoir tells stories that show my identity evolving from not being aware of race to accepting social constructions of my identity as Black to resisting those constructs to accepting my mix as other onto multiracial identity and eventually OpInChocTaliRican. This is quite similar to Janis (2016) whereby “My identity continues to develop and transform. Not only does it change, my understanding of my racialized self dwells in one, two, or more spaces, then switches to another and dabbles in another” (p. 126), a clear Triumvirate Mental Diaspora.

Researching or writing about multiracial experiences evokes complexity and contradiction (**Discovery 9**). Writing from the perspectives of a multiracial person, a once marginalized subject begins to take on a voice with various pitches and intonations that “will help readers to explore a new, hybridized world; to ask sticky questions; to refuse easy answers” (Prasad, 2006, p. 9). Sonia Janis’ work on mixed race theory led her to discover that it is a contemplative discourse of sorts that is positioned well beyond modern and postmodern identity theories which may ultimately lie within a trans-modern theory (Janis, 2016) and while the topic of mixed race theory is found in different fields, it “is not fully recognized in the field of curriculum studies” (Janis, 2016, p. 127). My multiracial story is another in addition to Janis’ work that will make a contribution to the field of curriculum studies. The stories from multiracial individuals are unique in that one multiracial individual’s lived experience does not adequately cover all multiracial individuals’ experiences. While certain characteristics may overlap to some degree in each story, none are the same. What I find most interesting and quite poignant to the study of multiracial identity theory is in each story “of personalized pluralities, the rigid categorization of people based on the biological and social construction of race diminishes” (Janis, 2016, p. 127). What these stories do is enlighten readers on the subject of

multirace giving rise to inquiries from people of multiracial heritages as well as people who identify with a single race. Furthermore, it produces criticism for or against the political aims of multiracial identity which breeds intellectual discourse in and of itself. The field of curriculum studies would greatly benefit from a discourse on multiracial identity theory as it is laden with contradictions, deliberation, and complexities awaiting an opportunity to unravel its many modes of inquiry.

My own experiences are tied to some of the political strife between advocates for a multiracial category on the US Census and opponents to the same. Growing to the realization that I am mixed and being rejected by both Black and White races, I developed a resistance to the identity of either race by labeling myself as ‘Other.’ It was nerve wrecking to list ‘Other’ on a job application or legal document at first because I had a socially constructed embedded trepidation for resisting the race society said I should be because of my phenotype. What eventually always overrode my trepidation were the voices of intimidation I heard growing up. They reminded me that I wasn’t black enough while white voices reminded me that black was all I was when I knew better.

During my research on multiracial identity, I read Kathleen Gay’s *I Am Who I Am: Speaking Out about Multiracial Identity*. Her book looked at the function of the racial paradigm in the U.S. and how it developed out of a history of racial prejudice. It also examined the role of racial heritage and how that role impacts a person’s sense of identity (Gay, 1995). Points made regarding the future of a multiracial designation on the US Census was what sparked my interest in the political debate. Due to my experiences of locating place within the black race I unwittingly advocated for a multiracial category on the US Census however, this was not central to my inquiry into multiracial identity theory. In 2013, my daughter was born and the

birth certificate had a multiracial designation listed for race. I was elated beyond expression. My daughter will grow up identified racially as she really is – multiracial. Because race is biologically a reified notion, I will reserve the right to change when the racial paradigm changes once again. As it stands right now for my two-year-old daughter, governmentally she is multiracial however, she is truly OpiianChocTaliRican. Experienced contradictions of this nature only help diversify the field of curriculum studies as multiracial identity theory becomes a burgeoning topic within the field.

Diverse forms of inquiry and modes of expression, such as memoirs, fiction, and poetry, represent the experience of becoming multiracial (**Discovery 10**). Delving into multiracial identity theory, I search ways of representing my multiracial experience without undermining my strengths as a writer. Writing about myself initially felt like the right method to use because I honestly thought it would be easy but I discovered otherwise. In spite of this, I continued researching methodological approaches to writing about oneself and discovered a plethora of ways to include biography, autobiography, and memoir. These three methods express an individual's lived experiences and Janis (2016) notes through her research that experience is an important, essential part of curriculum studies. My narrated experiences give voice to a growing multiracial population that deserves to be heard. "Writing accounts of life as a mixed race person is not new to literature or academia," (Janis, 2016, p. 133). It was new to me and I cite theorists and writers I felt contributed to the inspiration I gained for writing a memoir (Broyard, 2008; Coates, 2008, 2015; Hanauer, 2010; He, 2003; Janis, 2016; & Prasad, 2006). These are a few of the works that stood out to me and unfolded my understanding toward writing the most compelling research study I was capable of at this particular juncture. The theory and method used in these works were instrumental in helping me understand ways to

write in more interesting and compelling ways. Sonia Janis' work, *Are You Mixed?: A War Bride's Granddaughter's Narrative of Lives In-Between Contested Race, Gender, Class, and Power* (2016) is a compilation of stories about her lived experiences as a multiracial teacher living in between race and place. Her stories are told out of order, written as they came to her memory, enlightening readers on her experiences "of contradictory spaces regarding race, gender, sexuality, power, ethnicity, and class" (Janis, 2016, p. xvii). Reading about her experiences enlightened me on the different struggles that multiracial people deal with on a daily basis. Moreover, the scope of her discussion on race, racism, multicultural education, spaces in-between race and place, being mixed and her exploration of finding identity in those spaces in-between is quite broad but reads like a breathing document expanding and contracting between the contextual points made throughout her stories. As I write my memoir describing the experiences of ignorance encountered, I chocked it up to misunderstandings or misinterpretation as she did with her bible study group member. Her group member "believed the pastor should have made it clear that the interracial relationship he used in his example was sinful" (Janis, 2016, p. 44). This story illustrates how people are unaware of multiracial issues and how they affect multiracial people. In telling my memoir, I would like it to have the same impact upon others as Janis' story had upon me. I wonder what those ladies in her group would think after reading Janis' story. How would they feel? Probably nothing much due to the "Thick wool soaked in White Supremacy and Christian religion... covering [their] eyes" (Janis, 2016, p. 43). I do not think it is the intent of Janis' work nor mine to change a person's opinion outright rather it is to give a foundation to build upon from a different perspective in order to formulate a more informed opinion, preferably an opinion that is soaked in love, care and compassion for fellow human beings.

Searching for that same compassion in my own lived experiences as told through memoir, I found Ming Fang He's (2003) work, *A River Forever Flowing: Cross-Cultural Lives and Identities in the Multicultural Landscape*, to be helpful. While her work coins the concept of Cross-Cultural narrative inquiry, its objective is "to capture the evolving, shifting nature of cross-cultural experience, to honor the subtleties, fluidities, and complexities of such experience, and to cultivate understanding towards individual cross-cultural experience and the multicultural contexts that shape and are shaped by such experience" (He, 2003, p. xvii). I was particularly drawn to the way she talked about cross-cultural lives and cross-cultural identities. It was the first work I read that inspired me to write narratively about my experiences. I felt as if my multiracial life had meaning within the pages of some type of narrative inquiry but I had to find a way in which to discuss the inquiry. He's chapters begin with a prelude that creatively discuss the methodology, theory and historical context of her stories, which give readers a basis for understanding her research. "Each character tells a story to elucidate a shifting identity, embody a theme, express a dilemma, and establish a move for change" (He, 2003, p. xx).

Telling my story from a multiracial perspective would express some of the same occurrences within the narrative however, I wanted to give a prelude to each story chapter poetically more or less to express creatively, the dilemmas experienced with multiracial identity. Those experiences invoke anger in me I found comparable to Janis' experience with similar dilemmas. "My blood was boiling... I just sat there stunned; I was voiceless and motionless, while my heart raced... [and] my entire head was getting warmer and warmer," (Janis, 2016, p. 44). To reclaim those feelings and reactions to dilemmas experienced, I chose to express my memoir using fiction and poetry. I had never had any formal education in writing

poetry or fiction therefore, I researched works that discussed poetry and fiction with the intent of connecting it to multiracial identity.

David Hanauer's (2010) *Poetry as Research: Exploring Second Language Poetry Writing* gave me insight on justifying the use of poetry as part of an inquiry method. Hanauer points out that the use of arts-based research is delegitimized by established researchers due to its failure to produce knowledge that can be generalized and replicated (Hanauer, 2010). The counter argument legitimizes the use of poetic inquiry as research by implementing the support of this specific arts-based research with philosophical and theoretical arguments (Hanauer, 2010). The poems I construct to precede each story chapter of my memoir have philosophical implications toward my feelings and understanding of self past and present as well as futuristic theoretical arguments to be possibly used in further research on multiracial identity. While this is apparent, Hanauer (2010) warns that these two justifications for utilizing poetic inquiry reveal "a certain tautology involved in both approaches. They both start and finish with their own self-justification" (p.10). Hanauer is not suggesting that poetic inquiry is invalid rather he supports addressing its legitimized use as a research question in itself. By exploring the characteristics of poetry writing and ways it can be used as data, Hanauer aims to legitimize its use as research in the field of social science and disciplinary boundaries crossed.

There are several directions my poems take to draw readers into more in depth conversation that once existed in invisible realms manifested into visible realms to become more than mere articulation of my experience but to see myself anew and sharply in hopes that others will replicate that becoming within themselves all the same (Faulkner, 2009). The recreated poem I created from a narrative found in Sandra Faulkner's *Poetry as Method: Reporting Research through Verse* (2009) illustrates Hanauer's point of utilizing poetry as data

and its benefit. “The benefits of this approach were a more powerful presentation of data and the enhancement of the emotional intensity and poignancy of the respondent’s [myself] comments” (Hanauer, 2010, pp. 77-78). Poetry, in this respect, is a very valid method of creatively enhancing memoir.

Fictional enhancements were found through reading Chandra Prasad’s (2006) *Mixed: An Anthology of Short Fiction on the Multiracial Experience*. This anthology of short fiction by multiracial writers implanted the idea of using fiction in my mind. Being concerned with the identities of those mentioned in my memoir, I wanted to reveal my own experiences without implicating anyone who did not ask to be written about or described in terms they may wish to forget. My memoir is about my experiences as a multiracial person and I needed an exemplar of a fictional work that could connect me to my subject. Mixed “is by and about multiracial persons, but the feelings it evokes are universal” (Prasad, 2006, p. 9) which is the aim of my memoir. An invocation of feelings universally is the catalyst needed to encourage new thinking about multiracial identity. 18 mixed individuals tell their stories about their experiences as multiracial people. Prasad hopes her book will show how boundaries are actually blurred when given a closer look (Prasad, 2006). Exploring the boundaries between races can lead multiracial people to see them quite differently from people who identify as a single race. This different view from multiracial people is desperately needed more in the field of research.

In search of ways to articulate my memoir, I read Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* (2015) and *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008) in that order. *Between the World and Me* was an inquiry based proposition posed as a letter written to his son. *The Beautiful Struggle* was about the challenges of growing up in the mean streets of Baltimore and being raised by his father throughout those challenges. What I found most compelling about both works was the

expressive language he uses to tell how his father struggled to raise him and how he warns his son about the vices of the world that can ultimately cause him harm if he does not pay attention to his black body. The rhythm and pace of his writing is poetic and has the ability to draw the reader into his world. This was important to me because it established in my mind that the ideas and expressions of my work are only pieces of the work at large. How does anyone read the work if they are not captivated by its content?

Descriptively and analogously poetic, Coates expresses the struggle of growing up on rough city streets. “In those days, crazy Chuckie threatened our neighborhood. When we lined up for five on five, every tackle he took personally, every block was an invite to scrap” (Coates, 2008, p. 9). The flow and rhythm of his words draw me back to my own struggles growing up on mean city streets. As one who identifies as Black, Coates experienced some of the same issues with racism as I had from the position of inequality-racism. Regardless of whether I identify as Black, Multiracial or Other, the fact will remain that “Americans believe in the reality of “race” as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism – the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them – inevitably follows from this inalterable condition” (Coates, 2015, p. 7). The call for more works like Coates’ is at hand to speak honestly and boldly about the furtive modes of institutionalized racism deeply embedded within the fabrics of our society. Change can only occur if we continue to shine the light on inequality via racism by speaking about it in various ways, scholarly and otherwise; less we find ourselves in a moribund mental state.

Bliss Broyard (2007) answers the call by writing courageously about her father’s secret life in *One Drop: My Father’s Hidden Life-A Story of Race and Family Secrets*. Digging up her father’s past revealed that he was racially mixed but chose to identify as white because his

phenotype made it possible. I view her entire story as one to be envied and I mean for myself because I would give my right arm to know more specific details about the Italian heritage in my family. Broyard is a “snitch” for telling the family secret in such detail and that is looked down upon in the black community. I, too, am a “snitch” in the same respect because I am the only one in my family who has ever talked about the Italian side to outsiders. After reading about Broyard discovering she was multiracial, I felt it appropriate that I tell my family secret. Broyard’s story brings to full fruition the notion that one drop of Black blood identifies you as Black. This caused some confusion for her as she navigated her place quietly in a white world knowing the truth of the matter was that she was multiracial. This dilemma set in motion the mental battles that take place which I call a Triumvirate Mental Diaspora. Like Broyard, I asked the questions she asked only in reverse. “If all other things were equal, was there any evidence that black men would be constitutionally more prone to reckless behavior than white men? Hadn’t I in fact known white men who were reckless and black men who were not?” (Broyard, 2007, p. 100)? These mental battles force you to seek commonality within the human race beyond color, phenotype or racial identification. Reading Broyard’s work inspired me to connect to my own multiracial heritage in ways that fostered courage, courage to stand up, sound off and be heard.

I have learned to fully embrace that fact as I have journeyed through the dissertation program at Georgia Southern University. I received my Specialist degree in Teaching and Learning at Liberty University in 2010. Sadly enough, I did not feel challenged there as the work involved felt like stagnated edited dictation and regurgitation without the freedom to express in intellectual and academic ways. I was encouraged to pursue my doctorate at Georgia Southern by a co-worker at the high school where I worked as a teacher. I traded two years and

30 hours to a doctorate degree for five years and over 66 hours for a doctorate degree at Georgia Southern. Some people have called me crazy but I discovered the curriculum studies program there. It pulls at your consciousness in ways that are conducive to transformation and I am forever grateful for the experience. I have always struggled with my identity as a mixed race person and that struggle had always been intrinsic and silent within me. As Janis (2016) recalls, “I wanted someone to tell me it was okay to call myself something other than White” (p. 136) – Black for myself however, as she continues, “for many years I struggled with this same desire for some person to give me permission to identify not as [Black] but as mixed, multiracial” (Janis, 2016, p. 136). I learned that desire was as much of a reified notion as biological race itself. Waiting for permission meant being silenced by invisible chains of inappropriate responses and mis-education. I now question who I am racially without fear of offending someone or being misunderstood.

The curriculum studies program has changed my inner struggles to an inquiry of who am I, which wields a voice of curiosity, strength, compassion and new knowledge in the form of a memoir. These stories reveal a growth from being forced to accept a monoracial identity – Black – to accepting myself for what I am – multiracial. People’s lack of understanding of multiracial issues intertwined with their lack of knowledge on governmental constructions of race inhibits their ability to lead healthy, happy, virtuous, lives (Schubert, 2009). Part of leading happy lives comes from having a healthy identity, which is paramount to overcoming repression and incompetence (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Tubman, 1995). I have learned that identity is steadfastly linked to knowledge of self and it is pivotal to our understanding of who we are as well as what we know about who we are (Castenell & Pinar, 1993). Identity thus becomes an essential part of life that traverses every aspect of our lived experience (Ayers, 2004). When

examining my experiences teaching in retrospect, I often wondered whether I was good at teaching or just mediocre.

Upon reading Parker J. Palmer's (2007) book, *The Courage to Teach*, I discovered that identity and integrity play a large role, which impacts the value placed on teachers. Not being fully at ease with my own identity, which I kept silently hidden away, save my obvious racial phenotype, I believe hindered my abilities as a teacher. As much as I probed my students and learned about them, I never gave them an opportunity to know me beyond what was obviously visible. Just as curriculum should be multidimensional, socially dynamic and more importantly, questioned, so should the teacher charged with imparting these fluid characteristics of curriculum be to their students (Kridel, 2010). While teaching, my students never knew I identified as 'Other', nor were they aware that I did not like the title African-American. None knew my racial mix other than part Native American, which many black students acknowledge in their own racial mix however, they still identify singularly as Black or African-American. I discovered these realities through the curriculum studies program for which without it I'm not certain I would have come to these conclusions about my own identity. It is my desire and hope that my dissertation work will enlighten many on the issues of identity and multirace and perhaps invoke a spirit of new thinking about race altogether. In that respect, what will race look like in the future?

One methodological aspect of expressing my memoir is through poetry. I begin each story chapter with a poem, which describes my thoughts and feelings in the moments within each story as well as the present moment creating a cultural hybrid that serves to amplify my reflexive thoughts and concept of Triumvirate Mental Diaspora (Werbner & Modood, 2015). Thus, my poems serve to provoke thinking on the matter of multiracial identity as it relates to

my experiences past and present to garner new ways of thinking about the impact of multiracial identity on individuals who may be confused about their place in society. As a multiracial person who experienced just that, I want my poems to serve as a voice to strengthen the position of multiracial identity within our society. “The hybrid voice – she, he, it, they, us – can only accrue authority by questioning its a priori security, its first person privilege” (Werbner & Modood, 2015, p. xiii). This hybrid voice can also be construed as phenomenological inquiry or interpretive inquiry because its poetic objective is to investigate “the distinctly human perceptions of individual people and results in descriptions of such perceptions which appear directly to the perceptions of other people” (Pinar et. al, 1995, p. 405). When ascertaining perceptions, whether they be my own or others’, I have to question what multiracial culture looks like. In comparison to Werbner and Modood’s (2015) notes on political culture, I would have to agree that multiracial culture takes on the same structure. Its complexities are fluid and constantly developing. “Therefore, our view of any political [or multiracial] condition or concept is, in large part, a hypothesis based on the moving parts of the present and our analytical languages are informed by terms of transition” (Werbner & Modood, 2015, p. x). In other words, hybridity from this perspective becomes a valid deduction derived at only by seeking confirmation of multiracial culture. For instance, my poem, *Forever Black* contradicts the love and infatuation felt for a White girl by a multiracial person viewed as Black. The poetic expression voices opinions on why rejection was apparent over the seemingly obvious fact that I was black. However, the question of multiracial culture lies marginalized due to uneducated renunciations of the past. As time has progressed forward, multiracial culture and identity are developing as we speak, write, and deliberate the concept altogether, not only in America but around the world. Weaver (2009) illustrates this in his work, *Popular Culture*,

Non-European English people are in a constant state of identity negotiation. For example, an English citizen who is originally from Jamaica or has descendents from that land is constantly reminded that they are neither Jamaican nor British; therefore they are constantly inventing who they are, what their roots mean, and what it means to be an English citizen. (p. 45)

Awad Ibrahim's (2014) *The Rhizome of Blackness* also points to this phenomenon highlighting the fact that African immigrants to Canada negotiate their identity by ingratiating themselves toward black popular culture, which incidentally, North Americans view them as anyway only being differentiated by place and location. I have attempted to, through poetic expression, demonstrate an invention and reinvention of myself as I negotiate my identity as multiracial. Ingratiating myself toward blackness, I write *My Black People*, a poem that illustrates the joy and pride of being black and identified as such. However, my poem, *The Treasure Inside*, contradicts the joys of the black ride, forces me to look inside and choose my identity which ultimately collides with society's construction of race in this hour spawn by the tutelage of government and hegemonic power. My poems illustrate expanded double consciousness or Triumvirate Mental Diaspora, one's thoughts of their own identity spread out over race and place in complete contrast with how others view and perceive you racially.

EPILOGUE:

A LETTER TO MY DAUGHTER: A SONG OF BECOMING OPIANCHOCTALIRICAN

Micah Azari'el Williams, you're too young to understand what race or color is really about. When your mother teasingly refers to you as 'Light Bright' you smile and I hold this deep desire that when you are old enough to understand you will keep smiling. Keep smiling because your complexion is a part of you. Keep smiling because your melanin speaks to me about who you are. Never be ashamed of your skin color. It's a mixture of atoms that produces an 'Other' racial clarification that you should not dwell upon because I tried that growing up and it causes undue stresses in your life (Root, 1992). You are what you are but people have to have some way of characterizing you or labeling you to distinguish you from others (Prasad, 2006).

Categorizations of race become necessary in order to place people systematically in society. These same people will form collective bonds of common struggle (Hooks, 1992) and will accept you if you sympathize with them. Common struggles can help you develop a portion of your own identity but I would caution you there. Developing identity can be complex, confusing, and sometimes contradictory. It is an ever changing, fluid, and dynamic phenomenon that commands your attention but do not let it consume you. See your identity as a kaleidoscope positioned to change at a moment's notice. The blood running through your veins is impossible to identify. If I drew four vials of blood from an Ethiopian, a Choctaw Native American, an Italian, and a Puerto Rican and set them in front of you could you tell me which was who? Most likely not beyond a guess but this simply suggests that race is a reified notion. It is not biological.

Therefore sweetheart, do not fixate on ghostly concepts such as race. If, however, you must, then acknowledge your true racial heritage as multiracial. You are Ethiopian, Choctaw Native American, Italian, and Puerto Rican all-in-one. Do not deny any portion of yourself. Acknowledge all parts of yourself in part or in whole. Accept yourself first knowing you are worth more than gold and if the truth be told you are invaluable. The breath that you breathe makes you infallible as a human being and the same applies to any and all you are seeing. Here is something that I want you to know. When I was a few years older than you, I was picked on, talked about and beaten up for being 'Light Bright'. I was called names and alienated from white and black kids many times while growing up and I had to learn to cope with feelings of rejection, isolation, and stress. I had to learn to build confidence in areas of my life where I lacked self-confidence. What I learned that was most important was to recognize my racial heritage, your racial heritage, for what it truly is. It is a phenomenon that will force you to think about your identity in various ways based on how you see yourself and how others see you and how you respond to others who see you contrary to how you see yourself. I call this a Triumvirate Mental Diaspora because your thoughts are all over the place concerning your own identity racially and otherwise. I gained strength from self-identifying as 'Other' initially but there was much I still did not know about my own identity. After much studying on the topic of multiracial identity, I discovered my racial identity as OpianChocTaliRican, a self-identified race.

I'm comfortable with my own label and more confident about my racial identity. My journey toward self-identification was tumultuous and confusing so I hope the words that follow will give you the tools and foresight to have faith and confidence in who you are, a multiracial child. You have a right to self-identify anyway you see fit and that is conducive to your well-

being (Root, 1992). You can always talk with me when you are confused or troubled. I recently discovered that your grandmother, Suzy and Ti-ti Tonnette were also bullied, intimidated and made to feel less than worthy because they were light skinned. My heart dropped and beat with fear for you because like me, they kept their thoughts and emotions to themselves not sharing or discussing with anyone. I fear for you because I notice that same demeanor in you at times even though you are only just now coming into your toddler stage of development. Adolf Brown describes this as our second 'backpack' and it is hidden inside of the backpack everyone can see (Brown, 2008).

When you are old enough I will reveal to you my second 'backpack' so you do not have to fill yours with the same repressive content. The contents never go away but are easier to cope with and deal with when fully acknowledged (Brown, 2008). I want you to be a strong, confident example of a multiracial child for other multiracial children who may be experiencing a Triumvirate Mental Diaspora. When you are old enough to fully grasp the concept of race and identity, I want you to know that multiracial is merely a racial designation expanding the problem of race identity into one more complicated category. It is complicated due to its variegated nature. Be enlightened, however, this additional category further complicating the racial paradigm may be needed in order for our thinking to expand beyond fixed monoracial categories. This will ultimately help all multiracial children of the future such as yourself find place on the racial paradigm.

Having this place will give each one of you confidence in knowing that you fit into this racial scheme that we have fallen in love with in America. Do not let this love affair trouble you because beyond it you have a racial heritage that allows you to self-identify. Join me in self-identifying as OpianChocTaliRican as I am what my mother and father is and you are what your

mother and father is. You may want to identify antithetically and I encourage that if it is your desire but never forget that you are human first and should be treated with love, respect, and kindness. Show humility in who you are in hopes that others will see humility in themselves for who they are giving way to forging relationships that fixate on positive deeds and actions for a better society and world to live.

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