

Fall 2012

Through Smoke and Mirrors: Constructing Identity between the Myths of Black Inferiority and a Post-Racial America

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THROUGH SMOKE AND MIRRORS:
CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY BETWEEN THE MYTHS OF BLACK INFERIORITY AND A
POST-RACIAL AMERICA

by

GWYNEIRA YVETTE DIXON LEDFORD

(Under the Direction of Daniel Chapman)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an inquiry into my life. It is an exploration of my lived experience as an African American female negotiating through traditions in Southern culture and societal pressures to create a positive identity. Using autobiographical narrative (Connelly, He, & Phillion, 2008, Pinar, 2008) as a methodology and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000), double consciousness (DuBois, 1903), and the Nigrescence Theory of black identity development (Cross, 1991) as the theoretical framework, I examine my experiences from childhood to adulthood. Through these narrations, I note paradigm shifts in my thinking that identify the psychological struggles between feeling racially inferior and comfortable with my race. To protect individuals who may be inaccurately perceived, I fictionalize the setting and characters while remaining faithful to each character's persona and the nature of the events.

Although there are other autobiographical works of research literature that explore the societal influences of one's racial identity, few texts explore the aspects of race, gender, and class from the rural perspective of an African American female educator. My dissertation contributes to the field of curriculum studies in several ways. It explores the internalized color-based hierarchy that occurs within African American culture as well as American society and illustrates how it impacts various aspects of our lives. It also explores the ways that race interacts

with gender, class, and religion creating a more complex distinction between those who are perceived as inferior and/or superior. Additionally, it challenges teachers, administrators, parents, and all others who educate to reflect upon their personal values and beliefs and critically examine the external factors that help to create them.

The invisibility of white supremacy and the psychological effects of racism are often undetected, ignored, or ineffectively addressed. Considering our country's tumultuous racial past, many people believe that current Civil Rights legislation along with the election of black president signify a post-racial America. Racism and racial discrimination continue to negatively impact people of color, and our unawareness of such issues increases the power of white supremacy. Thus, it perpetuates the mis-education that we receive in our homes, schools, and through various messages in our daily lives. To address the problem of white supremacy and the internalization of racial inferiority/superiority, we must be willing to critically examine our society and the individual lives that dwell within it. This work is a model of such efforts.

INDEX WORDS: Narrative inquiry, Autobiography, Identity, Race, Place, Culture, Gender, Nigrescence Theory, Black Feminist Thought, Double Consciousness

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B.A., Georgia Southern University, 2002

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

STATESBORO, GA

2012

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Electronic Version Approved:
December 2012

DEDICATION

Life's challenges are often overcome when we are surrounded by love and encouragement. This work is dedicated to my parents—Charlie and Gwendolyn Dixon, two people who have provided me with these my entire life. In appreciation for supporting me and sacrificing our precious time together, I dedicate this work to my husband—Daniel Ledford. For teaching me the importance of making your time on Earth meaningful, I dedicate this work to my late son—Asher Ledford. Additionally, these words are for my son—Timothy Ledford—so that he might learn to look beyond superficial expectations, ignore negative voices, and pursue the greatness that lies within him.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank Dr. Daniel E. Chapman. If it weren't for you, I would have never found my voice in the world of curriculum studies. It was you that made me feel like my words were meaningful and had value. You pushed me beyond a level of comfort so that I would create great work, and you kept me focused on my purpose of educating others as well as continuing to educate myself. Thank you for believing in me when I wanted to give up. Thank you for helping me to become a true scholar.

I would also like to thank my committee members—Dr. Ming Fang He, Dr. Sabrina Ross, and Dr. Leila Villaverde. Dr. He, you have made me feel like a valuable person ever since the day I met you. The love and compassion that you show your students makes people like me feel confident. I will always remember that it was you who encouraged me to pursue a doctorate degree in curriculum studies. You were there in the beginning and have been through this entire journey. Dr. Ross, you have been like an auntie in the background of this process. You were always there to give me sensible advice concerning the balance of my work and family. Thank you for your insight and helping me understand the complexities of writing truth without compromising myself. Dr. Villaverde, thank you for getting involved in this project after it had already begun. Your reading suggestions were instrumental in my thought processes during the writing of this work. Thank you for encouraging me to make meaning of my experience.

To my sister Brittany, Aunt Lillie, and the rest of the “Crawford Family,” thank you for reassuring me during this process. Your phone calls, letters, and prayers were just what I needed to help me maintain focus, confidence, and sanity. I would like to thank Elke Flakes. If it were not for the sincere love you have for Timothy, I would have never finished school. Knowing that my child was being cared for by someone who was like family allowed me to ease my mind and

focus on this work. I would also like to thank my husband for saying “of course, you can do it” when I pondered the idea of a pursuing a doctorate degree. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my own efforts in creating this work. Being a mother, wife, friend, both educator and student made this research an extremely difficult task. I jumped every hurdle and got up every time I fell. With every ounce of strength I had, I pressed on to the finish line. Now I can proudly say, “This is my magnum opus, the greatest work I have ever written.”

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	7
CHAPTER	
1	FEELING INFERIOR11
	Traumatic Roots14
	Methodology: Autobiographical Narrative.....21
	Theoretical Frameworks.....36
	Significance of the Study48
	Chapter Outline.....57
2	MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL: SKIN COMPLEXION, HAIR TEXTURE, AND THE AMERICAN STANDARD OF BEAUTY.....65
	Black Is Beautiful?.....67
	The Politics of Hair83
	The Sacrifice: Pain is Beauty90
3	THE OTHER MIRROR: REFLECTING MEDIA’S CONTROLLING IMAGES102
	Black People103
	Series of Unfortunate Events113
	Know Your Role.....119
4	LOOKING OVER JORDAN.....125
	Separate But Equal127

The Way	140
Jesus in Black and White.	156
5 BROKEN MIRRORS: BAD “LUCK” IN AN INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE.....	160
Erased	160
Fighting Words	171
The Storm	175
Just Like the N-Word	191
6 MADE IN OUR IMAGE: THE STRUGGLES OF RAISING A BIRACIAL CHILD.....	203
The Big Question	204
The Eye of the Beholder	220
The Other Side of Colorism	227
Racial Relapse.....	234
7 REFLECTIONS OF A TWO-WAY MIRROR.....	240
The Myth of a Post-Racial America.....	240
The Dream and the Hope	241
The Change.....	247
Final Reflections	251
REFERENCES	254

CHAPTER ONE

FEELING INFERIOR

Who am I? This or the other?

Am I one person today and tomorrow another?

Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,

And before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?

Or is something within me still like a beaten army,

Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2005, p. 1)

In a moment of quiet solitude when we are only left with our thoughts to accompany us, most of us have been presented with what I consider one of most important questions of our lives—*Who am I?* The question is simple in syntax, yet semantically complex. Its significance lies in that it challenges our existence and forces us to reflect upon our values, beliefs, and accompanying behaviors. The physical, biological, social, cultural, and historical aspects of our lives are all in question as it relates to our understanding of the selves we embody. We ponder. We contemplate. We analyze. And often, we are left in a mental fog of confusion.

Who am I? Specifically, who am I in this black skin? This is a question that I have struggled with most of my life, one that ultimately led me to research my life as it relates to black inferiority. Although there are many dimensions of my identity, “black” is what resonates throughout each aspect of my being. I am constantly reminded of my difference. From the reactions I receive from whites when I speak in my most comfortable rhythm, tone, and lyric to

the way blacks perceive me when I display another linguistic tune, I feel black. From the way my skin bears an opposing hue to most to the twisted coiled strands that grace my head, I feel black. From the discerning gazes I receive to the suggestive “compliments” I gain from whites for my altered physicality and behaviors, I feel black.

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it... To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. (DuBois in Marable & Mullings, 2009, p.204)

I quietly remain in a sort of racial comatose feeling visibly black yet emotionally invisible to the world. There has never been a question to whether the world sees my blackness. The legend of colorblindness was shattered with my experiences. The racial blind eye that is often referenced has only appeared when perspectives suggested an opposing view to society’s social and economic structures, ones which are based upon various elements of racism.

While identifying with one’s racial or cultural heritage is considered a healthy avenue of identity formation (Tatum, 2003), the personal perceptions one attaches to it influences one’s self-image, their interpretations of the environments to which they belong to, the behaviors they develop, and ultimately how they live their life. Being immersed into a society whose mainstream views reflect a superiority of the white race, I have come to develop an identity centered on those very values. When I am extremely honest with myself, I realize that it has been a struggle to maintain a sense of pride in being African American.

Being in this skin carries a socio-historical burden, an internalized identity that resides beneath whites. Black, as a result of these internalized ideals, becomes synonymous to slave.. Although numerous strides have been made concerning the social conditions of black people in

the United States, the ideals that supported former practices, such as chattel slavery and the legalities of Jim Crow, still reside in the minds of many. As opposed to being termed “slave,” “Negro,” or “colored,” being *African* American is just another reminder that much of society views me as an abnormal human.

Race, a very real concept that impacts the lives and livelihood of us all, is a socially-constructed idea, and the beliefs and ideals that surround these differences should be ultimately ignored when it refers to a social hierarchy. Ethnicities and cultural differences should be respected, and each human should be seen as an individual capable of holding individual values and actions. Likewise, skin complexion or any characterization associated with race does not constitute a right to hold a particular group of people superior and others inferior. But as much as I believe in human equality and personal autonomy, it remains a difficult task to escape the influences of the racial hierarchies that exist within our society. The United States is composed of various ethnicities and cultural backgrounds which are vividly represented in its population. However, the implicit practices that continue to elevate Caucasians reveal the dominance of Eurocentric values.

Cognitive snapshots of my youth reveal a life happily immersed in my family’s interpretation of Southern black culture. A look at my present life—white husband, biracial son, teacher at a predominately white school, member of a predominately white church, and the sense of accomplishment I gain from these aspects—makes me wonder how much of my life has been affected by a goal of attaining the “American Dream,” an idea that was developed by and with white people in mind. In striving to reach this goal, I adopted white supremacist thinking and gave characteristics like ignorance, civility, and poverty a black face. Embedded somewhere between my youth and my most recent discovery of racial perceptions are experiences that

shaped those beliefs. It was apparent that my mind contained a tangled web of beliefs concerning race and my place in it. Much of my psychological processes revealed the inferior perception I had toward black people in general. However, there existed an idea that opposed this thought. Possibly, it was my own egocentrism which caused me to view myself as an exception and in turn see black people in a more positive light. But because I associated success with whiteness, I often felt superior to blacks who had not been afforded the opportunities that I had. If a moment of reflection brought me to a place where I could identify the intolerance I held about my own black race, surely researching more of my lived experiences could help to identify the events that helped this racial inferiority complex take root. In reflecting upon my personal experiences, I feel it also necessary to consider the historical context that surrounds the racial identity of African Americans.

Traumatic Roots

For over two centuries, American slavery was a perpetual institution. Slaves were characterized by their “incivility” and unchristian lifestyle, but most of all they were recognized by their skin color. Holding these prejudiced beliefs, it seemed reasonable to many that blacks could be enslaved by whites. Despite legends of the “good” master, faithful slave, and the warm sentiments that Southerners expressed for both, the accepted notion that blacks were inferior was ingrained through the institution of slavery. The slaves were black, and racial inferiority was the dominant justification of white America’s system of chattel slavery (Gordon, 2006, p.67).

The perception of black inferiority exists as a psychological process that affect one’s state of mind. Because of this ability, the inferiority of blacks existed through the moral and social climate of the time. Blacks were considered a demonic and barbaric group, and because blacks were viewed as a possession the white man, it disregarded the humanity of the slave. Blacks

were auctioned right along with the master's livestock, and the unity of black families was disassembled through this selling. According to Higginbotham (1996), slavery provided capital and monetary gain for white slave owners, and slaves grew dependent on this chattel lifestyle. The differences within this interdependent relationship between whites and blacks help to create a more distinct racial hierarchy. Blacks were essentially powerless. And because blacks had been denied an education and the right to vote, many of them remained powerless after they had been emancipated. As a result of these harsh conditions, many blacks interpreted their social circumstances as proof of their inferiority and created a mentality around this notion (Burrell, 2010).

While slavery was obviously a traumatic experience, the effects that it has had on those African Americans centuries later is questionable to many. Is slavery simply an unfortunate part of America's past or is it relevant to the identities continuing to be developed in a present society? Has the myth of black inferiority been transferred with each new generation of people, and if so, how? As these questions are considered, it is important to realize that trauma can take numerous forms. We are traumatized by acts of violence, unexpected deaths, or by an abrupt experience of social transformation. We are traumatized individually by direct experience in which an event abruptly impacts our psyche. In other cases, trauma occurs indirectly, slowly working its way into the awareness of those who suffer from it, as it negatively impacts the bonds that once created a sense of community. No matter the form of trauma (whether it is individual or group), it results in the removal or disappearance of healthy aspects of oneself and often displays more destructive components of one's psyche. As Alexander (2004) asserts, trauma is not necessarily "the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity" (p.10).

With thousands of Africans being transferred to a new land of foreign cultural values, slavery marked the beginning of an emergent collective identity. In spite of the various cultures that existed among these particular blacks, they were grouped by skin color and viewed by the similarity in their slave status. Because of this connection of exclusion, racial unity among slaves was vital, in many ways, in gaining freedoms in their new country. From Underground Railroads to Abolitionist Movements, many contributions were made to ensure the rights of blacks in America. (Dailey, Gilmore, Simon, 2000).

Following the Civil War, blacks were emancipated and eventually granted basic civil rights through amendments to the Constitution. Although they were released from legal slavery, they were still enslaved through their economic conditions as well as the inferior subjections that remained a relative aspect of the society's social order. Blacks' struggle for freedom and to secure federal protection of these rights confronted a massive resistance in the form of political and legal maneuverings by Southern white landowners coupled with white terrorism on the ground. One way of establishing and maintaining this white domination was the establishment of a legal system of racial segregation known as Jim Crow (Dailey, Gilmore, Simon, 2000). The rejection experienced after raised expectations of emancipation provided another culturally traumatic experience. The previous identity as a slave was lost in a sense, but many carried its characterization of subordination through the development of their new identity.

To many, America became "a world which yields [blacks] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (DuBois, 1903, p. 45). Blacks were challenged with creating identities within this framing in-betweeness, being an inhabitant of a free country yet having ancestry of a perceived inferior race. For many years,

African Americans endured the harsh realities of second-class citizenship. While blacks were given some freedoms, Jim Crow laws and other oppressive practices reminded them of social standing of American society through racial segregation.

One of the most momentous turning points in our racial history occurred during the Civil Rights Movement beginning in 1954. The U.S. Supreme Court announced its response to *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. With a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court held that racial segregation was unconstitutional. A sociological argument that influenced the court's decision was the "personality dysfunction" that many black children consumed as a result of Jim Crow laws (Anderson, 2003). One of the most influential pieces of evidence came from the now famous "doll test" conducted by social psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark. Their test showed the world that young children are capable of identifying racial difference and that racial segregation was damaging to the psyche of blacks. During their study, over 250 African American children, ages three to seven, were interviewed to study how they perceive racial difference. During each interview, children were given two choices—a brown doll and an identical version of a white doll—by which they were to respond to questions concerning race within the context of socialization, intelligence, morality, and self-image. According to the results, the majority of the participants associated being white with "good" attributes and being black with "bad" attributes. With the participants' overwhelming preference of the white doll, the Clarks "extrapolated that the damage done to self-esteem of [black] children reinforced notions of black inferiority and white superiority" (Martin, 1998, p.28).

In 2010, CNN along with child development researcher Margaret Beale Spencer conducted a study that revisited the Clarks' doll test. Combinations of original and new questions

were used with 130 children to determine the status of children's beliefs, attitudes, and preferences regarding skin color. The Clarks suggested that the results of the doll were due to the racial separation experienced in American society, yet over fifty years after legalized segregation ended, the new study still found the majority of black participants identifying positive attributes with being white thus posing new questions. If children of a post-segregation era continue to have white preference, was segregation the real culprit? Do our practices of racial integration reflect racial equality? Is there an invisible message of racial inferiority present at each stage of history? Since there were African Americans who showed no white preference in each test (although it is was a small percentage), does this suggest that white inferiority is an escapable attitude?

No matter how much it is denied or subconsciously lived, racism and white supremacist ideology continues to exist. Although whites are often identified as the major culprits in promoting white supremacist ideology, blacks can be complicit in maintaining these beliefs "by vying for white approval... rather than for their own autonomy and giving in to nihilism and immorality in the face of the endless struggle to surmount inequality" (Dickerson, 2004, p.52-53). The mis-education of blacks was an education that promoted white superiority, and the behaviors and attitudes of many African Americans have followed suit.

Trauma, in this case, continues to live through a collective memory of slavery and the discriminatory practices that followed. Although neither of the events was experienced directly, they were a central aspect for which my racial identity was created (Eyerman, 2001). It is as a result of these events as well as the society's current racial climates that continue to racially separate that I am able to identify and bond with other African Americans.

At the same time, it is because of the invisible message of inferiority which has sustained through each era that I found myself living my life in pursuit of affirmation in a culture that has always excluded me from the centers of power. The boundaries constantly shift, whether it is through ideas of normality or ideas of worth, and exploitation and violence has always been justified toward those who were not white. The characteristics of whiteness are what make achieving it so unattainable. Whiteness is “a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white” (Kivel, 2002, p.15). It is a powerful fiction of racial superiority. It is a transforming power that behaves invisibly through a set of normative cultural practices yet the exercising of such power is extremely visible to those who are definitively excluded by it. In a sense, whiteness is privilege as it “has always signified worthiness, inclusion and acceptance” (Powell in Roediger, 1998).

Though strides toward racial equality have been made in the United States, we continue to live in a society sustained by its foundations of white supremacy. If we look deep inside the emotional trenches of America’s people, we will find that we continue to struggle with race. Even when we stand under the leadership of a black president and with countless race-centered accomplishments under our belts, black inferiority remains a dominant belief of many Americans. The tumultuous emotions that surround our circumstances are often too chaotic to mentally dissect let alone articulate them to others. In addition to this obstacle, racial barriers make it difficult to convey feelings associated with our racial experience.

Blacks do not want to discuss race because they do not want Whites to see them in this way. Whites do not want to discuss race because they do not want to be labeled racists.

So, it is simply not discussed. Consequently, our social order is in chronic denial of racism or the belief in the inferiority of people of African descent (Yeakey & Henderson, 2003, p. 307).

Many times, we are simply unaware of the interworking of our psyche. According to Myers (2005), “racism is hegemonic—it is so much a part of the fabric our past and present lives that it is often invisible or appears to be inevitable. The hegemony of racism makes it difficult to recognize, discuss, and challenge” (p.22).

As a young black woman of the Deep South, I have found race a difficult topic to process. Throughout my community were the obvious racial divides and deeply-rooted ideals of black inferiority, a belief system that did not solitarily exist in white circles, but one that was a dominant aspect in black ones as well. Before I learned the “proper” ways to navigate through the racial contexts of my Southern environments, I silently questioned the segregationist mind that seemed to be the culprit in such affairs. It was much easier to follow protocol than to challenge the practices of white supremacy. As an attempt to avoid any possible repercussions, I began a ritual of journaling documenting personal experiences and exploring the vulnerable sides of my emotions.

It is within the pages of those written experiences that I was able to see that the struggles that I had with my identity and self-esteem were related to the unwarranted reverence I had given to white people. As a teenager and young adult in my twenties, writing as an isolated form of expression benefited me in that it allowed me to explore a sense of self under the radar of life’s critical eyes. But today as a woman seasoned with experience and wisdom, I find within myself a desire to share my experiences and insight with others. For what good is a positive

metamorphosis of self if it remains within me? “One must listen to one’s silence, observe the shadows among which one moves. One must identify the ghosts who haunt us now; one must “talk back,” to oneself as well as to those who will listen” (Pinar, 2004, p.126).

Methodology: Autobiographical Narrative

When choosing a research method, consideration must be given to the match between the research problem and the approach, the researcher’s personal training and experiences, and the audience for whom the work will be written and shared (Creswell, 2003). Because human values, behaviors, and emotions are difficult to quantify, a qualitative research method would be most beneficial in examining my interpretations of race and its distinctions, reactions to society’s color line, and the actions I took to achieve a higher social status (perceived as whiteness). Qualitative research has a tradition that considers personal stories, reflections, and lived experiences valuable to understanding the social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Reflecting upon my own life, I recognized that my experience contains a wealth of information regarding racial inferiority. The ability to openly and honestly share my lived experiences is a personal strength. So when it came to choosing a methodology for my dissertation, I felt autobiographical narrative inquiry would be well-suited for the cause. As Connelly & Clandinin (2008) state, “there is no better way to study curriculum than to study ourselves” (in Connelly, He, & Phillion, 2008, p. 498).

Narrative inquiry rests on the epistemological assumption that we as human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures (Bell, 2002). It also seeks to reveal a wide range of human thoughts, emotions, and experiences. It is a way of retrieving information in a way that captures the richness of humanity. Likewise, it is a way of communicating who we are, how we became who we are, how we feel, and why we should

follow a certain course of action. Specifically with autobiographical narrative, the narrator has the opportunity to explore their history from a personal perspective relating it to the happenings that surround each experience (Wortham, 2001). What distinguishes narrative from other methodologies are the dimensions of sociality, place, and temporality that are explored through the inquiry. Through these explorations, one is able to examine the complexities of my experience and the correlations made within and around its environments.

“Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which [our] experience of the world enters the world and by which [our] experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477). We are all shaped by the interpretive stories (spoken or unspoken) we create of ourselves and others as well as the relationship that exists between them. Within these narrative interactions, a constant exchange occurs between our personal self and social environment. It is often said that relationships live at the heart of narrative (Murphy, Huber, & Clandinin, 2011); thus, our identities are not created in isolation of others. It is through our social interactions that our identities are created.

As an example, we can examine our ideals of womanhood. What it means to be a woman or a woman of color are not derivatives of solitary thinking. It is a response to the dominant perceptions of gender and race that exist in society. Within the realms of femininity, women have always felt the pressure to be beautiful. However, the politics of race and skin tone create a barrier that women of color must cross in order to achieve such beauty. Numerous narratives have been written in response to these pressures—each in their own setting and containing a series of unique experiences.

In the novel *Don't Play in the Sun: One Woman's Journey Through the Color Complex*, Marita Golden (2004) discusses her experiences of color-based discrimination, ones that began

in her home and continued to be echoed in society at large. Golden details how the mentality of a color-based hierarchy is such a vast part of our daily lives that we often do not see the workings of it. As an example of these unseen workings, Golden shows us the impacts of sociality using the words of her mother: “Don’t play in the sun. You’re going to have to get a light-skinned husband for the sake of your children” (Golden, 2004, p.9). I cannot imagine hearing these words from my mother, words that emotionally erase you from existence. As a child, my grandmother made me play in the shade, but never did she make such an overt statement that deemed my genetic makeup defective. “Play in the shade” is a mild suggestion that carries the message “this is what is best for you.” “You’re going to have to get a light-skinned husband...” says that something is inheritably wrong with you.

When I get past marital suggestions, I begin to connect with those words. Being told similar warnings about the sun, these words resonated with me excavating childhood memories of feeling as if my blackness was somehow a plague. While I was never encouraged to date light-skinned men, it is through Golden’s words that I am able to see that both subtle and extreme acts of color consciousness yield similar results. Both cautions negatively affected our psychological processes of our African American identity, interpretations of being black, and specifically being dark-skinned black women.

Using her own stories of childhood, high school, and college as the backdrop, Golden shows how the quest for light skin and Eurocentric physical features invade African American communities through media coverage, music videos, and Hollywood as a whole. Through the inclusion of stories from personal friends, acquaintances, and global observations, she shows us that the colorism that exists inside black communities is not just an American issue, but a problem worldwide. From stories of African men and women’s overuse of bleaching creams to

Cuba's observable economic colorline, we are enlightened to the harsh realities of color complexes that boldly exist within African American communities as well in countries across the globe. The colorism that exists within black communities has the ability to traumatize individuals just as racism has.

Although my grandmother told me to play in the shade while Marita Golden's mother suggested she marry a light-skinned man, the message (light skin is better) and the consequences (emotional trauma) were essentially the same. In a different context setting both in geographical place and place of era, this message was depicted over fifty years prior in a conversation between characters in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This particular conversation lies between two fair skin black women, one who is proud of her African American culture and another who holds a hatred of dark skinned blacks. The latter character constantly judges dark skinned blacks harshly and even suggests that she and other light skin blacks should only marry whites in hopes to lighten up their race. The repetitive contexts of these racial dialogues reveal a different aspect of the effects color politics have on African Americans. In this example, skin tone is used as a dividing line among black people by which they openly choose their mates with desires to birth light-skinned children.

Hurston's narrative is also centered on the experiences of a black woman struggling to find her place in a Southern town by undertaking a spiritual journey toward love and self-awareness. It discusses issues of class and is heavily focused on gender roles of women in the South. While this story is not explicitly focused on race, it implicitly shows how certain elements of race impacts one's life. Beginning with the entrance of Janie, the main character, an illustration of the race issues surrounding her (not necessarily within here) are present. In the

perceptions of others, Janie's fair skin and "great rope of black hair swinging to her waist" symbolizes power. "Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times"(Hurston, 1937, p.2). While her physical beauty, a reflection of whiteness, is envied by many darker skinned women in this Southern community, it is simultaneously treasured by other black women who have experienced some social liberties of bearing Eurocentric features.

As I think of race, skin tone and my interpretations of it, I cannot help but notice the distinction of racial concerns in the characters Hurston presents. Race is portrayed as an occasional force that causes only a bit of turbulence in Janie's journey toward independence and self-awareness. Does the subtlety of racial themes further reveal a privilege of pigmentation? Does it reveal an internalized ideology which ignores the common constructs and implications of race? Does Hurston place race in the backdrop to illuminate equally important issues of class and gender inequalities? Despite the possibilities of her intentions, I am left to recognize elements of the narrative that reveal the divisions that are created when race and skin color becomes a centralized characteristic of an individual.

Although Hurston's story is fictitious, so many elements ring true to black communities during the time period of which she writes. Lawrence Otis Graham (1999) reminds us of these truths in *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class*. Graham illustrates the black experience in a light that is rarely displayed, one that resides far away from poverty or middle class experiences, but ones that rests in the summer homes of Martha's Vineyard, gains a Harvard education and one that follows a strict regimen of maintaining a heritage of light skin. While Graham salutes the accomplishments of these African Americans and acknowledges their

monetary support of black economic and social advancement, he also acknowledges the issues of skin color-consciousness that existed within these social groups.

From his experiences of being raised within the black elite, he provides a scape of how the color complex governed much of his life. Although he was not alive during the early 1900s, he represents a generation who was grounded in the beliefs of affluent African Americans who were. The history of his family as well as families of his social circle shows a high correlation between class and skin tone. As he writes, "...I grew up thinking that there existed only two types of black people: those who passed the 'brown paper bag and ruler test' and those who didn't" (Graham, 1999, p.1). Commonly used among upper class African Americans in the early 1900s, these tests used skin complexion and hair texture to determine if a black person gained acceptance into their social networks. The idea was that your skin should not be darker than a paper bag and hair should be as straight as a ruler. These were the ideals that governed much of Graham's experiences socially (as he was encouraged to associate with lighter skinned blacks and play in the shade), educationally (through the color-conscious practices of prestigious universities), and economically (as a result of social ties and academic achievement). As he attests, these experiences can be vividly seen throughout many African American organizations and secret social societies that exist within many wealthy blacks.

As a dark-skinned black woman, I served on the opposing side of the color spectrum. It is through these sorts of written work that shows that blacks—light and dark—can be negatively affected by the adherence to skin tone politics. Hurston's character Janie seemingly had to respond to other's perceptions (admiration and envy) of her Eurocentric black beauty. And although Lawrence Otis Graham (1999) had the skin complexion that "passed" the test, he

struggled with the curliness of his hair and eventually got a nose job to become closer to the American ideal. Through these stories, we see how fixations on skin color (“privileges” of being light and the “disadvantages” of dark skin) and other Eurocentric features affect one’s psychological experiences and thus influence our behaviors.

Our experiences can serve to strengthen our stance or silence us. Both avenues are explored in the Maya Angelou’s (1969) *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In her autobiographical narrative, Angelou tells a story of the pains that accompany much of her childhood and how they shaped her identity as a black woman from the South. The geographical setting explores small communities of Arkansas to larger cities in Missouri and California. Each setting brings a type of emotional conflict to young Angelou’s innocence—parental abandonment, sexual abuse, and racism. Throughout each of these trials, I can vividly see how being a black female in not only a white supremacist society, but a male-dominated one, can diminish one’s sense of being. And specifically with this story, it can literally silence you. Following her rape and the death of her perpetrator, Maya refused to talk to anyone except her younger brother.

In reflecting upon her life, I clearly recognize the various times in our life when we are silenced. I never told anyone that playing in the sun made me feel free and alive or that denying me of that right stripped me of racial pride and my independence as a human. I never told anyone I hated being black and being a girl, and I never shared my feelings of shame and guilt upon my development of black and white identities. Instead, I accepted the ideology that surrounded me and adjusted my behaviors to fit them. Such actions are not a literal muteness, but

a decision to keep our controversial ideas, opinions, and feelings within us. And within this form of silence and behind the shadows of being black (and being female), one is always left to dream.

Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them...(Angelou, 1969, p.2).

Blue eyes. While many authors arranged their discussions around skin color and hair, Toni Morrison (1970) gave us a new symbol of whiteness with *The Bluest Eye*. Using the character of Pecola, Morrison shows us how these internalized assumptions of black inferiority are capable of evolving in the innocent body of a child. Confirmation of such ideals is seen throughout the setting of a small community in Ohio. The glorification and the idealization of Shirley Temple, the persistent verbal affirmation that a light-skinned girl is prettier than the other black girls of the neighborhood, and a caretaker's preference for a white girl over her own daughter all work to show how the covert messages to deem white superior seep into a young girl's mind.

Feeling physically ugly along with experiencing turmoil from a dysfunctional family and sexual abuse, Pecola wishes to have blue eyes. However, this illustration of blue eyes goes beyond the typical desires to attain American standards of beauty. While Pecola believes that blue eyes will make her beautiful, she is more focused on their ability to change her reality. Seeing through these seemingly white lens means that she would not experience the hardships to which she has attributed to her blackness. Despite the naïve nature of the childhood wish, we are able to recognize some truth: even children are capable of observing the social advantages that

are associated with race. Essentially, we all realize race unfortunately has a power to influence one's outcome.

Maybe the character of Pecola narratively exemplifies the results of social psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark who showed the world that young children are capable of identifying racial difference and internalizing beliefs of racial inferiority. Of course, not all black people approach whiteness with a sense of admiration. For many, the recognition of whiteness as a power to marginalize and oppress engenders feelings of rage and hate. While I can completely relate to the majority of children studied in the doll test as well as Toni Morrison's Pecola who obviously coveted the idea of whiteness, my alter ego identifies with the character of Claudia who exhibits contrasting behaviors:

I destroyed white baby dolls. But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others (Morrison, 1970, p.22).

This is a battle that I have fought almost constantly—my love of whiteness and my hate of it all the same. I find that my love rests most securely in the white man, society's symbol of supreme power. For them and all they represent, I possess the most innocent yet terrifying desire to love them and be loved by them. But in the same whiteness of tone, I despise his gendered power which often trances me to a state of submission. A returned focus to whiteness sends my hatred (which has diminished greatly overtime) to their women. While all women have fallen

victim to some form of gender oppression, the white woman has been a constant reminder of everything that I know that I will never be.

Narrative inquiry is guided by the belief that people are social beings and telling their stories is essential in building relationships with each other (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). These personal stories of lived realities help transfer extremely complex concepts and the effects of highly embedded traditions in society to more understandable, humane, and personal levels. Sharing such lived experiences brings the unknown to the known allowing individuals to view others realities which open their eyes to new perspectives of the world. Through the fictional interpretive narratives of Hurston (1937) and Morrison (1970) as well as the factual narratives of Angelou (1969), Graham (1999), and Golden (2004), we are capable of visualizing the impacts of racial discrimination, colorism, and gender biases even if we had not experienced them firsthand. Each narrative references the impacts of sociality specifically emphasizing the familial influences to these ideals. In comparing these narratives, the readers are able to understand that patriarchal notions to white supremacy were present in the various places that these narratives particular occur (both northern and southern states). These narratives are embedded within broad historical and sociopolitical contexts, and they provide a reason as to why the story occurred in the first place (Chase, 2005).

Curriculum involves the understanding of society, history, and the individual that resides in it. Education is political, psychosocial, and requires individual and societal intellectual reconstruction. As an educator and researcher, I am charged with the responsibility of investigating the issues that exist between academic, social, and political realms of daily life. For a major aspect of curriculum theory is to discover and articulate for oneself and others (Pinar,

2004). Autobiography then becomes a medium for research because these stories express “the particular peace its author has made between the individuality of his or her subjectivity and the intersubjective and public character of meaning (Grumet in Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, Taubman, 1995, p.515).

Within the context of curriculum, autobiographical works are said to have roots in the 1970s with William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet’s introduction of *currence*, an autobiographical theory of curriculum (Pinar, 2008). This methodology encompasses the sharing of lived experience, but also requires an inward and outward reflection and an acknowledgment of the historical and social elements that surround it. Smith & Watson (1998) consider the “instrumental role of autobiographical writing [to be] giving voice to formerly silenced subjects” (p.25). Slave narratives, for example, were a significant means of opening dialogue between blacks and whites about slavery and freedom. These stories enlightened many whites about the harsh realities of slavery, and for many it placed humanistic values on a people who were considered to be less than.

A demonstration of such work is found in the 1850 publication *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, A Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828*, a personal story of a journey from slavery to freedom. Truth shared the sufferings that slavery brought as well as the triumph which she contributed to her spirituality and faith in God. “In these hours of her extremity, she did not forget the instructions of her mother, to go to God in all her trials, and every affliction (Gilbert, 1850, p.27). Like Truth, much of my racial experiences have run parallel to my religious experiences. There is no one way that one could ever ignore race in a country that has been built the marginalization of colored peoples. The mental effects of these practices run deep, and religion has been used as a way of dealing with the constant images

of inferiority for many. Specifically within African American communities, I have seen Christianity used as a tool to overcome some psychological obstacles. Having faith in God is a message passed to me from my parents and grandparents which is tied to the slaves' embracing Christianity.

Prior to Truth's narrative, Frederick Douglass (1845) presented *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. Like Sojourner Truth, Douglass gives reference to Christianity. In many ways, his interpretations are similar to the ways I have come to acknowledge and use my faith in God. Whether Christianity supports or refutes ideals of racial inferiority is debatable, but Douglass provides a clear distinction between his perceived forms of American Christianity:

...between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked ...I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land...the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels (Douglass, 1845, p.116).

Additionally, Douglass' narrative illustrates the brutality of the American slavery as well as provides an argument for slaves' emancipation. Perhaps, one of the most important aspects of Douglass' narrative is its ability to portray the institution of slavery as an immoral strategic practice of physical and psychological power, not an economic necessity or natural order of humanity as popularly argued. Douglass highlights the psychologically damaging effects of slavery as he discusses familial separation, the treatment of slaves as property, physical abuse, the victimization of female slaves, and the educational control of slaves. Through these

examples, he reveals the hypocrisy of America's Christianity as such practices go against the principles of true Christianity.

As what could be seen as an epiphanous moment for Douglass and well as a public enlightenment, he reveals how hearing his master's response upon discovering him learning to read—"...Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world...It would forever unfit him to be a slave" (Douglass, 1845, p. 47)—helped him clearly see how a slave's ignorance helps whites maintain power.

These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man...From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom (Douglass, 1845, p. 47).

Through the telling of his life, Frederick Douglass gave life to the silenced voices of his fellow slaves while enabling future African Americans to use their voices as a platform for social justice. When reading this narrative, one cannot escape the cruelties and dehumanization that slavery placed upon blacks. However, Douglass was also able to articulate the psychological enslavement and how he used his mental emancipation to eventually find freedom. "At last it came,—suddenly, fearfully, like a dream. With one wild carnival of blood and passion came the message in his own plaintive cadences:—

'Shout, O children!

Shout, you're free!

For God has bought your liberty!” (DuBois, 1903, p. 6)

Using narrative elements of prose, song and poetry, the story of African American struggle and marginalization continued with W.E.B. DuBois whose work verified the interactive relationship between race, class and the multilevel configurations of the social structure in American society. *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois (1903) offers an assessment of the progress of race relations in America proposing that slavery was not the real culprit, but the philosophies upholding the color-line. Through both a historical events following the Civil War and throughout Reconstruction, DuBois takes us on a journey of from the North to the Black Belt of southern Georgia to discuss African American life explaining that disdain rests in the souls of blacks whose eyes were gazed upon the ideals of equality upon emancipation. DuBois primarily attributes the problems of African Americans to white prejudice arguing that the much of black misfortune was a consequence of economic, social, and political processes that were immersed in white supremacist philosophy. However, DuBois also extends his criticism toward black people suggesting that their eagerness to gain white acceptance causes them to neglect the issues that remain a negative aspect of black community (Reed, 2006).

But perhaps the most recognizable articulation of African American identity is DuBois’s idea of double consciousness, the internal conflict involving the mentalities of culturally related to two opposing American ideals—blackness and whiteness. When W.E.B. DuBois described the black experience of double consciousness over a century ago, he captured how separation from whiteness and marginalization within a white society molded one identity. One identity seemed inescapable while the other appeared unattainable. In this representation of double consciousness, DuBois provides one example of “the resulting psychological awareness and dynamic of the American believer/idealist in an African body” (Peterson, 2007).

From Frederick Douglass' triumphant escape from the physical and psychological struggles of slavery to DuBois' idea of double consciousness, I can clearly recognize the psychic and spatial tension that white supremacy produces. Although these are experiences of past lives, we must acknowledge our interconnectedness and our commonalities of experience (L'aszlo, 2008). We are all characters within one large story of life viewing it from different aspects and creating different memories from them. Each of us highlights the events that were most salient or impacted their life in the greatest way. Race is a highlighted theme that runs throughout my life, and it is a reoccurring theme that has been the center of many discussions that began centuries before me. Through narrative, we are able to envision the possibilities of shared life experiences, and our incorporations of psychology will help provide a panoramic view of racial issues enabling us to interpret the causes, consequences, and future direction.

Because curriculum is historical and political, it is racial by default, and writing narratively about experiences surrounding race is not a new concept. Whether the focus is the American chattel system, colonialism, society's ever-present color-line, race relations, colorism in African American communities, or a historical discussion of racial inequalities, the topics of racial identity and inferiority have been heavily deliberated. Writers have explored the subject of racial discrimination discussing how white supremacy impacts people of color. However, I find that a void exists within these bodies of literature. The dearth of rural voices is what makes my work important to the field. Additionally, my work contributes the experiences of the post-segregation era which allows us to see racial prejudices in its most current stages. While American society has taken external steps toward racial equality, we find that the power that maintains white superiority is insidiously found internally in the mind. The assertions of my life experiences support this notion. By providing a rural, Southern, African American, female, and

post-segregationist view to this discussion of race, my unique experiences only enhance this complicated conversation which is already in progress.

The use of autobiographical narrative provides me with a variety of means that make work socially and personally justifiable. A major aspect of this methodology is that allows me to conceptualize the cultural, social, and institutional aspects of society while given equal significance to my “feelings, hopes, desires, and aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). Because our response to our experiences often alters our beliefs and behaviors, this methodology recognizes the temporal states of one’s life. Additionally, narrative inquiry recognizes place as the origin of our experiences which contain the influences that shape our identities. Not only does autobiographical narrative provide me a space to highlight an identity that blindly adhered to ideologies of racism, but it permits for comprehension of the experiences that shaped it. According to Freeman (2007), autobiographical narrative is “a product of the present and the interests, needs, and wishes that attend it (p.138). As the researcher of my own experiences, I become transformed during the process. Although transformation can occur through the retelling of these events, I believe it has more significance when a theoretical understanding is applied.

Theoretical Frameworks

In the web of reality, individuals cannot separate themselves from what they perceive. From the moment a human enters the world, there begins an individual process of developing the mind, creating and recreating identities, constructing and reconstructing values. Every experience and every encounter we have with the world helps us shape the beliefs we hold about ourselves in relation to our environment. The contrasting perceptions that lie within race and the identities I created in response to them have all developed as a result of the encounters I have had

with the world. While narrative inquiry provides me with an expressive method for which my experiences can be told, it “requires going beyond the use of narrative as rhetorical structure, that is, simply telling stories, to an analytic examination of the underlying insights and assumptions that story illustrate” (Bell, 2002, p.208). According to Pinar (2004), it is through a psychological investigation that we are able to see how the politics of society maintain their life through our minds and behaviors. It is imperative for me to understand the deep, insidious psychological problems that continue to exist within me in regards to the feelings of black inferiority. The issues of racial inferiority are multilayered and complex. As a result, I believe it is beneficial that I examine my life through multiple lenses of the psychological framework of Nigrescence Theory (Cross, 1991, Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001), Double Consciousness Theory (DuBois, 1903), and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, Collins, 2004).

Psychology is essentially the science that systematically studies behavior in its relationship to the complexity of mental, emotional, physical and environmental factors which shape it. According to Polinghorne (1988), psychology has a unique history with narrative inquiry. And although the validity of individual perception and memory were once criticized, a renewed attention to human experience has made psychology and narrative a distinguished pair. Because people’s life stories “are social constructs...it is hard to see this set of story frames in any other way other than ...psychology” (L`aszlo, 2008, p. 8).

Tatum (1997) defines racial identity development as “the process of defining for oneself the personal significance and social meaning of belonging to a particular racial group” (p.16). The work in racial identity formation has been useful in psychological research of African Americans because it provides insight on how some blacks view society and respond to their environment (Sanders-Thompson, 2001). The psychical interworking of the African American

mind have peaked the interests of many psychologists. For example, Eugene Horowitz studied aspects of black identity in his “show me test” during the 1930s. By asking black children to choose which race of individuals they would prefer to socialize with in various scenarios, it was concluded that many black children had white preference (Murphy & Murphy, 1931). In the years following this test, psychologists like the Clarks examined racial attitudes in children with their doll test and found similar results. In the 1960s, other psychologist emphasized racial oppression and cultural experiences in their work. And later, psychologists began to focus more on the cognitive processes that occur in the individual as well as the interpretation of a group identity.

Traditionally, the examination of racial identities focuses on the specified race of an individual and the experiences that one identifies as being associated with that particular ethnicity. While mainstream approaches tend to focus on universal properties associated with race, underground approaches to racial identity emphasize the qualitative meaning of being an African American (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998), and William Cross’s theory of Nigrescence is perhaps the most widely used. According to Connelly, & Clandinin (2006), the lives of people are in temporal transition. That is, we are constantly evolving and revising our autobiographical lives. Considering these aspects of racial identity and the temporal state our lives, the Nigrescence Theory becomes a beneficial theoretical framework. This theory proposes that the “black” identity of African Americans evolves through a series of experiences of their blackness in relation to the whiteness that surrounds them in society.

Nigrescence, a French term meaning “to become black,” suggests that individuals are not born with the knowledge of race. Instead, African Americans come to understand their race through their interactions within the context of a white supremacist American society and create

an identity in response to it. The Nigrescence Theory (NT) consists of five stages of racial development that African Americans experience as they head toward a healthy racial identity: *pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment*. These stages are characterized by self-perceptions that implied a person's feelings, thoughts and behaviors (Cross, 1991). While I do not believe these stages are essential, I do believe they can serve as a useful starting point for analysis.

During the *pre-encounter* stage, individuals do not necessarily comprehend race nor consider it to be an important aspect of their identity. This may be a result of racial saliency or a focus on other aspects of group membership, such as gender or religious affiliations. However, the person experiences teach her/him to devalue aspects associated with being black resulting in attitudes of self-hate and shame. This stage is primarily characterized by its orientation of white supremacist ideals and the individual's response of racial inferiority. As one begins to have more intimate interactions with Caucasian people, race is defined more clearly. In this stage of *encounter*, the individual's previous anti-black attitudes are shifted toward a more pro-black view of life. This change of view is believed to be a result of an external event or several occurrences which challenge the white supremacist ideals previously expressed. After reexamining one's current identity, one feels the "need" to develop a black identity (Cross, 1991).

This stage is followed by *immersion-emersion* which reflects an intentional denigration of "whiteness" and an immersing into a perceived black culture. The person relies on other external factors to define this notion of blackness. This is generally done through one's affiliation with other black people and "educating" oneself with black history and culture. Although this stage is accompanied by emotions of anger and hostility, these strong emotions

subside as one is transitioned to the stage of *internalization*. This stage is characterized with positive attitudes and perceptions of blackness. While the individual may not be pleased with society's race relations, she/he is content with a black racial identification. The last stage, *internalization-commitment*, is reached when one actively seeks to eliminate modes of racial oppression for African Americans and other races (Cross Fhagen-Smith, 2001).

While these stages serve as the basis for Cross's Nigrescence Theory, these contexts are also infused with several socialized responses to racial stigmas. For example, psychological buffering can become a method by which African Americans actively protect themselves from racial discrimination. After a person has experienced a racially biased situation (directly or indirectly), she/he may attempt to avoid encounters that are perceived as damaging. Code switching provides another example and can also be considered an act of buffering depending on its use. Code switching can be viewed as an act of bicultural competence or it can be used to deter criticisms of a cultural dialect. Throughout this process of creating one's identity, bonding is also used which creates an intimate connection with other blacks who share similar interests and cultural practices (Helms, 1990).

While I find the stages of the Nigrescence Theory useful in examining the development of the racial identity of blacks, the complexity of the African American origin makes it difficult to explain the crises that often occur within the formation of these identities. The cultural history of the African American is significantly different from other ethnicities in the United States. Lacking ancestral nativity or an ancestral pilgrimage to this country, African Americans can experience a sense of lost identity or cultural in-between-ness.

Therefore, I find it necessary to incorporate the theory of double consciousness which conveys a condition of African Americans' struggle. This struggle is focused on developing a

positive personal identity while simultaneously enduring the opposing identities that are imposed by the external white supremacist society. The workings of these antagonistic identities help influence the experiences that many African American people have. According to Gooding-Williams (2009), the theory of double consciousness has been explained by other psychologists and sociologists as a theory of personality. However, DuBois' version emphasized race which at the time (as well as presently) the core of the African American experience. The central element of the theory of double consciousness is self-reflection of a collective black identity and a conflictive American identity.

In *Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois describes double consciousness as a race conscious psychological development by which blacks are able to view themselves through the negative perceptions of white Americans while maintaining black perspectives. This dual sense of knowing oneself is a result of blacks' subjugation and oppressive living conditions. To this subject, DuBois (1903) states the following:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world (p. 12).

These words convey the idea that blacks are aware of their social standings in the general eye of American society. Within a historical context, blacks understand that their racial inheritance excluded them from being citizens of the country in which they resided. To be considered (even if not fully) human, one is pressured to assimilate or integrate into mainstream white society. The then requires a dual perception of oneself.

He continues stating that the black individual "... ever feels his two-ness,—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. 12). However, the emphasis that is placed upon the "strength" of blacks highlights many people's ability to avoid defeat by finding alternate routes as they navigate through society.

From slavery through segregation to the most current examples of modern institutionalized discrimination, African Americans have faced numerous hindrances in the pursuit of racial equality in the United States. In response to these overwhelming obstacles, many African Americans are described as exhibiting characteristics of the Duboisian sense of "double consciousness." This proposed frame of mind assisted blacks in their navigation through the cultural avenues found within black and white worlds. Considering this notion, African Americans are still left with a multilayered psychological challenge that requires the response to an existing ideal of race. How does one create a healthy identity between the pressures of "white" assimilation and maintain a sense of "blackness"? The objective of many African Americans is found in the "longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (DuBois, 1903, p. 13).

As we begin to examine my life, we must first realize just how much race and culture impacts our lives. Despite my current condition involving black inferiority, I was not born with these ideas. Individuals are not born with inherited values, beliefs, or any associated behaviors. Because of this trait, every human being is born with the capacity to function in any of the various cultural environments that exist in our world. Once into a structured society, people begin to form their identity from the social categories to which they belong. The specific sociocultural environments to which we grow and mature help to develop a psyche that functions

well within that specific setting (Markus & Hamedani in Kitayama & Cohen, 2007). However, one can develop a unique combination of identities, such a racial identity, through interactions of various social and cultural groups.

Race and culture in many ways go hand and hand in our American society. Culture refers to the knowledge and lifestyle that people of a particular social group share. It interprets our environments and informs us of our perceived acceptable behaviors (Lindsey & Beach, 2002). Existing within the broader view of American culture, African American culture has a history of slavery, acculturation, racial oppression, and assimilation. The geographical location and class of my environment provided me with a more precise definition of what it meant to be African American or black. The low middle-class, rural, Southern, African American community in which I was raised had a well-established cultural climate that helped shape my personal beliefs about myself as well as the people around me. From the way someone spoke or their topic of conversation, you could tell whether or not they “belonged.”

According to Naylor (1997), “humans create, learn, and use culture to respond to the problems of their natural and sociocultural environments, to control them, and even to change them...” (p.3). Just as the promotion of a “white” culture was used as a tool to dominate and oppress masses of nonwhite people, many used assimilation and acculturation as tools to ease the racial burdens of society. The adoptions of such practices result in an external gain, but also a psychological loss that supports white dominance and confirms the ideals of being racially inferior.

Despite Nigrescence’s popularity in cultural branches of psychology (e.g. cultural psychology, black psychology, cross-cultural psychology, etc.), the theory is not absent of prior

psychological works. Several dimensions of NT reveal connections to other psychologists. For example, Erik Erikson's theory of identity development, Henry Tajfel's theory of socialized human development, and Lev Vygotsky's theory on active learning were all correlated to the theory of Nigrescence.

Proclaimed pioneer of the sociocultural perspective Lev Vygotsky claimed that our environment provides us with methods of social behaviors which we are immersed are absorbed in various ways (e.g. imitation, instruction, collaboration, etc.). We mimic observable elements found within our environment and are sometimes explicitly taught desired behaviors. Through collaborative dialogues with those we perceive to be skilled and knowledgeable members of society, we acquire confirmations of desired behaviors which provide us with a more specific group identity (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010).

My childhood participation in racial self-segregation began as mere imitation, but evolved through the assertions of other members of my community. However, Hogg and Abrams (1988) suggest that our self-categorization and social comparisons further complicate the process including how we racially identify ourselves and we socially compare ourselves to others. Our racial identification and our social comparisons are interconnected which affect our attitudes, behavioral norms, and other properties that are believed to be associated with the categories for with include ourselves. These cultural groups "exist only in relation to other contrasting categories (for example, black vs. white); each has more or less power, prestige, status, and so on" (Stets & Burke, 2000).

In 1807, Hegel suggested that individuals come to know themselves through their social interactions with others and are dependent upon them for their own self-consciousness. And because of the social hierarchies that often exist within societies, self-consciousness is displayed

in various manners. Using a narrative illustration of lord-bondsman (master-slave) dialectic, Hegel explained that a person of higher social rank has more influence on the perceptions one of lower social rank holds for himself (Moyar & Quane, 2008).

This form of self-consciousness is not a difficult idea to grasp, and it incorporates social elements of class. In its most basic form, these concepts can be used to understand social interactions between people. However, it does not consider other variables such as race into its theories. According to Wen-Shing (2003), ethnic groups that are marginalized by a dominant group will likely develop an inferior image of themselves as well their ethnic population. In many ways, one can compare Hegel's lord-bondsman dialectic to the master-slave relationships found in African American history, but it arguably provides a limited view of human behavior as the original theories omits race and the culture of one's environment. Hegel's example provides a view of how social class affects the interactions between each other. Conversely, class is a social aspect that possibly can be achieved through economic gain unlike race. The master-slave relationship differs in that the slave's race is responsible for his social rank. Because one cannot change his race with hard work or inheritance (like that of class), the permanency of caste becomes an inherit trait of the slave.

According to Fanon (1952), these traditional notions of human self-consciousness do not consider blacks within colonial ideology. With this view, the black man's values are not a result of his own actions and thus belong to his white oppressor. Therefore, this consciousness, while it recognizes its human existence, is held within mental bondage. Within the constructs of a colonized society, a "man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him" (Fanon, 1952, p.191). We see the same form of human acknowledgement within our American history as blacks were considered to be

property, not human beings, during slavery. Fortunately, the fight for racial equality has resulted in tremendous advancements for African Americans. But as Fanon suggests, blacks who are recognized as “men” (that is, emancipated and increased in economic rank and station) from their necessary obligations, still lack independent self-consciousness because his psyche has been infiltrated by the dominance of a white society.

One way that the Nigrescence theory and the DuBoisian notion of double consciousness examines the effects of race on an individual is by considering the overarching theme of white supremacy in American culture and the socialization that occurs within it. When we take the social and cultural histories into consideration, we are able to better understand our identities, self-image, and personal perceptions that continue to refine who we are and sustain our society’s prevailing views. However, neither of these theories specifically considers how gender obfuscates these forms of oppression.

Initially, it seemed that my issues of inferiority were solely related to race. Nevertheless, my reluctance to include a gendered lens in my theoretical framework was related to the stereotypes that revolved around words like “feminist.” The word carried a negative connotation in my mind, and images of militant black women and lesbians were very much connected to them. Although I did not have adverse feelings about either depiction of womanhood, I was aware of the negativity that it carried in the general public. Consequently, I wanted no parts of the association. I now recognize these images as controls by which the white supremacist powers, which are heterosexually male-dominated, maintain their authority.

Women, especially black women, have been in the shadows of men—both black and white—and white women when it comes to discrimination. It is an issue that has been acknowledged and fought for by black women (along with some whites and men) for centuries.

In 1831, Maria W. Stewart encouraged black women to value their worth as she asked, “How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?” (Stewart, 1831, p.12) It was twenty years later when Sojourner Truth who commanded spectators of a women’s convention in Ohio to *see* her, see her blackness and see her womanhood:

Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (Truth in Katz, 2003, p. 126).

These words spoke to black women’s oppression in American society. It displayed harsh reality of the mule-like strains that had been literally placed on her back as well as her mental psyche. It illuminated the inner desires of intellectual attainment and the cultural practices that viewed black women as domestic servants and field hands. It displayed the fantasy of womanhood—a persona in the frailness and weakness of state could be sheltered and protected. Additionally, it demanded attention to her as a human requiring the equality of men and of white women.

Following a similar antidote, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) consider Black Feminist Thought as an aim “to empower African American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions” (p.22). This theory recognizes the importance of African American female narratives and acknowledges the role that class, religion, and sexual orientation plays in one’s life. Black Feminist Thought believes that oppression is maintained through hegemonic powers through our cultural ideologies, such as patriarchy, sexism, and racism. It is

also maintained through structural powers upheld by governmental laws and policies. Additionally, it is preserved through disciplinary measures of our social institutions, public education, and the media. All of these powers collaborate interpersonally through our daily interactions with society (Pratt-Clark, 2012). The tensions that lie between the suppression of black women's voice and our social action against such oppression constitute the politics of Black Feminist Thought.

The political structure and social relations in the United States continue to affect various groups of people, and within each environment are the discursive practices that construct a divisive and hierarchical distinction between blacks and whites and men and women. These distinctions were observed, but never did I think that they were having a negative effect on my psychological development. As Freud suggests, we are not always aware of the forces that govern our behavior. Rather, they reside within the subconscious. Like an iceberg, these forces often remain unseen until an event causes a mental collision with it (Hockenbury & Hockenbury, 2010).

Self-expression and the acquisition of one's capabilities are highly dependent upon the social contexts in which we operate. Therefore, it is impossible to become who we are outside the context of a white supremacist society. We all have experienced a psychic whitewashing of the mind, but when we take the social and cultural into consideration, we are able to understand our identities, self-image and personal perceptions that continue to refine who we are. "If we are willing to listen, the history of disarticulated grief is still speaking through the living, and the future of social transformation depends on how open we are to facing the intricacies and paradoxes of that grief and the passions that it bequeaths" (Cheng, 2000, p. 29).

Significance of the Study

Historically, the struggle for racial equality has been the focus of most progressive and radical movements in America. From the exertion of abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth to the civil rights leadership of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, people of color have toiled for a positive change in race relations. Additionally, the fight for racial equality has also served as a catalyst for women's liberation and most recently gay and lesbian rights. These efforts have not gone in vain as our country made vast improvements in the legalities of discrimination (e.g. the abolishment of slavery, removal of Jim Crow, implementation of affirmative action policies).

In the dawn of the 20th century, W.E.B. DuBois (1903) identified the "color line" as the principle factor of America's problems. His statement was based on the social, political, and economic discrepancies between blacks and whites during this time. The latter years of the 20th century brought a glimpse of hope through the laws of desegregation creating the illusion of a more equalized view of race.

The moral, legal, and rhetorical pursuit of collective rights of access was but an essential strategy in a multifront [sic] war for a much larger prize: the uplift of a people that had endured slavery and afterward the trials of subordinate caste status (Foreman, 1999, p.3). These civil rights never ensured people of color the individual rights of which they are entitled. Moreover, the legal obligations were not enough to transform the ideologies that support a racial hierarchy. In the years following desegregation, the United States has seen a variety of people of color gain affluence. When we widen our lens, it becomes apparent that much of our lives are still controlled by a system of white patriarchy. From the classroom to the boardrooms and from local to national levels, most decisions about our futures are made by white males.

Although many people of color still feel the “problems” that W.E.B. Du Bois referenced, the 21st century has also become characterized by a set of paradigm shifts that respond to the changes in America’s perceptions of race. Interracial marriages have risen in the past decades (Craig-Henderson, 2006). For the first time in history, the 2000 U.S. Census was revised to allow people to identify themselves with multiple racial categories. Serving as the climatic event of this time was the presidential election of Barack Obama, a biracial yet presumably African American man. Despite the claims of present-day racism and race-centered groups such as the NAACP, there are numerous forms of literature reveal contrasting understanding of race. *The End of Racism* (D’Souza, 1995), *America in Black and White: One Nation Indivisible* (Thernstorm, 1997), and *A Dream Deferred* (Steele, 1999) all suggest that the America we live in is now a post-race society.

On the one hand, the existence of a post-race era proves that the Civil Rights era accomplished its goals. Therefore, a post-race era is one in which racism has no significance. On the other hand, living in a post-race era means living in an era in which race itself is not significant (Joseph in Dawkins, 2010, pp. 9-10).

While discrimination has adverse effects, not all blacks are psychologically crippled from the influences of racism and prevail in spite of it. Many African Americans have and are continuing to create positive self-images despite the circumstances the dominant white culture presents. I was just not fortunate enough to have a life filled with those experiences. Throughout my life and within a seemingly “post-race” era, I struggled to communicate my ideas about race—partially because they were in conflict with many people’s beliefs in my immediate environments, but primarily because they were too complex to decipher. But it is within my

silence that I found myself lost and confused trying to find myself and express myself in terms of race.

My autobiographical narrative is significant because it is a reflection of many lives in the United States. I was born and raised decades after the Civil Rights Movement, yet racial separation remained an evident aspect of my educational experience. Amidst the overarching practices of society's color line were similar politics of colorism of the black community. Although the rate of interracial relationships has increased tremendously over the years, my relationship with a white man received numerous criticisms from both white and black communities. From childhood experiences in the classroom to my current experiences as an educator, I am haunted by the substantial educational gap between blacks and their white counterparts. And while President Obama may be seen as the visual marker of racial progression, I have heard many of my elementary students say "he doesn't *look* like a president...the vice president *looks* like he should be the president." It seems quite evident that when the fog of racial accomplishments clears, we are still left with elements of racism.

Initially, I became interested in this study because of my own personal convictions with unconsciously supporting white supremacy through my belief in black inferiority. Upon acknowledging my inferiority complex, I felt the need to research its history within American culture and examine its developments through my personal experiences. Much of my lived experiences have involved American schooling—as a student and now as a teacher—and I believe that many aspects of my complex were developed within these contexts. Therefore, I feel that it is important to illuminate the darkness of a hidden curriculum and present my life as a real

example of its consequences. This autobiographical narrative will be a dissectible model for which we can observe and examine the workings of a racial inferiority complex.

An autobiographical narrative may seem a bit narcissistic, especially because I will reap the immediate benefits from the work. In this thought, I am reminded of the words of Jewish teacher Hillel who stated the following: “If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?” (Telushkin, 2010, p. 203). It is important to recognize humans as an interdependent race of people, ones who intimately interact with each other and rely on each other for insight, wisdom, and knowledge of the world. The white supremacist ideologies that saturate our society were not always dominant. Like any popular belief, they began as a thought in the minds of individuals and through power it was articulated throughout the masses. According to hooks (1996), it is important for individuals to transform their consciousness to end the structural system of white supremacy, and these individual struggles must be linked to a collective effort. By transforming my experiences, thoughts, readings, and reflections into a dissertation, others may be informed and/or inspired. Therefore, this work will not only affect me, but it will also extend to family members, my students, and fellow educators.

Unfortunately, many people experience life within the constraints of racial inferiority which harshly impacts the lives they create. There is no doubt that racial discrimination has improved since the birth of this nation. Specifically with the history of African Americans, our country has witnessed an acknowledgement of their humanity, their emancipation from slavery, institutional integration, and the implementation of numerous laws to ensure their civil rights. However, the long history of racial grief in the United States has stifled our abilities to effectively communicate our thoughts about race with each other, let alone decipher them within

ourselves. The unfortunate histories that stand between blacks and whites cause us to approach each other with caution, often so much caution that it reduces the candid interactions needed in making progress in ideological modifications and race relations. And all this amounts to is a constant exchange of hollow statements, blanketed emotions, awkward silences, and negligent conformists.

While discussing race is vital to “recovering” our nation’s race relations, it is also important that we are attentive to the ways in which it is discussed. Race is a social construction primarily based on skin color, and we unfortunately tend to address race within these physical parameters. In other words, our discussions of race are also maintained on the physical, what we can see. We sometimes measure racial progress by comparing the economic, educational, and statistical data of blacks against that of whites. As an example to this notion, consider the African American subgroup that is often used in the comparison of academic achievement. If African American students had scored similar scores to their white counterparts, it is likely that many would have viewed this as proof of racial progress. However, my life (especially my academic career) serves as a complete testament that challenges this notion. We must not simply view elements of racial progress as proof that racism is extinct.

The psychological effects of racism are often ignored, overlooked, or ineffectively addressed. When we focus on race in this manner, we take a step back from destroying the problem at its root as racism and white supremacist ideologies are matters of the mind. Therefore, it is imperative that we examine the harmful effects racism can have on one’s psyche. Before we can address the problem, we must acknowledge that the problem first exists. Unfortunately, there is so much denial of racism that we fail to engage in honest discussions

about race. My dissertation seeks to challenge this as I display many portions of my life through autobiographical writing.

Much like the thoughts of Cornell West (2008), I believe “it’s crucial to understand your history, and then be true to oneself in such a way that one’s connection to the suffering of others is an integral part of understanding yourself” (p.13). My autobiographical narrative is an illustration showing that racism and the ideals of racial inferiority are very much a part of our present. It documents my life, an African American woman in the South living during a period subsequent to the Civil Rights Movement. Through the connection that is made through this form of literary exchange, one may critically reflect upon the ways that race negatively continues to affect our society. As West (2008) suggests, “if you don’t muster the courage to think critically about your situation, you’ll end up living a life of conformity and complacency” (p.13).

As members of this society, we “are inevitably exposed to the glaring contradictions between teachings of American democracy—the creed of brotherhood, equality and justice on one hand, and on the other hand ... the discrimination of blacks” (Clark & Klein, 2004). As an educator, I feel that it is my role to challenge and subvert the ideological basis of our society and raise consciousness about the racism that still remains a staple in our society. In the words of W.E.B. Dubois, “we want our children trained as intelligent human beings should be ... They have a right to know, to think, to aspire” (Torrecelli & Carroll, 1999, p. 19). Racism and its effects are at the heart of America’s problems.

The essence of this American dilemma is in the distortions and despair in the lives of the victims of the persistent prejudices and the immobilizing guilt, ambivalence and moral

cynicism which dominate or make empty the lives of those who are required to acquiesce to injustices perpetrated upon others (Clark & Klein, 2004, p. 35).

In order to become actively involved in the struggle to eradicate these symptoms of social maladjustment and save our children from their harmful effects, it is necessary to know how these forms of racial inferiority are manifested in one's psyche. It is important to clearly understand and identify these racist attitudes, determine how they affect our society, and the ways they are communicated to our children.

Over the past ten years in the classroom, my students have reminded of the impact one's school experience has. With regards to race, it seems that most of my elementary students have bought into the idea that white is superior. I have had 7 year olds tell me that they were once afraid of me or believed that I would not be a good teacher because of my race. I have heard teachers complain about having to teach Hispanic children because they automatically assumed they would be low-achievers. I have heard black children say that their white people were inheritably smarter. Of course, the experiences that I have had in my small, rural school of South Georgia do not represent the overall perceptions of American students. Nonetheless, CNN revealed a study that showed that these perceptions can be found in many schools.

Serving as a sequel to their 2010 visitation of "the doll test," this study focused on the racial perceptions children held, the factors that informed their views as well as how those perceptions differed between blacks and whites children. Although researchers studied students from three types of schools in New York City and Atlanta (predominately white, predominately black, and racially diverse), the results were alarmingly similar: 1) the majority of elementary black students had a positive perception of white students, 2) the majority of white students had a

negative perception of black students, and 3) as black students transitioned to teenagers, their views become more negative toward whites (Arbitman & Pearsall, 2010).

So how do my life experiences and research like this relate to education and contribute to the field of curriculum studies? To comprehend its importance, one must first understand the correlation between identity formation and educational success. According to Minnow, Shweder, & Markus (2008), decades of research has consistently correlated identity with educational success. The aspiration to be a successful student requires a particular understanding of oneself which continues to work as an interpretive framework influencing goals and decision-making throughout one's life. We must understand that the ways in which we construe the world are rooted within us during the early stages of our childhood. These habitual methods are generated from the thousands of micro-messages we receive from our families, communities, and the media. And particularly within schools, it is generated through the hidden curriculum. In either case, these cultural forces reinforce and naturalize white supremacy within the United States (Lea & Sims, 2008).

As an educator, I recognize that schools are extremely data-driven, racial intolerance still exists (even in the hearts of a child), and many aspects of the educational system foster a belief in racial superiority and inferiority. As we critically examine the nature of American schools, we have to consider the history and development of the schools we know today, initially created for the economically and racially advantaged. American schools have changed who they educate, but not necessarily how they educate.

If public education is the education of the public, then public education is, by definition, a political, psycho-social, fundamentally intellectual reconstruction of self and society, a process in which educators occupy public and private spaces in-between the academic

disciplines and the state (and problems) of mass culture, between intellectual development and social engagement, between erudition and everyday life (Pinar, 2004, p. 15).

Understand that the white supremacist ideologies that dominant our society has a social and psychological effect on its victims. It robs the youth of their self-esteem and deprives them the opportunities of educational and economic mobility as they approach adulthood. As educators, we are charged with the job of providing students with the proper tools they need to be academically successful. The keys to this success are not simply found within the pages of our required text nor is it within the words with which we teach. It requires the ability to comprehend our histories, evaluate societal perceptions, and examine the personal beliefs we will create throughout their lives (Sanchez-Casal & Macdonald, 2009). When we give students the tools to understand themselves, we give them power to question their own values, edit and transform their principles, and challenge the notions of the world that are contrary to the modes of normality.

Chapter Outline

Because our memories are often separate grouped by qualities like place, people, time period, and the overall nature of each event, my life experiences will be told in a similar manner. My earliest experiences will be discussed first, but these encounters are framed within a present discussion that travels throughout various time periods. This enables me to organize my life into a meaningful whole by which one can make connections and clearly see correlations between events in my life. I try to remain true to the rural, Southern black dialect used throughout the telling of these stories. I conceptualize these events using the theory of double consciousness, black feminist thought, and the Nigrescence theory. Although I am narrating factual segments of

my life, I fictionalize the setting and characters. Pseudonyms are used to protect the individuals who may be inaccurately perceived by readers. While these aspects of my writing are fictitious, I attempt to remain faithful to each character's persona and the nature of the events as I remember their occurrence.

Chapter Two: Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Skin Complexion, Hair Texture, and the American Standard of Beauty lays the foundation for the entire dissertation as it shows where my inferiority complex took root. It provides a description of the cultural environments to which I was exposed and reveals the overall racial climate that existed during the time of the experiences discussed. Despite being raised within a strong black culture, I feel that many of the threads from which this African American culture was woven carry a fundamental belief in black inferiority. It is my belief the life lessons that I was taught were composed of an abundance of lies about race which negatively influenced my views on myself as well as my race as a whole. It is my belief that the inferiority complex with which I still struggle began in my own home. It was there that I was explicitly taught to love being black and implicitly taught to covet whiteness. I am convinced that the carriers of these lies were not always aware of its impact and sometimes that it was even a lie. They were simply passing on values that had been taught to them. I am sure there were levels of extremities for which these teachings were displayed. But even when there is only a minuscule amount of racial bias present it opens the door to the possibility of embracing of a life of black inferiority. Cloaked in the name of tradition, these lies which saturated my life strengthened the idea of white superiority and the myth of black inferiority.

This chapter's main focus is on the first experiences that attacked my racial self-image— aesthetic perceptions of blacks. As a dark-skinned black female, I found it a struggle to appreciate certain aspects of my physicality despite the positive reinforcement I received from

my parents. My physical characteristics were never blatantly criticized by my family members. Still, there were always the subtle actions of family, friends, and society at large that informed me of what true beauty was, and it was far from my mirror's reflection. In this time and place, beauty among African Americans was light skin and "good" hair (naturally silky straight or curly). For example, rituals such as "hot comb Sundays" and rules such as "playing in the shade" will show how some African Americans instinctively perpetuate the cycle of black inferiority. Hot comb Sunday was a hair straightening event that occurred nearly every Sunday afternoon. "Nappy" or kinky hair, a characteristic that is often associated with African Americans, was considered too difficult to manage, but primarily unattractive. As a result, I had to get my hair straightened by a hot comb. Skin color is another attribute that needed to be "protected." It was a popular perception in the black community that light-skinned African Americans were better looking. Even though my parents specifically taught us not to be color-struck, in awe of light-skin folks, playing in the shade was a common practice which protected me and other black people from getting "blacker." These experiences among many others taught me to devalue many of my natural physical traits.

Chapter Three: The Other Mirror: Reflecting Media's Controlling Images narrates my earliest experiences concerning the generalizations that are often associated with black people. It discusses the perceptions that exist within predominately white environments as well as black communities. As Folan (2010) suggests, we are constantly bombarded with images that stereotype blacks as lazy, untrustworthy, violent, and oversexed. As we think of popular stereotypes such as these, we often view them as black images in the white mind. My experiences challenge this thought. Having very little intimate experiences with white people before adolescence, I had heard and adopted many of these negative messages about black people from other black people. Of course, the media had its role in influencing my thoughts

about race. However, I heard explicit statements which supported these stereotypes within my own home and throughout the black community, statements that I truly believe my family felt were factual at the time. Through the reflections in this chapter, I provide examples of how some African Americans self-segregate themselves racially and economically. These examples reveal some negative perceptions that African Americans have toward people in their own race. Within this chapter, I will also discuss some experiences involving race and gender relationships and how my initial perceptions of blacks influenced my analysis of those experiences.

Chapter Four: Looking Over Jordan discusses the overt and often unspoken ways of Southern life that is centered on Christianity. Its title is inspired by the Negro spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” which expresses a desire to ascend to Heaven in the afterlife. In other words, as one looks over Jordan (the river), the water reflects the image of a current self while one imagines the future self. Like the first chapter, this section paints another setting—the church. Only this time, one can vividly see how much Christianity is a part of the environment for which these stories take place. As it relates to race, this chapter shows how many African Americans embrace Christianity despite its historical use to support the creation of a color line. From both my childhood and adulthood points of view, these stories tell my experiences within the “black church” and “white church” and shows how white superiority could be perceived within them both.

The narrations of this chapter involve several settings (e.g. churches, educational institutions, and home). Although many of the settings are outside of a typical religious sector, I show how Christianity maintained a staple in all of them. It is where I received daily reminders of who I was in comparison to the white standard and the reiteration that white was not only better, but something that was to be sought after and praised. Because I gained my most intimate

relationships with white people in a religious context, there is an interweaving of religion and race relations. These encounters show how my initial perceptions of whites and blacks (revealed specifically in Chapter Three) were altered as a result of the educational experiences I had as well as the experiences I had with whites in general.

There is an obvious correlation between the predominant values of one's environment and the values that an individual creates for himself. This reciprocal relationship is revealed as I discuss two major turning points in my life: socially becoming a racial minority and being introduced to a "white" version of Christianity. These stories show the development of my Christian faith, illustrate the racial inferiority I felt in the midst of many Christian environments, and how I used Christianity to maintain what I considered to be a healthy self-esteem. This chapter also shows my struggles to create my identity through blackness, whiteness, and Christianity in a geographical area that seemed to separate them all—the South.

Chapter Five: The War at Home is an inside look inside of my interracial marriage. Within the United States, there are a variety of responses to black-white couples. Those who oppose use their prejudices to criticize it or only focus on the negative aspects of being in an interracial relationship. Although the bible does not explicitly oppose interracial unions, it is often used to support opposition to the lifestyle. Because of the offensive nature of these discussions, I developed a defensiveness in hopes of protected my relationship. I desperately wanted to show the world that an interracial relationship could be successful. Others' negative perceptions of our racial difference became so much a part of our relationship, that I wanted to overlook race altogether. I, like many interracial couples approached the marriage in color-blind terms (Childs, 2005) which presented more problems.

This chapter shows the development of an interracial relationship and how the negative attitudes of others (family, friends, coworkers, etc.) can impact the relationship. These attitudes toward my relationship created an emotional strain and caused me to question aspects of my racial identity. Even though I still struggled with feelings of black inferiority, I had sense of loyalty toward the black race which created a war within my own home. What difficulties are found within a black-white interracial marriage? Do blacks feel inferior to their white partners in an interracial relationship? Does the gender-race arrangement play a role within an interracial union? Can ghosts of slavery affect an interracial relationship in the 21st century? Has biblical interpretations of marriage negatively affected my marriage? Does love really conquer all? This chapter seeks to answer these questions through personal experiences of my interracial marriage.

Chapter Six: Made In Our Image: The Struggles of Raising a Biracial Child discusses my experiences in parenthood. There are racial expectations from blacks and whites that place pressure upon each partner of an interracial relationship. One of the popular discussions of these unions are not the relationship itself, but a product of them—biracial children. Having a child has been the most glorious gift I have received, but with it has come much responsibility. Because the formation of my identity has involved race, much of these responsibilities in raising my child has been centered on race. My goal has been to raise him to acknowledge both racial heritages while maintaining a belief in human equality. This has taken a constant examination and revision of my values and behaviors concerning all aspects of race, and this chapter discusses examples of these experiences.

Through the examinations of my childhood experiences (illustrated in chapters 1-3), I am conscious of the ways that black inferiority can progress as I raise my child. Much like my life, the environment surrounding my child's life will affect his attitude and behaviors concerning

race. Although I am not sure what developmental stages a child begins to comprehend certain aspects of life, society has been teaching him about race ever since he left my womb. For example, debates about his race occurred in the hospital shortly after his birth. Family members and even strangers constantly compliment his light skin complexion and “good” hair and often have positive stereotypical behaviors associated with them. Despite the negative experiences I had desiring or being compared to these physical traits, I believe his aesthetic qualities, characteristics which are closely related to his white heritage, add to his beauty. My personal conflicts with my own racial value are examined, and I grow afraid of my negative influence on my child’s racial identity. This chapter narrates the joy and struggles of rearing a biracial child in the South, reflections upon my racial identity, and the correlations between them. In these experiences, I find myself revisiting prior life experiences from an outside view.

Chapter Seven: Reflections of a Two-Way Mirror is an analytical reflection of the chapter two through five. It will serve as the conclusion of the dissertation and will connect the theoretical insights from the previous chapters. The significance of the chapter lies in the targeting of the trends that support this notion of racial inferiority. I will discuss any mental milestones or emotional setbacks that have occurred as I attempt to overcome the inferiority complex. It will also challenge others to examine their own personal journey and reflect on how popular perceptions of race have affected their view of themselves and others.

Racism is an American dilemma, and it is important for the topic to be thoroughly discussed. These discussions “[lessen] its power and [break] the awful, uncomfortable silence we live within” (Kivel, 2002, p. 58). In order to become actively involved in the struggle to eradicate these symptoms of social maladjustment, it is necessary to know how these forms of racial inferiority are manifested in one’s psyche. It is important to clearly understand and identify these

inferior attitudes, determine how they affect our society, and the ways they are communicated to each generation.

From the savage beatings and murders of people of color, to job and housing discrimination and the myriad of petty insults that mock the founding principles of our society—all Americans are faced with the consequences of racism (Kaplan, 2011, ix).

In a society where racist practices are embedded in virtually every aspect of society, many people—of all races—are oblivious to the ways they perpetuate racism and racial inferiority. Samuel (2005) asserts that white people's sense of entitlement undermines any discussion of who is responsible for maintaining oppression. And many blacks retain the idea that they are not capable of perpetuating black inferiority. My life experiences are a testament that challenges the latter. From childhood to adulthood, this research will trace my experiences and the manifestations of white supremacist ideologies that become the foundations of my racial inferiority complex as well as my belief in the myth of post racialism. My intentions are to illustrate how society's practices of racial intolerance perpetuate within the black community and negatively impact the self-esteem of African Americans. Additionally, I wish to show how critically examining these racial aspects of life can lead to a more positive identity.

CHAPTER TWO

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL: SKIN COMPLEXION, HAIR TEXTURE, AND THE AMERICAN STANDARD OF BEAUTY

“Looking into the mirror, the black woman asked, ‘Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the finest of them all?’ The mirror says, ‘Snow White, you black bitch, and don’t you forget it!!!’”

(Weems, C.M. in Willis, 2000, p. 312)

Societal standards of feminine beauty are presented in all forms of popular culture from children’s movies like Snow White to music lyrics, television personalities, and Hollywood actresses. Whether women view these images in the pages of a magazine or on the big screen, they are bombarded with images that illustrate society’s fixation with Eurocentric symbols of beauty. Many Americans are familiar with this example of racial discrimination in the United States and can recognize the underrepresentation of African Americans and other minorities in many forms of media. However, many people overlook the other form of skin tone discrimination that continues to present itself in the mainstream aspects of daily life.

Known by some as the “cousin” of racism, colorism is a practice which privileges those with light skin and disadvantages individuals who have dark skin. Research shows that these standards of beauty, which are in the eyes of many beholders, not only affect women’s perceptions of their worth but also impacts their overall experience in society. According to Hunter (2005), lighter skinned African Americans “earn more money, complete more years of education, live in more integrated neighborhoods, and have better mental health than do darker-skinned African Americans...” (p.2).

Acknowledging this statistical data and viewing my present life, it would seem that I am fortunate (as a dark-skinned woman) to be an educator, have three college degrees, and have maintained a racially integrated social life. Nevertheless, I cannot escape the reality of the psychological workings that have been in the background of all of these accomplishments. I felt that I must put forth my best “white self” in order to gain these successes, and these elements of “whiteness” began with my physicality. The most common behavioral manifestations of this form of assimilation were centered on my skin complexion and hair texture.

Although one’s physicality can seem like a separate entity of life, it is very much connected to how we view ourselves in and outside the mirror. The societal mythology that exists about one’s personality, morality, and capabilities are often a prejudgment based on physical features observed. Much like the ideal of race, beauty and acceptable physical traits are a social creation and reside in the eyes of the beholder. Nevertheless, we must not ignore the social impacts that are projected by these images and their associated meanings. If the fabric of America is continuing to be stitched with the threads of white supremacist values, should we not consider the foundations of such thinking?

Race as we know it is a socially constructed ideal initially overtly used as justification for domination. Its labels are primary determined by one’s physical features, and two of the most defining traits associated with race are skin tone and hair texture. The basis of these principles has led to discrepancies between social, economic, and educational opportunities among whites and people of color over the centuries. Therefore, we need not view our physicality as mere aspects of beauty (although this is a concept that is difficult to escape). We must also see it as an avenue by which racism can begin to take root. It is not the physicality alone that leads to such issues, but our comprehension of such measures.

In this section, I will discuss the environmental orientation that shaped my attitudes on race beginning with skin and hair. Specifically, I seek to reveal a different face of racism and show how it mutates to an often unrecognizable guise poisoning the minds of the mis-educated. Black Feminist Thought allows me to complicate the issues of racism and colorism and view it as an oppression that involves race, gender, and class. This bilateral view of my childhood essentially shows how white, masculine worldview deems blacks inferior and objectifies women centering their value on their physical attributes. The Duboisian idea of double consciousness allows me to understand the crisis in forming an identity between perceptions of “whiteness” and “blackness” as well as the struggle to resist repeating racial and patriarchal oppressions. And finally, Nigrescence Theory of black identity formation allows me to see the transitions between attitudes concerning race as well as identify specific encounters as points of reference which led to those changes.

While there are variations of behaviors that support an attitude of white superiority, my childhood behaviors began by focusing on the physical attributes one may associate with being black or African American (i.e. dark skin, kinky hair). My introduction to these qualities and the perceptions that surrounded them began in my home and extended communities. While I did not initially identify myself as a racialized being or completely understand race (as it relates to ethnicity) in the early stages of my childhood, I still began forming an identity that assumed the complexities of skin color and its correlating features. It was this phase of my life that I was introduced to the myth of black inferiority through negative perceptions of my physical features.

Black is Beautiful?

Numerous interactions with my family have revealed the distinct perceptions which surround skin complexion. Comments and discussions criticizing dark skin are so frequently

used that we all become complacent to its battering. We are emotionally beaten because of the words yet more often than not we never think of those words as being the culprit of our pain.

“You gotta stay out that sun! You don’t get black again.” These are the words of my mother.

Although those words were directed at my younger cousin, whose caramel complexion had been sunbaked to a seemingly undesired milk chocolate hue (much like my own), hearing them caused a familiar uneasiness and discomfort within my spirit. These words and I were much more than acquaintances. They had become the anthem of self-worth as I had heard them in some form or fashion most of my life. And knowing that my mother or anyone would never complain if the reverse affects happened to my skin simply reminded me of the emotional plight I had carried for years. My feeling of shame had never been shared, and I had never heard anyone else complain. I wondered why I had never made my feelings of known to my mother, and I wondered how these overt criticisms became acceptable among us.

Thirty years of living in a world of white supremacy has led to many experiences that have oriented me toward the acceptance of ideologies which supported white dominance as well as challenged the beliefs that I had internalized (Cross, 1991). Like everyone in the world, I began my life unconscious of the racial systems that dominated society. I saw race, but I failed to realize how the perceptions surrounding race truly impacted my life as an African American. Instead, I blindly accepted the norms of my environment. But now as an adult woman, I understand that that race was is not my only form of oppression. Race intersects with forms of gender and class oppressions, and the internalization of these ideals is maintained without obvious teachings or conscious learning (Collins, 2000). Within the experiences of home, educational institutions, work, and daily interactions with society at large, black women navigate through their environments interacting and responding to stimuli that give meaning to their

identity as African Americans and as women. These “meanings” which are often a culmination of stereotypes and myths have gone through waves of transformation throughout the centuries. However, the ideology of white domination has been a constant feature of these forms of oppression and the invisibility of them allow them to permeate environments that we consider safe grounds—like our schools, like our own home, and like Grandma’s house.

Before I was old enough to attend school, my days were always spent at Grandma’s (Mama’s mother) house with while my parents worked. Grandma was like another mother to me. She was kind-hearted, and she let me do things Mama wouldn’t allow, like cook on the gas stove and sew with needles. It was because of Grandma that I learned the secret to making collard greens and sweet potato pies. She was the reason I knew how to sew pillows and make a family quilt. Grandma spoiled me rotten in many ways, but she was an equally strict disciplinarian. She was one of those old school “because I said so” grandmas that disciplined with a switch and expected children to obey without questioning, and I have a feeling that was how her mama had raised her.

Even though it seemed completely innocent and in many ways valuable to learn how to cook, sew, care for children, and manage a house, these were principles that placed a box around my identity. The foundation for my perceptions of blackness is found within observations such as these. Single, widowed, divorced, or happily married, a black woman’s place seemed to be at home, and a black woman’s place was centered on unpaid work and servitude (even when she had a full-time job).

As a child, I was not able to comprehend the ideals that surrounded these gender roles let alone challenge them. Just as the Nigrescence Theory suggests, people are born into an environment of well-established racialized norms. In this particular environment, norms revolved

around the color line which collided with gender and class. While these observations were continuing to shape the perceptions of my identity, it was all relatively unimportant to a child of my age. It would be much later that I would call upon these messages as I began to focus on an “adult” form of gender in a deliberate manner. Rather, my earliest memories seemed to be characterized more by Nigrescence’s pre-encounter modes of racial self-hatred. The beginning of this self-hatred was not initially associated with race. Rather, it was a slow progression that began with the examinations of my physicality (skin color and hair texture). Specifically, my attitudes were shaped by people’s response to my skin tone and hair texture as they compared to whites and other blacks.

The most relevant illustrations are found within my interactions with my light skinned cousin Natasha at Grandma’s house. Every day around noon, my cousin and I would sit in the dirt driveway under a huge oak tree and play games for hours. Grandma considered this to be a good spot for us, mainly because of that huge tree. The tree was centrally located in the front yard which provided good visibility from inside the house and more than enough shade from the sun. Somehow I knew that the tree’s shade had more of an impact that its proximity would ever have because as soon as we left the shade to join the neighborhood boys for a game of kickball, I would hear a screech from the screen door opening and Grandma would yell “Stephanieeeeeee! Yall need to play in the shade!”

I always hated being a slave to the shade having to follow it all over the yard as the sun moved across the sky. It made no sense to me that someone would be so obsessed with the shade that I would have to exchange it for fun. I wondered why the neighbors weren’t as adamant about their children playing in the shade. Maybe their maleness lessened the pressure for them to sustain to a certain level of beauty. Being dark-skinned was not considered a badge of honor no

matter the gender, but it was obvious that people expected girls to be more prim, proper, and beautiful (mainly to eventually gain the attention of a boy). Even in these expectations, it seemed almost just as unfair to be dark-skinned as it was to be a female.

“Stephanieeeee!” Grandma always called my name no matter what! Even when Natasha was caught being mischievous, I heard my name. I never asked why. Maybe it was because I was her granddaughter, and Natasha was only distantly related. I had no theory at that time, but no matter what was going on, my name was called which made me feel like everything was always my fault. Even though Natasha was the mastermind behind most of our schemes, I still thought she was sweeter than me. I never asked myself why (until now), but I am positive that my perceptions were correlated the way others responded to her. Everyone treated her so delicately—kinder, softer words and gentle touches. I also never asked Grandma why the shade was so important. I always knew that it was related to my skin color, but besides that I had no concern. All I knew was that if I didn’t take heed to her warning or “make haste” as she would say, the whole kickball game would be shut down and I’d be stuck watching the game from the window.

Although African Americans are generally race conscious and aware of the inequalities they often experience for their skin color, they are notorious for modeling the same racist ideals within their own communities. Rather than white versus black, it becomes a comparison of light skin versus dark skin. No one ever has to directly tell someone that dark skin is less attractive; it is a myth that is adopted through daily interactions with the world. Despite not having much contact with the outside world, specifically with white people, I had a crash course in racial politics beginning with my own race. There were observational differences between the treatment of light and dark skinned people, and although it was subtle, it was frequent enough to

make a connection. Thus, my internalization of this social norm began to affect my behaviors of how I viewed myself.

My experiences at Grandma's house may seem to be part of my past, but the behaviors that surrounded me and the conflict remains in my head allow me to realize that this colorism is very much a part of our present. As a mother of a lighter skinned biracial child, I struggle to keep these discriminating ideals at bay. It is thought that dwells in the back of my mind every time his skin comes in contact with the sun or when he becomes lighter in the winter. It is the destructive nature of these thoughts that prevent the growth of a healthy self-esteem. Additionally, these views ultimately perpetuate discrimination.

It is disheartening to acknowledge that my family had raised me with the same message, but it is interesting to see the disequilibrium that seemed to exist in their beliefs. Despite the obvious admiration of light skin, nearly everyone in my family had chosen a dark skinned mate. Fredrick, an older cousin of mine, was the only extended family member that married a high yella woman. Fredrick was always calling somebody black or reminding them that they were blacker than him. "Hey, Blacky!" he'd always say to me placing his arm next to mine to compare our skin tones. The irony could be found in his own skin complexion. If you saw him and his chocolate colored skin, you would think that he was out of his mind for even making such comments. "Boy, leave my baby lone! The only light skinned things you have are your wife and kids!" My mama was always there to divert his attention back to his own dark skin, and we would all laugh innocently at the gestures that had been made.

When examining events like these, it seems apparent that the beliefs we embrace do not become permanent entities. Rather, they become a current body of knowledge which can be revised and manipulated as we reconstruct our lives through experience. Therefore, ideas such as

those found within a hierarchy of skin tone can live alongside beliefs which view it as an oppressive myth. And the contrasting behaviors reflect one's inner flow of psychic struggles. This idea is related to the Duboisian (1903) idea of double consciousness, the internal conflict involving the mentalities of two opposing American ideals—blackness and whiteness. With this view, African Americans always view the world through double lens. They both see themselves as members of an oppressed community as well as hold standards of the dominant culture. From the lens of oppression, one can acknowledge the consequences of a particular history, such as slavery. This then allows one to see the negative aspects of colorism. However, in the same mind, the white supremacist lens blindly “sees” value in colorism and perpetuates the mis-education of African Americans’ status and self-worth.

It's kind of an odd thing when you think about it: the fact that I was taught in so many ways to covet light skin yet was simultaneously taught to love being black and consider my skin beautiful. I always heard the elders say “you can't serve two masters. You will love one and despise the other.” I currently recognize the common saying as biblical scripture referring to spiritual warfare of good versus evil, but I think it contains some truth as it relates to my perceptions of race. Self-love and affirmation becomes an impossible task when one has internalized a partial hate for certain characteristics of the physical self. For the self consists simultaneously as mind, body, and soul. These aspects cannot be dismembered and remain healthy or whole.

Like DNA, these Eurocentric ideals of beauty had been passed down to generations of African Americans. Grandma, Mama, and I had inherited it. I learned a lot about skin color as a child through observation. By age six, I believed that lighter skin was better looking in most people's eyes. I also believed that the sun was my skin's natural enemy. Still, it did not seem

very fair that some people had a natural advantage of being pale. No matter how much I played in the shade or stayed inside on sunny days, I would always be a dark-skinned girl. Maybe I wouldn't get "blue-black" or "African black" as some black folks called it, but I would always be dark.

I guess it was Daddy's fault being that he was darker than my mother. But from what older family members said, my dad was the darkest man Clyde had ever seen: "I member when yo daddy came to see yo mama one night. He knocked on da door, and we all kept looking out the window and couldn't see a thang! Somebody finally opened the door to see who it was. I swear they almost walked straight into him. If it weren't for the whites in his eyes, we wouldna been able to see 'em at all! Yo daddy was shonuff black!" Everyone always laughed at the telling of this story, but I wondered if my dad ever felt like me growing up living in the shadows of light-skinned people, feeling devalued in some ways. And if he did, I wondered how he overcame it because he seemed to be the most confident black man I knew.

Recognizing my father's experiences allows us to see colorism as an issue that affects both men and women. The confidence that my father displayed, however, may have been a disguise similar to the one that I had worn for decades. And even if he were truly confident in his skin, I knew it had not come as easy as I once thought. Nevertheless, it seems that this color hierarchy navigates itself differently in the lives of men and women. While both can be perceived as being more physically attractive with lighter skin, women are often taught that their physicality is more valuable than other aspects of the self, such as one's intellect or emotion.

As Collins (2000) suggests, "race, gender, and sexuality converge on this issue of evaluating beauty. Black men's blackness penalizes them. But because they are not women, valuations of their self-worth do not depend as heavily on their physical attractiveness" (p.89).

The influences surrounding my gender led to my goals of unattainable beauty. No one sat me down to explain the differences in light and dark skin, and I never had to read about it in a book to comprehend people's perceptions of it. Dark skin was a butt of a joke, a laughable entity, and a shadow to ignore. In contrast, light skin was oohed and ahed over, an invitation to smiles, and worthy of gentle stares.

Skin color and features associated with whites, such as light skin, straight noses, and long, straight hair, take on the meanings that they represent: civility, rationality, and beauty...[while] dark skin, broad noses, and kinky hair represent savagery, irrationality, and ugliness (Hunter, 2005, p.3).

I may not have questioned anyone about why lighter skin was perceived better than darker skin, but it was something that I definitely thought about in my spare time as a child. I can remember a particular moment when I was seven. School portraits had been delivered, and Grandma had been given pictures from all the children in our family. I took my picture and Natasha's picture and hid in one of the bedrooms. I sat in the dimly lit bedroom, crouched down between the wall and the head of the bed as the sunlight peeked between the curtains. I looked at my picture. Then, I stared at her picture. I was careful to compare the shapes of our eyes, noses, and lips. Both of us had wide eyes, broad noses, and full lips. I looked at our hair—the color, texture, and style. Both had dark brown, kinky but straightened hair in two ponytails. “She's just lighter than me,” I whispered to myself. I saw no striking features other than her skin tone that made her better looking than me. Sitting there on that bedroom floor, I had solved the seven year mystery of why Natasha was better than me. The assumption was always there, but now it was more evident. There was virtually only one thing that stood between us—skin color.

Natasha's favorable genetics made her better looking than me. She was the "cute little girl" that was "so pretty" according to everyone that saw us walking downtown with Grandma. Strangers never gave me random compliments like they did her. It's not that I never heard a compliment about my beauty. My parents always told me that I was pretty, especially on Sunday mornings when I was in my fancy church dress or right after I had gotten my hair straightened. Although these aspects of beauty are externally acted upon, the act can be psychologically disintegrating. Reshaping outward appearances alters the psyche as well as one begins to internalize the message that black is inferior (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). The temporary beauty I possessed was achieved by the intense labor of a hot comb, but Natasha's was found in her natural complexion. There was a noticeable difference in the types of compliments and the amount of compliments I heard about Natasha, and I was just her cousin who seemed somewhat invisible around her because of my dark skin.

The Nigrescence Theory suggests that when African Americans are confronted with their racial difference, they generally react with strong emotions which shift the initial feelings of self-hate toward the perceived guilty party. Although the Nigrescence Theory generally associates these "encounters" to occur within black-white interactions, these shifts toward envy and hate have the ability to occur as a result of a black-on-black experience as my uncles' retelling of childhood experiences illustrate:

Black folks back in the day were almost just as racist as white folks. Instead of black and white, they did it with light skin and dark skin. They didn't care if you knew it either; they put it right in your face. And if you were dark like us, you couldn't stand a red boy! I remember one time I put sand in a red boy's hair because he called me black. Them red boys would call you black on purpose cause they thought they were better than us. Them

ole high yella girls would do it too, and they said it just to piss you off. Oh, and if a red boy called you a nigger, it was on! It was just like a white person had said it. We would whoop they ass!

Events such as these reveal the power of colorism. Racism and colorism differ mainly in their distinctions *within* a racial group rather than across racial groups. However, this form of color preference is closely related to racial prejudice. First, the method of using Eurocentric physical features as a standard demonstrates its relationship with white supremacist ideology. Secondly, it is correlated with the desire to acquire and maintain power over others (Hochschild & Weaver, 2007). Even though my uncles' experiences occurred with other African Americans, it is apparent that they felt pain from the lighter skinned blacks' power. And the emotions they carried from it were very similar ones' they experienced with racism. Light skinned blacks were African Americans and thus victims of racial oppression. In black communities, however, they represented power "just like a white person."

These emotions were ones which I could not totally relate. Natasha was the only light skinned cousin I had, and I completely adored her. The differences in our complexion never placed a strain on our relationship. Although I wondered why Grandma always called my name first when she and I were mischievous and although I desired to be a "pretty little girl" like Natasha, it never made me want to retaliate. And she never made me feel like I was beneath her. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison (1970) explores the tensions that exist among blacks as they begin to experience of the hierarchy of skin tone. Like the dark-skinned character Frieda, I observed the "honey voices" and the "slippery light in the eyes" of the people who encountered Natasha's light skin. And like Frieda, I realized that if there ever was a thing to envy or fear, it was not my cousin Natasha. "The Thing to fear was the Thing that made *her* beautiful..." (Morrison, 1970,

p. 74). Although I did not recognize it during my childhood or rather I mislabeled it as a simple lightness of hue, I understand that it is an ideology that prides itself in proclaimed whiteness and maintains its aggressive power through our blind ignorance and mis-education.

When it came to skin tone, people love to point the finger at people like Michael Jackson and Sammy Sosa, both who allegedly took medications to drastically lighten their skin. But are we any different if we bow to its greatness? Are we any better if we play in the shade or rely on over-the-counter bleaching creams to release to change our appearance? I had seen black women with the visible make-up line—obviously lighter than their own skin tone. Although I've never been a fan of makeup, I must admit that I am still a part of the statistic. By the age of 16, I had already tried lightening my skin with Ambi® bleaching creams and skin toning soaps. It didn't work, but the desire remained.

Skin color stratification supports the contention that racial discrimination is alive and well, and so insidious that communities of color themselves are divided into quasi-racial hierarchies. Without a larger system of institutional racism, colorism based on skin tone would not exist. Colorism is part and parcel of racism and exists because of it. (Hunter, 2005, p.7)

The Nigrescence Theory suggests that all African Americans are oriented toward a white dominated culture, and my childhood experiences show evidence of these behaviors specifically in the perceptions that surrounded my physical traits. Even though I primarily socialized within a black community, these attitudes which deemed whiteness (and those which closely resembled it) as superior were most popular. But behind my family's ideas of playing in the shade laid another consciousness that sought to uplift the blackness and bury the controlling images that surrounded me. This sort of buffering, as NT refers to it, is implemented to protect a possible

negative encounter with race is sometimes achieved by deliberately creating a positive racial experience.

As it relates to skin tone, I imagine my light-skinned cousin Natasha had been my first color comparison. However, my white classmates provided a more distinct contrast once I began school. There were a small number of white children in my class, but we somehow knew the rules of socialization. I knew that only black children would get an invitation to my birthday party, and I knew that I would never get an invitation from my white classmates. So when an experience did not follow that pattern, it was salient in my mind. One memorable classmate who broke the rules of socialization was an African American girl named Andrea. No matter what was going on around us (recess or class instruction), Andrea could be found running her hands through one of the white female's hair.

"Mama, why does Andrea only play with the white girls at school?" I asked one day. Mom had a displeased look on her face as she spoke. "Ain't that Alreatha's daughter, Eddie?" "Yeah," my dad replied. "I think she likes them better than us. She always with them playing in their hair," I explained trying to reenter the conversation. "Well, they better get ahold of that now if they are smart," my dad commented to my mom. And from there, the conversation continued on a more adult level of comprehension. I didn't fully understand what my parents were implying, but from what I could gather playing with white girl's hair was frowned upon.

It was a confusing interaction, hearing my parents discuss the wrongness of Andrea's behavior and not understanding why. Even though I didn't have all the pieces to the puzzle, I recognized the peculiarity of Andrea's actions. The racial dynamics of my school placed rules upon our interactions with our white classmates. A predominately black class meant that *we* were not playing with the white girls; *they* were playing with *us*. First, Andrea had crossed the color

line. Additionally, she made the fascination with whiteness (in this case, hair) an intimate and public affair.

The situation I witnessed could possibly been a result of Andrea's natural childhood curiosity. She may have simply been drawn to difference (i.e. the white girls in the class). Whether or not Andrea's actions were a display of curiosity or racial self-hatred is debatable. Because my parents did not directly discuss their feelings or justifications for their beliefs directly with me, I was left to develop my own. Nevertheless, the tension that Andrea created drew the racial line deeper in the sand. No matter what the specifics of the situation were, this quickly became a matter of race. For my parents, it seemed that Andrea had only two choices in her social interactions—play with black children or white children, and the latter was perceived to be the more destructive response. Their feelings about Andrea's decision not only created a racial barrier between my classmates and I, it also sent the message that one must always follow the status quo which I believe ultimately caused me to develop this idea of “the black identity” onto which I desperately tried to hold as an adult. As a result of this experience, racial separation and the assumption that relationships began with the commonality of skin color became an acceptable social practice.

My mama always told us—my siblings and I—that light skin was not equivalent to beauty, but she also taught us to protect the skin that we were in which sent a contradictory message. There were times when she would complain about family members who were color struck (in awe light-skinned blacks) and she warned us about exhibiting such behaviors. And when it came to black and white, she always *wanted* me to know I was equal. This was a desire that she had for me although I am certain that she was incapable of achieving it with her state of

mind. How could one instill a feeling of equality while constantly encouraging racial separation and complying with common practices of colorism?

At the root of all Mother's actions was a desire for me to love myself (even though I am not completely sure she was able to love herself as a black woman). I can remember being a child wanting a brand new Barbie or Cricket baby doll I saw advertising on television. Before 1990, Mattel only used white dolls in their print and television advertisements (Bobo, Hudley, Michel, 2004), but that never stopped Mama from trying to find me a black one. It was always the same old story. We'd walk up and down the aisles to find a particular doll that I had seen on television. "There it is, Mama!" I'd exclaim from the toy aisle. "Nope," she'd reply shaking her head, "that's not the one *we* want." In my mind, that *was* the one; it was definitely the only one I had seen on television. I am convinced that my mother's fear was that I would develop self-hating attitudes toward being an African American from direct contact with "whiteness" (e.g. befriending white people, playing with white dolls). Like many African Americans, she failed to realize the role she played in perpetuating the same message.

The story would always continue in the same manner. Mama would track down a sales associate and sometimes even request to see a manager. "Why don't yall ever have any black dolls?" she'd ask in frustration. I was never really sure of why they didn't have any, but I would always go home empty handed. On most occasions, she would end up ordering a black doll from a catalog. If they were out of stock and if she was tired of my whining, she would break down and buy a white one. It's funny how even as children we are brainwashed to perceive white as the model. I had only seen white Barbie in the commercials. So even if Mother had managed to find a black Barbie doll, it would be just that—the *black* Barbie. Barbie was white. All real dolls

were white. Like Nissel (2006) says, “Anyone who watched television could tell Black Barbie wasn’t as important as White Barbie” (p.37).

I know that Mama felt it was important for me to have a doll that resembled my skin complexion, and for good reasons. It seems that there were enough societal images that portrayed white beauty as superior without me developing an intimate, imaginative, and infatuated relationship with a white doll in my own home. According to Chin (2001):

Adults tend to assume that the physical aspects of toys determine how children will use and relate to them. Part of the impetus behind the move to introduce ethnically correct dolls to the marketplace is to provide children with toys that looked like them and to which children can relate (p.171).

But could I really relate to my black dolls? Were my dolls ethnically correct? Was a dark complexion enough to make the doll relatable? To me, it didn’t matter if my doll was black or white. I knew that either doll—black or white—would possess a unique quality that my own hair would not allot me in its natural state—straight hair that I could comb it with ease. It’s not that the hair on my head was unmanageable; it’s just that I was never taught the proper skills of caring for kinky hair. So while Mama’s focus was on skin color, mine was on hair texture. I would sit in my playroom combing and brushing my dolls hair all day wishing that mine was as beautiful. I would sometimes braid it in styles that I wore as a toddler, but most of the time I just put it in a Jan Brady ponytail, Cindy curls, or let it flow loosely like Marsha’s. Sometimes I wondered why I never saw black dolls with kinky hair, but now think that I know the answer. No one would buy them.

In the 1930s, Kenneth and Mamie Clark made it publically known that black children would much rather play with white dolls than black dolls. In the late 1960s, in the midst of the

“Black is Beautiful” campaign of the civil rights and black power movements, poor sales for Mattel’s first “colored” doll proved that African American communities were still not ready to embrace their “own” black dolls. In the early 1990s, Mattel acknowledged the legitimacy of changing physical characteristics, such as hair texture, in with its new African American Shani doll, but opted to maintain the profitable long, silkier hair (Bobo, Hudley, & Michel, 2004). I, as Mattel predicted, was fascinated with the “original” hair of my dolls. It was long, smooth and glamorous, “the kind that grows out of the heads of ‘white’ girls...the kind you buy at a beauty shop and add on to your own” (Lewis, 2006, p.263). It was the kind of hair that every black woman I knew loved and desperately tried to obtain.

The Politics of Hair

“Hair is another important medium by which people define others, and themselves as well... hair emerges as a body within a social body and can reflect notions about perceptions, identity, and self-esteem (Banks, 2000, p. 26).

When it comes to beauty, skin color and hair texture often go hand and hand. Just as the hierarchy of colorism perceives skin tones which closely resemble Caucasians of the highest rank, the beauty of hair texture is seen in a similar way. Amongst many African Americans, “good hair” is considered to be one that is straight, wavy, sometimes curly, but one that definitely absent of extreme kinkiness.

“Yo hair so nappy, I bet you had to take Tylenol just to comb it this morning!” “Yo hair so nappy, Moses himself couldn’t part it!” These are the words that I heard as a child. Because my mother made sure my hair was neatly pressed or braided, these comments were never directed at me. However, hearing them directed at other African Americans aided in my internalization that the hair that naturally grew from my head was defected. As a result, I became

more self-conscious about my hair. How could African Americans despise the hair that grows naturally from our heads? Why is this viewed as humorous?

In 2007 Don Imus was the hot topic of every news show for the insensitive comments he made during a discussion of the NCAA Women's Basketball Championship. Referring to the kinky haired black females from Rutgers University as "nappy headed hoers" sent a powerful message that was not so humorous to many Americans. The term "nappy" in most cases is used to describe the kinky texture of African Americans. Although it is used among various ethnic groups, it tends to carry a more negative connotation when used across racial lines. It seems to me that nappy is only a derogatory term when a white person uses it. It's like calling a black person's hair a nigger. For many, Imus's comment was seen as an example of overt racism which is likely due to the fact that the insult derived from a *white* man and was directed at *black* women. However, racism and sexism are interwoven forms of oppression (Collins, 2004). Comments like these reveal the gender-specific ways that African Americans experience racism. Specifically, it shows the affiliation that exists between the black race, female gender, and hair texture.

"Nappy-headed hoers." The relationship between the remark and the recipients of the criticism seems easily dissectible. The qualifications for the label require one to be black and female. Having kinky or "nappy" hair is a physical feature of many black men and women, and it is generally seen as an undesired quality because of its distinct difference from most Caucasian hair textures. With longer hair generally being perceived as a feminine quality, the texture of the hair becomes a focal point alongside skin color (in this specific case, dark skin as most of the teammates had). When these two characteristics combined with the physical activity displayed

on the basketball court, it created the image of a dark, barbaric African woman which many see as being sexually driven.

Both Imus and his executive producer Bernard McGuirk referred to the female players from Rutgers University as “hoes,” but for some reason Imus got most of the heat. Watching the news coverage of this event, I was completely shocked. The women they referred to were simply black women playing basketball. They were not sliding down a pole, dressed provocatively, nor did they illustrate any other trait typically associated with *women* being whores. This leaves me with the assumption that their “blackness” was enough to portray such an image in these white men’s mind. According to Collins (2000), accusing African American women of being sexually aggressive, promiscuous jezebels, or the contemporary “hoochie” is a regular practice found in U.S. culture dating back to slavery. And it is within these modes of degradation that the oppression of African American females is found.

Bernard McGuirk referred to them as “some hard-core hoers” and Don Imus called them “some nappy-headed hoers” during the same year a Grammy-nominated song proclaimed to “make it rain on these hoers.” What was the difference between each of these comments? Considering that each example referenced black women (as illustrated in identities of the members of the Rutgers team as well as the music video), not much in particular. The nappy-headed descriptor unfortunately caused racism to overshadow the sexism that was present. By focusing on Imus, in many ways, we make sexism a secondary concern. It’s like saying, “you can call me a hoe, but you better not call me nappy-headed!” By no means do I feel that any of these comments are acceptable. But as I examine these aspects of our culture, it reveals how perceptions of the inequalities that exist in our society. It also shows how the insidious traits white supremacy can guise itself among less noticeable forms of oppression.

When we think of African American hair, several images may come to mind. Its texture ranges from tangled and kinky to silky and wavy textures that are often referred to as “good hair” in black communities. Black hair is micro-braided, kinky twisted, pressed, curled, permed, wigged, weaved, or worn in an array of natural styles like dreadlocks and afros. And each of these textures and styles carry a meaning in heads of the women that wear them as well as the people who view them.

Although many black women today would attest to the notion that permanent relaxers and weaves are just as much a part of African American culture as natural hair, we must not ignore the historical progression of black hair in the United States, its connection to white supremacist ideologies and its association with black pride. Just as racism and colorism operate on the basis of a white identity, the standards of “good” or acceptable hair operate in a similar manner. This idea promoted practices of pressing and permanently straightening hair in black culture. During the Black Power movement, natural hair became a symbol of pride as African Americans were encouraged to embrace their *innate* beauty (Banks, 2000). Blacks wore thick afros to attempt to alter racist stereotypes which insisted African Americans were ugly, undesirable, and immoral (hooks, 1995). Conversely, the social images of people like Angela Davis caused these hairstyles to become a symbol of black militancy and delinquency, a likely reason why many people like my parents began straightening my hair. In many ways, these behaviors can be viewed as characteristics of an emerging positive black identity, one that has “encountered” racism in American society and one which intends to immerse himself into “blackness” (Cross, 1991). However, double consciousness is revealed in the ways many African Americans clung to the belief that success could only be achieved by adhering to Eurocentric standards of beauty. My mother’s hair perceptions serve as an example of double view. While

she religiously pressed my hair nearly every week, she was adamant about me not permanently straightening it.

These somewhat contrasting practices may have revealed the struggles my mother had with personal ideals of beauty. The kinky texture of our hair obviously elicited some level of discomfort. Otherwise, she would not have chemically processed hers and pressed mine as much as she did. While Mother was vocal when sharing her beliefs concerning colorism, she remained quiet on the subject of hair. It is my belief that her adamancy to keep my hair chemical-free was a silent protest. In doing so, she could help me preserve a trait that she felt was of my African heritage. As an adult who has experienced my hair in both a permanent and temporary straightened state, I understand the difference clearly. Even when natural hair is straightened by heat, one is frequently reminded (by precipitation or humidity) of natural state. With a permanent relaxer, it is easy to get lost in a dream whose story line follows a theme of physical self-hatred and a desire to achieve attributes of others. And even when the kinky roots of new growth present itself, it stands in contrast alongside the chemically processed, a visual reminder of difference and perceived abnormality.

The day I got my hair straightened for the first time was a momentous occasion. After my hair was washed, detangled, plaited, and air dried, my mother pulled a chair from the kitchen table and place it next to the gas stove. The stove was turned on, and an iron hot comb was placed over the flame of one of the stove's eyes. My job was to sit and hold the hair grease, a small container of Royal Crown ®. With a brand name like that, I was sure to be transformed into a princess. And there I would sit excited and nervous waiting to become a new girl. I knew that when I got up out of that chair I would be able to run my fingers through my hair and shake it back and forth like all the white girls did at school. I knew that I wouldn't have to sit for an

When it came to physical beauty, it seems that Mama's teachings were common. I have never met a black woman, although they surely exist, that did not share similar stories of black beauty. All of my black friends from childhood to adulthood, from various regions of the United States to countries in Africa, were familiar with the same rituals of straightening hair and maintaining a good skin complexion. We all had memories of playing in the shade and versions of hot comb Sundays. Like them, I had learned what beauty looked like in most people's eyes. It was my light skinned cousin Natasha. It was Goldie Hawn and Christie Brinkley, and in 1983 it was the fair skinned, light eyed Vanessa Williams as she was the first woman of African descent to win the title as Miss America (all had straight hair). Beauty was always white or damn near white.

As I reminisced upon family members and images of popular culture over the decades, it seems obvious that blacks as a whole had issues with their skin and hair. I watched Michael Jackson and Sammy Sosa get lighter and lighter as the years progressed, and I had seen jars of bleaching creams in the medicine cabinets of family members. Hair rituals didn't just exist within female circles. Prince, James Brown, Al Sharpton, and my cousin Ananias had permanently relaxed hair. Then, there was the wave of jheri curls with Michael Jackson (before he relaxed his hair), Eddie Murphy, Easy-E, and my uncle Al. Of course, hair styles like boxes, high rights, corn rows, and dreadlocks remained an aspect of black culture. But it seemed to me that every black man who wanted to be taken seriously or seen as a white collar professional just "faded" his hair almost completely off while many black women were gluing and sewing it in.

I am certain that my mother only wanted the best for me and wished nothing more than for me to become a woman who was confident in her black skin, but she, like many blacks, was "able to see beauty in traditionally black identities including dark skin color and short, natural

hair, but it seems as if [she had] not completely released the power of the white ideal of beauty” (Hunter, 2005, p.4). Nonetheless, her contradictory messages filled with both love and ignorance taught me this: (1) Beauty comes in a variety of skin tones, but there is a limit to a complexion’s beauty. (2) Naturally straight hair is “good” hair; anything else is in dire need of an alteration.

These efforts to modify or control one’s complexion or hair texture in such ways are minor attempts to gain power in this society. While these practices may seem to have desirable outcomes, they essentially only provide a temporary fix. There is no denying some of the positive effects of having lighter skin or straighter hair. These trends were witnessed during the era of slavery as lighter skinned blacks were given more prestigious positions than their dark skinned counterparts (Hall, 2008). While there is still a significant discrepancy between areas of economic growth and educational levels among dark and light skinned African Americans, succumbing to these superficial practices stifles true development within the individual and among the races. A foundation of knowledge, respect, and trust could provide the basis of these developments.

The Sacrifice: Pain is Beauty

If the standards of beauty are centered on ideals of whiteness, then it would be practical to assume that many of the seventy-five percent of African American women who “straighten their hair and spend hundreds of millions of dollars on hair weaves and pieces” do so with self-hating attitudes concerning their image (Dickerson, 2004). I, for one, can honestly say that I hated my hair. In retrospect, it is apparent that I held a prejudice for kinky hair for the beliefs that I held were formed *before* I ever had a chance to really *know* my hair. The practices found within hot combing or pressing hair may not have permanently altered my hair, but the ritual carried a subliminal message that reinforced the belief that hair like mine was disgraceful. Consequently,

my decision to permanently straighten my hair was based upon these foundational teachings. Even though my mother, in some ways, seemed to have wished to protect the “natural” state of my hair by keeping it chemical-free, the overall message was the same.

As a symbol of femininity, hair becomes a trait that many women cling onto to prove their worth. Race, ethnicity and the physical characteristics associated with them continue to muddle an already complicated issue. With these ideals in mind, a black woman’s hair becomes more than just hair on a black woman’s head. It is a symbol of beauty, social status, and power. Therefore, the decision for a black woman to permanently straighten her hair likely has depth beyond aesthetics. For me, it was a conscious attempt to avoid being seen as benighted or uncouth.

Every time I endured the chemical burns of the permanent relaxer, the feeling I received afterwards was worth the pain. I would no longer have to fear water’s ability to return my hair to its natural state, a visual reminder of the blackness that I wanted to escape. Permanently straightened hair gave me the impression that I was closer to waking up from my “black ugly dream” (Angelou, 1969, p.2). The pain that I received from those methods was temporary. But living in a society whose overall ideal of humanity contrasts your physical existence presents a continuous flow of emotional pain. And rather than dealing with those emotions, it seemed much easier to commit to a lifestyle of bandaging the wound.

Lately, there has been resurgence in natural hair styles with African American women, one that was not as prevalent during the Imus-Rutgers scandal. Where I once would cringe at the thought of having “nappy” hair in public, I proudly (on most days) walk through the mall with my afro or other naturally kinky hairstyles. My hair may still draw some negative attention, but it is likely that many others will be wearing similar styles. We smile and nod to each other as if

there is some unspoken bond. We sometimes engage each other in hair conversations sharing natural regimens. Type in “natural hair” on youtube.com and thousands of videos of African American women documenting their journey of going natural, making their “big chop,” or sharing tips for maintaining healthy hair can be found. Walk through any major bookstore and you can find books on similar topics. Surely, these resources have been a benefit to many African American women as they most certainly were to me. But as Dickerson (2004) questions “...who else on the planet needs such things? (p.141)

If it weren't for me watching Chris Rock's *Good Hair*, a docu-comedy about African American women's obsession with “good hair,” I would probably still be a slave to the relaxer (or “creamy crack” as it is sometimes called) as well as hair weaves. For many people, the movie simply provided laughs as it highlighted some of the extreme risks (e.g. scalp burns and debt) African American women are willing to take for their hair. Personally, the movie became one of the turning points in how I viewed my image as a black female.

As we watched the film, one of my friends even confessed that she regularly skips paying utility bills just to buy her weaves deeming hair as a necessity. We all laughed and shook our heads in self-righteousness feeling that we were somewhat above her because we never skipped utility bills. Nevertheless, we all suffered from the same disease. Although we prioritized our monthly utilities over our hairdos, we all were guilty of overspending on hair. After this confession, more of us began to share stories about *our* hair. Some of us discussed how we would call in sick for work to make a hair appointment or not go to church if we didn't finish straightening our hair in time. And nearly all of us admitted that we felt these rituals were imperative if we were going to be around white people. In a way, it was a bit humorous to hear

these crazy stories about our hair. And hearing them aloud really made some of us realize not only how stupid we sounded, but how senseless we had been acting.

Certainly, hair rituals and its associated stress is a beauty aspect that is not just found among African American women. Excluding all of the countless regimes we perform, women of all races spend billions of dollars each year dying, cutting, weaving, and perming their hair straight and curly to reach an ideal standard of beauty. But while all women may participate in the quest for beauty, women of color are likely to experience more aesthetic scrutiny and thus spend more time and sometimes money altering their appearances. According to Hunter (2005), beauty is an ideology that serves the interests of dominant social groups which in this case are whites. It is within these ideological standards of beauty that help to maintain white superiority and privilege. And because women of color, like myself, are well aware of these associated privileges, we desire the lighter skin or in this case, the longer, straighter hair.

Although I laughed quite a bit throughout the movie, I was more interested in the economic and scientific side of the hair industry. I learned that black hair was a billion dollar industry stemming from the demand of permanent relaxers and weaves. I learned that many of the products used to straighten hair contain chemicals that actually weaken the hair and cause skin problems. The film also answered an age old question, one that many people have after they enter their first hair store, “Where in the hell are they getting all this hair?”

According to *Good Hair*, most of the weaves (100% human hair, not synthetic) that women wear come from women half-way across the world who give their hair as a religious sacrifice. I sat there watching the screen as thousands of Hindu women in India got their hair shaved for God, and something happened to me. It was a spiritual awakening. For the first time, each strand that graced the head of each Indian woman seemed much more than just hair.

Watching the shaving was like seeing the vanity, the ego fall to the floor. It was simply beautiful. I so desperately wished that I was at a point where I felt comfortable shaving my head. After that scene, I continued to think about that religious sacrifice throughout the rest of the movie. My girlfriends and I continued to laugh and share more hair stories, but my mind was still on the sacrifice. I figured that for a black woman in America, getting rid of a weave, not getting any more permanent “touch ups,” and wearing hair in its natural state was just as much of a sacrifice.

Metaphorically speaking, “whiteness” had been my God. It was the invisible, omniscient power that seemed to govern numerous aspects of society, and it had influenced the way others and I saw myself physically. Although this particular experience directly involved hair, the depth of it extended much farther. For me, my altered physical appearance was representative of the beliefs that I harbored concerning race. I did not just hate my hair; I hated what my hair represented. *My* hair was indicative to my African roots, told the story of a history of slavery and marginalization, and proclaimed to the world that I was the heir of a subordinate group.

Undoubtedly, an unwarranted bias is revealed in the comprehensive examination of my hair. My understanding of my revelations showed that I revered white people, and the root of this problem began with the idolizing of their Eurocentric features. That is not to say that every African American who straightens their hair suffers from some type of racial inferiority complex. However, I would suggest that there may be a correlation between the revulsion of the naturally kinky hair that grows from one’s head and the beliefs in their head.

This reverence that I unconsciously internalized had led to the racially biased perceptions I had toward people in my own race. And the way I began to understand it, my beliefs contained the same foundational attitudes that had fueled the problems of our nation’s race relations. Beginning with W.E.B. Dubois, the “problem of the color line” has been referenced by many

scholars over the past century. While race relations in our nation have certainly progressed over the centuries, racial divisions still maintain as societal order and are continuously seen through economic discrepancies. When we discuss the most prevalent problems of the racial hierarchies, physical features seem to be unimportant or irrelevant. However, I understand this learning as the foundation of the overall problem. If race is a socially constructed ideal primarily determined by skin color and hair texture, then these concepts uphold the line of color.

Although I never discussed my personal revelations concerning race, they had become the topic of most of my thoughts. I realized I must begin a process of altering my own thought processes concerning the inferior beliefs I had about black people. Much like a religious sacrifice, I desired to outwardly show my commitment to the process. But I would use my prized straight hair as an offering to a new “enlightened” self.

The sacrifice of *my* hair was a Saturday morning. I awoke shortly after sunrise with a sense of pride and an emerging freedom. I rushed to my kitchen and rambled through my junk drawer for a pair of sharp scissors. My husband Nathan awoke from all of the commotion. “What are you doing at this time of the morning?” he asked with a yawn. “I think I am going to cut my weave out.” “Well, it doesn’t take that much noise to cut your hair!” I was a little surprised that he seemed perfectly comfortable with me cutting it. He had only seen my real hair a couple of times since we had been married, and I knew that underneath the weave was some kinky, unpermed hair that I was ashamed of. “Are you sure you’re ok with me cutting my weave out? My real hair is not going to look like the weave. You know that, right?” I explained. I didn’t want him to be surprised if my hair ended up looking like a bird’s nest. But I will never forget his response: “Stephanie, I didn’t marry your hair. I married you. It doesn’t matter what your hair looks like; you are still you.”

Nathan's words resembled the message of India Arie (2006) in her song *I Am Not My Hair*, a song whose lyrics encouraged African American women to withstand the pressures of American standards of beauty and to define themselves outside of their hair: "I am not my hair. I am not this skin. I am not your expectations, no no." Nathan (and Arie) was partially right. I was still Stephanie Smith, the woman that he had married. But I *was* a black woman that harbored self-hate when it came to her hair. I just did not have to succumb to these standards.

Now as I look back at my life, I realize that the climatic act of cutting my hair that turned me into a new woman. I walked in the bathroom and faced the mirror with more confidence that I had awoken with. I snipped and snipped away the weave. Nathan even helped me clipping all the hard-to-reach places. I looked down into the sink at the weave, and I wondered whose head the hair had once belonged. I thought of all the time that I had spent sitting in a salon chair. I thought of the thousands of dollars I had spent on my hair to make it look like the white women's hair I grew up admiring. I thought of Jesus (Mama said He created a unique beauty in all of us). And I thought of Malcolm X (1965):

How ridiculous I was! Stupid enough to stand there simply lost in admiration of my hair now looking "white"... I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are "inferior"—and white people "superior"—that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look "pretty" by white standards (p.54).

Even though I felt liberated in releasing myself from the chains of my weave, I knew that the ability to look myself in the mirror had come from Nathan's approval. I had a friend who had gone natural prior to my decision, someone who I knew would commend and encourage me through this physical and mental process. I knew that I could call my mother, and she would

console me (even if she did not understand my decision). As my second sight arose, none of those people's views and not even my own personal thoughts mattered at this time. What really mattered was how white people would see me. I held this fear inside of me that even though I was black, my straight hair somehow made me a better version of it.

Even though Nathan was my husband, someone who was supposed to have such adoration for me, I was still shocked to hear a white man make such a nonchalant comment about my hair. Sometimes "black women believe that our physical charms are primarily attractive to black men..." (Folan, 2010, p.107), but even most of the black men I knew enjoyed the look and feel of silky hair.

Experiencing this hair transformation, I could not help but think of my 1 year old son Braden who lay that morning in his bed sleeping on the cushion of his fluffy curly afro. He was part black and part white yet he was the only one in the family without straight hair despite the fact that it was my genetics that had created every kink in his curls. What was I teaching him about himself with all my permanent relaxers and weaves? Would Braden begin to hate his kinky curly afro? Would this be his first experience of black degradation?

Was all of this my mother's fault? She had spent more time teaching me how to straighten my hair than taking care of its natural texture. I stood in the bathroom, weave-less, not knowing what the hell to do with my hair—two-thirds permed straight, one-third a kinky new-growth. I felt free, but at the same time I felt ashamed. I so badly wanted to plug in my flat iron, straighten the new growth, and blend it with the permed hair, but I knew that I couldn't. I was committed to a life of straight-free hair. It wasn't that I was against straight hair and weaves as I still loved them and felt they had their place, but my goal was to fall in love with my own kinky hair. I didn't want to be a slave to straight hair. Well aware of my weakness to weaves and

relaxers, saw the flat iron as a gateway drug and figured going cold-turkey was my best option to embracing my natural hair. I was embarrassed for being a black woman lacking skills on how to care for black hair. I didn't even know how to braid! Surely, my mother could not solely take the blame for a practice that African Americans had done for centuries. This among many other aspects of African American life was just an effect of societal brainwashing.

Why else would Madam CJ Walker become the first African American millionaire from hair straightening products and fading creams? "Many people are surprised to learn that a black woman who was developing hair care products and cosmetics in the late 1800s would actually be the first self-made woman millionaire in this country," explains her great-great granddaughter Perry Bundles (Graham, 2000, p.12). But why should we be surprised? Walker, like many great entrepreneurs, saw a deficit, a "need" in the black community and fulfilled it. It's just sad that she became a successful icon by capitalizing on the insecurity of African Americans.

Taking all of these things into account, I grabbed the scissors from the counter and locked myself in the bathroom. I cut off every knot and then every chemically altered strand that I could find. The "big chop" was in session. When I finished, I was left with a four-inch afro. I cried (on the outside). "It's just hair. It'll grow back." I could hear Nathan's voice in my head. But it wasn't just hair. My hair, my straight hair, was a part of my identity. It was how I became a better looking black person, and it was how I perceived myself to be more accepted in white (and black) communities.

According to Burrell (2010), "there is no aspect of black physical appearance that has more psychodynamic value than our hair," and unlike skin, it is the easiest of the inferiority dynamics to transform (p. 67). Nevertheless, the methods of straightening hair and the practices of protecting one's skin complexion are closely related. Both measures are physical ways in

which the African American attempts to assimilate into a white culture. These are ways in which we display our internalized hate for our natural selves. Black people can never be white, but this was how we physically become our whiter selves.

Even though I had elected to make this sacrifice, there was an emotional attachment to the self I felt that I had lost. In *Melancholy of Race* (2001), Anne Cheng uses Sigmund Freud's research on mourning and melancholia to explain some psychological responses people have in regards to racial identity. Cheng contrasts mourning (the emotional response to a loss in which the person assumes it as a temporary condition) with melancholy (a depressed state of mind by which the person experiences infinite sadness from the loss) to describe some of the processes people experience as they deal with race. According to Cheng's philosophy, the unconscious part of one's psyche instinctively seeks satisfaction from both racial selves (in my case, I presume the black and white lens of double consciousness), and with this comes feelings of guilt and anger attached to the object of loss.

I was a thirty year old woman hardly able to face the reflection of my natural hair in the mirror. The untamed perception of my hair was likened to the animal-like qualities often portrayed by African slaves. Although the self I knew was educated and refined, natural hair told the world that I was ignorant, lazy, and deceitful. As I reflect upon the racialized experience the pre-encounter stage describes (i.e. conformity to societal norms of a white identity), I am inclined to believe that my parents wished to shield me from that experience. They never wanted me to feel inferior. My elementary school experience of witnessing Andrea's infatuation with white girls' hair likely meant more to my parents than it did to me as a child. It was a red flag of unattainable racial conformity. However, they were blind to the ways that they continued to orient me toward whiteness through their submitting to the pressures of Americanized beauty.

Mama always said, “If you train a child in the way he should go, when he is old he will not turn from it” (another modified version of biblical scripture). She was right in many ways. I spent almost 30 years believing that I didn’t quite measure up on the basis on my skin complexion and mostly my hair. And whether they realize it or not, my closest relatives taught me that. It’s a shame that as an adult I had to learn how to love my self. Without my silky mane, I felt far from beautiful. Straight hair, and more specifically my weave, had been a distraction from my dark skin. Without it, I had just become this black, nappy headed girl.

Despite the wavering feelings I held about myself and my hair transformation, I was determined to love myself. I had encountered race and racial discrimination in a non-confrontational manner. Rather than experiencing racial discrimination through an interaction with another, my learning derived from the struggle that resided within me. I knew that I had been programmed to hate myself. I knew I was brainwashed. The mis-education that characterizes Nigrescence Theory’s *pre-encounter* had been recognized, and I was determined immerse myself into the cultural-historical aspects of an African American identity (a meaning of which I was unaware at the time).

And as a result of my newfound knowledge, I forced myself to look in the mirror. Not just a quick glance while getting ready for the day, but more like an exercise. It was an exercise of the mind. Every day after my transformation, I would sit in front of the mirror staring at myself for at least a half hour. I spent a lot of time looking at my hair, but also at my eyes, my nose, and my skin. I would think of the time I compared my picture to my light-skinned cousin Natasha (“She’s just lighter than me”). I would tell myself I was beautiful. I would listen to India Arie’s *I Am Not My Hair* on repeat. I wanted to love myself. I wanted to mean every bit of the words I read from the poem *Phenomenal Woman*:

Now you understand
Just why my head's not bowed.
I don't shout or jump about
Or have to talk real loud.
When you see me passing
It ought to make you proud.
I say,
It's in the click of my heels,
The bend of my hair,
The palm of my hand,
The need of my care,
'Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

(Angelou, 1994)

I wanted to believe those words. And the truth is that I did for a while, but it is a constant struggle not to revert back to old habits and deep-rooted philosophies. In my home I could feel beautiful because at home *I am* the standard of beauty there. I could be reassured by my husband, and I could try to find comfort in other black females who too have realized and sought to overcome elements of black inferiority. But my life is not lived within these constraints. Every morning, I must walk out of my front door and face the world. And in this world, there are standards, standards of beauty, standards of character, and standards of how we experience our lives. Because the strength and resilience of these ideologies continue to dominate our society, temptation is always in close proximity for me.

CHAPTER THREE

THE OTHER MIRROR: REFLECTING MEDIA'S CONTROLLING IMAGES

Lazy, untrustworthy, poor, uneducated, violent and promiscuous. Gang members, drug dealers, sexual predators, pimps, whores, single-parent families, welfare queens, street hustlers, loud, and angry niggers. Nearly everyone has been presented with images that are correlated with these descriptors. Although the exhibitions of these characteristics are not determined by race or ethnicity, it is often used as a marker of such stereotypes. Many of these labels are used to describe African American men and women in the United States. As an unfortunate result, many African American children grow up wrestling with the ideas of these presumptions trying to decide if the perceived characteristics are avoidable or a destined part of their fate.

Our double consciousness allows us to see these labels as a socially constructed form of black inferiority. Nonetheless, this false sense of “blackness” becomes the African American model we respond to as we create our identities and form our beliefs about other people. The Nigrescence Theory recognizes the racial factors that impact the formation of a black identity and notes how the effects are depicted in a variety of ways. African Americans can be characterized as having a romantic obsession to all things “black” or as one who easily accepts forms of cultural misinformation as facts. Blacks can display aspects of racial self-loathing or self-hatred, and they can also be consumed by an intense hatred of white people. Additionally, there are African Americans who seek to create an identity that shows little significance to his race while others recognize race and openly address issues which surround it (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001).

Being bombarded with images that deem blacks inferior support the idea of a racial hierarchy, and this idea becomes an influential aspect of the self-hate that many African Americans possess (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001). Additionally, many blacks look to these

images as they “become black” by forming their racial identity. But while race is an important facet of one’s identity, focusing solely on it provides a partial view of the factors which impact it. It is important to recognize the dominant ideology that permeates our society operates not only around racism, but also within a sexist context. When African American women encounter the world, we are forced to respond to perceptions surrounding our race and gender. That knowledge alone reveals a black woman’s innate disadvantage in a society. In this chapter, I discuss several of the paradoxes and silences that transpire from racism and gender discrimination. Drawing from journalistic accounts of my life (and others around me), I illustrate the damaging African American women have portrayed throughout the history of our society and the ways black communities have unconsciously perpetuated these oppressions.

Black People

Whose more racist? Black people or white people?

Black people... You know why?

Cause we hate black people too

Everything white people don’t like about black people

Black people really don’t like about black people

-Chris Rock, 1997

On the album *Roll with the New*, Chris Rock provided comedic commentary on his perception of black on black relationships. Beginning with the previous quote, Rock continues his bit by describing behaviors he sees in black communities for which he uses to create two characterizations of African Americans—black people and “niggas.” The African Americans who embody stereotypical behaviors like laziness, ignorance, or deceitfulness, he refers to as “niggas.” Believing these behaviors create a hostile environment as well as strengthen an

existing stereotype of African Americans, “black people” hate them. While Rock may not be a noted theorist and received harsh criticisms for his act, he was able to capture some sentiments that black people have about their own race.

Rock’s words alone are controversial, but the audience’s overwhelming approving response reveals the unconsciousness of internalized racism. The applause, laughs, and accompanying nods fuel the comic for nearly eight minutes as he criticizes “niggas” for their daily social interactions, broken family structure, welfare dependency, lack of education, and crime. As he explains, “niggas” primarily distort the images of black people, not the media. Although he attempts to show a distinction between African Americans with the use of the terms “black people” and “niggas,” both are commonly used by many African Americans to refer to each other. Moreover, the collective racial identity that many blacks simultaneously possess make it difficult to hold such negative feelings about “niggas” without seeing oneself as part of the equation. Additionally, the development of an “us versus them” mentality illustrates an assimilated act of “Americanism.” Rather than simply drawing a color line on the basis of white and nonwhite skin, the stereotypical characteristics of nonwhites are used to construct “niggas.” This construction allows one to compartmentalize racial generalizations and avoid interference with one’s exceptionally perceived personal self-image.

A racist is one who believes a certain human race is superior to all others and/or uses similar ideals to discriminate against others. To use Rock’s language, the black people in my experiences might possibly be the most “racist.” White supremacist values have slithered through black households undetected, and we continue to pass values of internalized racism to our offspring. Although we recognize racial discriminating practices as a negative, we continue to operate through them. We use a color caste system deeming lighter skin better than dark skin,

and we promote many of the racial stereotypes that are associated with skin color. Sadly, we usually do not see how our behaviors connect to the overarching ideology of white dominance. Our minds have been whitewashed so that even our personal goals revolve around our idea of whiteness. I can turn on the radio today and hear the self-made millionaire P. Diddy rap about being “richer than them white folks” as if whiteness is some type of goal to reach or surpass. In many ways these behaviors are disturbing, “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (DuBois, 1903, p.45).

When I first heard Rock’s words (as a teenager), I found much humor in it just as I did when my classmates created jokes on the playground to criticize someone’s skin or hair. But a deeper look at the situation—the popularity of such jokes, the fact that these behaviors provide revenue, and the acknowledgement that many people absorb these words as reality—reveals much more than roaring laughter. First, these interactions between the comic and the listeners illustrate the racial mis-education that William Cross (1991) speaks of in his Nigrescence Theory. This mis-education stems from one’s adopting of negative stereotypes of about blacks. Once these attitudes are internalized they are passed on as fact. Even when these ideals are displayed as a form of entertainment, they have the ability to create an illusion of reality, especially when these perceptions like these are frequently presented. As one begins to give these negative characteristics a black face, one begins to view “being black [as] an intrinsic deficit that is responsible for the negative experiences” (McAuliffe, 2008, p.164). These stereotypes of African Americans were created to justify our inferiority, and they have been woven so tightly in our experience that we did not recognize them as that. Societal brainwashing compels us to accept these notions and even to laugh at our own denigration (Burrell, 2010).

The black body, according to George Yancy (2008) “has been historically marked, disciplined, and scripted and materially, psychologically, and morally invested in to ensure ... white supremacy (p.1). The childhood experiences explained in Chapter Two provide examples of how these ideals seep into the minds of African American individuals, and this Chris Rock example gives us an opportunity to momentarily turn our eyes away from the familial impacts that acquaint us with white ideology and toward other external factors, such as the media.

There are several ways in which we experience the world and come to know ourselves. Obviously, we experience it directly through our interactions with the people in environments, but we also gain perspectives through images found within various forms of the media. Media has the ability to inform us on subjects that would otherwise be foreign to us. For example, media can integrate the racially and economically segregated lives that many continue to live by providing a lens into environments that we would otherwise never come into contact. But these “experiences” we have with television, music, newspapers, and other forms media provide skewed view of reality. By the time these words and images of life reach our ears and eyes, it is often more fiction than fact. And because media can be our first introduction to an unknown topic (e.g. a race of people), inaccurate representations and recurring stereotypes can negatively shape perceptions (Hall, 2008). However, it also has the power to impact the perceptions that negatively affect one’s self-image.

When I saw white people, I naturally assumed that their lives were like most of the families I saw on television. White families were well-to-do, middle class families like the Keatons from *Family Ties*. In my favorite childhood movie, *The Toy*, whites were wealthy enough to hire their children a playmate (in this case, a black man). And even if they weren’t extremely wealthy, they were still superior to black female housekeepers/nannies like Nell Carter

from *Give Me a Break* (Larson, 2006). Sitcoms, like *The Beverly Hillbillies* provided another view of social class for whites, but for some reason they never tainted my image of them. There were simply so many other positive examples that it overshadowed the possibility of a negative image. By showing a black family headed by two educated parents, *The Cosby Show* displayed black families in a different light. A black male doctor (father) and a black female lawyer (mother) challenged popular perceptions of race, gender, and class relations. However, images like these were scarce and served more as an exception to the rule of black inferiority.

While these images and views had created a positive portrayal of whiteness in my mind, the black image was not so fortunate. During my first year as a second grade teacher, one of my white students innocently asked me if I lived in the “hood.” After I told him no and investigated his inquiry, he explained that his question derived from a movie he watched about a group of inner city gang members (all black). I can remember him saying, “They were shooting up everybody and I was wondering if your neighborhood was like that.” Because my student had very limited exposure to other African Americans, television provided him with his most intimate interactions with black people. Unfortunately, this was not to my advantage.

As children, we begin to learn about the favorable and unfavorable stereotypes that relate to racial and ethnic groups. We obtain this knowledge long before we are mature enough to understand the full implication holding such views. By the time we reach adulthood, those stereotypes have worked their way deep into our psyche. We see the world through those lenses, and it unconsciously influences the understanding of ourselves and others. If the views are positive, we end up focusing on the positive attributes of an individual or group of people. If those views are negative, we view others and can even end up viewing ourselves in a negative light without ever realizing the belief originated elsewhere (Ramsay & Sweet, 2008).

According to Anderson & Stewart (2007), “the mass media serves basically as self-arbiters of psychological, cultural, social, and political messages” (p.193). The mélange of images we receive our personal experiences help create our view of the world and consequently our perceptions of race. Unfortunately, the media has historically functioned as antagonists to the social progress of African Americans. In many ways, these methods continue to feed both our first and second sight in the world. Interactions with our environments directly and through media provide us with the ideals of what to consider “white” and “black” or “American” and “Negro” (DuBois, 1903). Sometimes, the two transmitters can simultaneously interact with each other as it often did in my life.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with black folks these days!” My mother usually said this when an African American had acted immorally according to her standards. This particular time, a story on the news had elicited her reaction. I didn’t care much for watching the news as a child, but I always sat in the same room when my parents did. Wondering what was wrong with *us*, I fixated my eyes on the television. In the right hand corner of the screen was a picture of a black man who looked like he was old enough to be someone’s father. The news anchor mentioned rape, a word that I had never heard before. I was confused, but his charges seemed serious enough to make an inquiry. I asked my mom what rape meant, and she didn’t hesitate at all to tell me. “It’s when a man forces a woman to have sex with him.” Several fuzzy images began to pop into my head. The most vivid memory contained a black man who had a white woman pinned down as she lay half naked screaming trying to escape. Because media’s portrayal of violent acts, such as rape, most often involves a nonwhite male, it reinforces the notion that whites are superior to blacks (Blau, 2003). I had just learned the definition of rape, and the media had shown me that rapist had a black face.

Of course, “black folks” and “black people” were not the only faces of rapist, but it seemed to be this way, especially when my mother continuously criticized the actions of some with a collective racial marker. Although much of the media’s negative representations were of blacks, my mother’s reaction to them sent a powerful message concerning my race and whites. Blacks were becoming the immoral, evildoers of the world who existed alongside the haloed Caucasian race. Of course, my mother never stated this nor do I think she ever completely believed this. Nonetheless, her behaviors taught me to neglect my critical eye and accept a coding that was racially biased. Instead of illuminated the racism that was projected by the disproportionate uses of race and crime or a system that biasedly targeted African Americans, she communicated that discrimination were irrelevant factors. And ultimately, African Americans were collectively responsible for creating and displaying a positive perception of themselves.

This negative reference of blackness characterizes Nigrescence’s pre-encounter mindset of anti-blackness which has very little difference between white racism (Cross, 1991, Price, 2009). My mother, a woman of the Civil Rights era who obviously had encounters with racism, still had the tendency use negative generalizations about African Americans. This speaks to the ability to negotiate between multiple identities (Dubois, 1903).

We are bombarded with stereotypes that label blacks as slothful, devious, and violent. “Opening a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe [sic] white supremacy” despite the relative progress that African Americans have made (hooks, 1992, p. 1). While crime and violence were characteristics typically assigned to men, black women had their share of negative labels which generally revolved around sex.

Historically, black women have been ostracized with the focus being on her body and the labor of her body. The institution of slavery introduced the black woman as a commodity, and the perceptions of her have not changed much (Collins, 2000).

Former statutes in many jurisdictions exemplify the ways society has ignored black women's inherent right to control their bodies. As Wriggins (1983) reminds us, black men once received the death penalty or castration for raping a white woman. On the other hand, it was perfectly legal for a man (black or white) to rape a black woman. Similar practices are seen today in punitive actions of sexual predators as the severity of the punishment is highly correlated with the race of the offender and victim.

The historical connections between racism and the sexual exploitations of black women provide the backdrop for the ways race and gender continue to transpire. Although the victims of sexual violence (as well as its offenders) are of all races, the most common portrayal of the crime is seen as a black male preying on white women. This was the image to which I had been exposed, an image that I had not seen challenged.

There are several damaging effects of this overrepresentation beginning with the creation of the "dangerous black male." This ideal obviously tainted the image of black men, but it also negatively affected my overall perception of African Americans. From a black feminist perspective, possibly the most destructive consequence is the establishment of the "invisible black woman," unnoticed, ignored and silenced.

As discussed in Chapter Two, black women generally fall at the bottom of the sociocultural hierarchy. Gender places black women in a disadvantaged place, but their position is also dependent upon skin complexion and their conformity to the standards of the Eurocentric values of womanhood. These ideals of womanhood are often accompanied by the belief that

women should be protected. Because African American women are not perceived as meeting these patriarchal standards of femininity, they are not perceived as deserving protection. Characterizing them as sexual aggressors further removes the shield which protects them from these violent acts (Covington, 2010).

These stereotypes that saturated the media could be found all over Clyde. I knew black families that acted like holding a full-time job was a disease. When certain black people came around, I knew to hide my mother's purse. I had seen black children fight in school and seen mug shots of local blacks in Clyde Herald for their violent behavior. And I knew girls who boldly pursued sexual activity with boys at extremely young ages. I think my mother tried to teach me that the "controlling images" of womanhood—primarily ones which centered around sexual promiscuity (Collins, 2000)—did not have to define me for they were not natural, inevitable traits of my identity. I was attentive to my mother's guidance, but seeing the promiscuous behaviors of girls in my community brought the controlling images back into my mind. Only time and the assurance of my family would cause me to realize that I was not destined to exhibit these stereotypical characteristic nor were the observed behaviors always connected to race.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois (1903) describes the "two-ness" that is often experienced by African Americans. This condition, which makes a close connection with racism (and sexism as previously mentioned), has taken different forms of transmittal since the blacks' arrival in America. The message of whiteness being the standard of humanity and the model of what is considered "American" is still present. I was introduced to this model of whiteness in the form of beauty standards. Although the teachers of this mis-education were often people in my family, the media was in the background promoting these indirect messages of black self-hate. It

was there that I saw the racially-biased advertisements of white baby dolls and Disney princesses (which at that time were only white) as well as the exploitation of women on Nair commercials, Miss America pageants, and Jet magazine's Beauty of the Week. While my parents remained focused on providing me with positive images of African Americans and combatting these views, they underestimated the power of their unconscious endorsement of its negative ideals. These messages spoke to my race and my racialized gender.

Several images of black womanhood have been reflected in society, and they have continued to serve as models which maintain an African American woman's subordination. Among these images we find what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) refers to as the mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, and jezebel. Beginning with a popular image of the slave era, we are presented with mammy, the obedient, domesticated servant whose purpose in life is to care for others, specifically according to the white man's orders. The matriarch (possibly the alter ego of mammy) represents the aggressive, unfeminine mother who does not adhere to traditional gender roles of caring for family in her home. The welfare mother is an apathetic, single black female who is heavily dependent upon government assistance. Possibly the most popular "controlling image" of black womanhood is the jezebel who is characterized by her sexually aggressiveness.

Certainly, these images accurately describe many black women in the world, but not all of us. There are countless African American women who are the protagonists of their daily struggle to maintain an affirmative position in society. They are leaders rather than servants, caring mothers, not just caregivers. They are independent and display their sexuality in various ways. Additionally, the "jezebels" and "mammified" personas which are often used to reflect black womanhood are found within other ethnicities. The issue then is twofold: There is an overrepresentation of women of color who display these negative images. Moreover, there is a

lack of diversified images of black women. When there are limited representations of black women, we become pigeon-holed into modeling a specific persona. And even though we may not adhere to these expectations, we are inclined to respond to them.

From jeans and lingerie to deodorant and burgers, female bodies (no matter the race) have used to gain the attention of potential consumers in the buyer's market. Whether the woman is shown ripping off the pants of a man or seductively eating a hamburger, she is typically displayed in a sexually submissive manner resembling pornography. These images do not only entice sexual arousal, but they create a degrading and often unrealistic model of how women (and men) should behave. Additionally, it reinforces sexist ideals concerning the relationships between women and men. It is common knowledge that sex sells, but we often ignore the fact it is selling more than a fantasy or the goods and services which the media markets. Sexual exploitation of women sells the idea that women are sex objects, a commodity to be had.

Series of Unfortunate Events

*a rapist is always to be a stranger
to be legitimate...
but if you've been seen in public wit him
danced one dance
kissed him good-bye lightly...
pressin charges will be as hard
as keeping yr legs closed
while five fools try to run a train on you [sic]
(Shange, 1975, p. 17-18, spelling mine)*

It all happened so quickly I didn't even have time to think, or perhaps my immaturity provided no aid in a situation like this. I was twelve and in the safe haven of a public school classroom when my thoughts were interrupted by what sounded like a herd of cattle. Immediately I was tackled, pushed back into the room up against one of the shelves by four boys (acquaintances among the grade level). They worked efficiently as if the assault had been premeditated. Two held me down while the others got my pants down, and one by one but mainly all at the same time, each of them push their grimy hands inside of me. I squirmed about, but there was no way I could escape their grips. The yelling for them to stop was completely useless. The laughter and chatter of recess muted my cries. I literally blanked out staring out of the window hoping that someone would come in to stop them. Finally, after I guess they had enough, they ran off wearing faces of accomplishment. I was left there to get dressed again and process what had happened.

I snapped the top of my pants and slowly walked toward the door feeling a bit dazed and defeated. I bumped into Mr. Palmer, my language arts teacher. I knew he had to see the perpetrators running out of the room because they had just left. When our eyes met, we stared at each other in silence. Though no tears were present, my eyes desperately cried for help. Mr. Palmer looked at me and then down at my pants. "Your pants are unzipped," he said with a smirk and walked into his room. I was embarrassed. He had to know. My zipper was not just unzipped. It was stretched open from where each of those four boys had forced their way into my pants. The idea of Mr. Palmer knowing what happened to me bothered me, but the idea of him thinking that I had wanted it to happen hurt my feelings. It was the way he looked at me when he said "your pants are unzipped" that was simply disturbing.

Unwanted sexual acts occur on a daily basis in our world, and many times they go unnoticed because of the victim's silence. Although my unfortunate experience occurred within a matter of minutes, the behaviors exhibited speak volumes to the beliefs people have concerning relationships between males and females across the color line. First, there is no concern for my feelings and a blatant disrespect of my body. No one asked me if I wanted to engage in a sexual act. Instead, the males (all black) forcefully take advantage of my temporary solitude viewing my body as an object free for the taking. The fact that multiple boys willingly participated in this act allows one to see that the female inferiority in the male psyche is not only internalized at a young age, but it is much more common that is often conveyed.

This notion of female inferiority is reinforced when my teacher (white) becomes aware of the situation. His response to the situation seemed based on an assumption that I had invited or desired the encounter. It did not matter which race was involved in the matter, their perceptions of "victim" could not be attached to my black female body, a body viewed as promiscuous by nature (Yancy, 2008). And my silence—never illuminating the wrongness of their actions—confirmed their acts of sexism and possibly racism.

Silence is an interesting behavior, especially when it is a response to an experience to an emotionally charged encounter like rape. In the Maya Angelou's autobiographical *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), she metaphorically describes her childhood rape. Similarly, these sexual encounters caused a temporary silence whereby the acts were willingly concealed. However, the exposing of these encounters led to a series of consequences including raging emotions of loved ones, a court trial, the death of her perpetrator, and Maya's extended muteness. Self-blame is one contributor to silence after rape, but for others it can be more complex. My choice to remain silent about the act is likely a result to the multiple layers of my

identity. Like Maya, I was a young female which brought taboo to any sexual act (invited or not). As a young girl, I was taught to refrain from any sexual acts until I was married. This suggestion was viewed as a biblical act, but I knew that my gender influenced its importance more than anything else. Although males were participating in these acts, it was viewed as a natural reaction to their hormones as opposed to the promiscuous female behavior. Speaking of the incident seemed as “sinful” as the act itself. I had a reputation to keep, one that was removed from the stereotypical jezebel that seemed to embody black womanhood. I did not want to run the risk of being labeled a whore. Besides, reporting it would make it real, and I wanted to erase the event from my psyche.

Unfortunately, I found myself in a worse situation two years later. After leaving a school dance with a male friend, he drove to a secluded location and turned off the car’s engine. Leaving the radio playing, he proceeded to climb on top of me. “Nooooooooooooooooo!” I screamed, but it didn’t seem to matter to him. “Stop! I don’t want to!” Still, he did not acknowledge me. He let the seat back and pulled my pants down. The satin pants I had worn were advantage to him. Having nothing but an elastic waist, they slid off as the tears began to roll down my face. Still, I didn’t give up. I pushed and kicked and screamed. His arm was in a sling from a prior injury so I put all of my energy into hitting and pulling on it. It seemed the more I kicked, the easier it was for him to get inside of me. There wasn’t much room in the front seat, and I was very cramped. I kicked one last time, and decided to surrender. “I knew you wanted it,” he moaned seeming completely oblivious of his theft. He had stolen my joy, my innocence, and my voice. I was in the middle of the woods and no one could hear me. I looked out of the window into the darkness. Soon enough it was over.

In *The Color Purple*, rape and the patriarchal aggressiveness of sex is a motif that continues to silence Celie's character. Beginning with the molestation from her father, her choice to be silent creates a psychological acceptance of the crime which stifles her liberation and ultimately victimizing her to other undesired sexual encounters. As she recalls, "Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ast [sic] me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off...(Walker, 1982, p.79). In one's attempt to mentally escape the unpleasantness of the situation, we disguise of feelings of discontent, erase ourselves, and become more invisible than we were already perceived.

Rape wasn't anything like I had imagined. The stranger in my thoughts was not hiding behind the bushes; the stranger never showed up. He was someone I knew, someone that I did not consider being dangerous, crazy, or deranged (Groth & Birnbaum, 2001). Television had introduced to me who rapists were, and they had gotten one thing right. Rapists were black. Given the parallels between the media's images and my experiences, I did not acknowledge the fact that rapists could be any race. They were simply black in my mind.

The truth was that the perpetrators of these sexual advances were not always black. But when whiteness is always viewed in a positive light, the events are difficult to recognize. "Psss...I want you to meet my friend," Rob whispered to me in class one day. Rob was a white boy who had been in my classes for several years. Without saying a word, he slowly looked down in his lap motioning me to do the same. I did. There resting on his leg was his erect penis. I didn't stare, but I did not immediately look away. I just smiled and shook my head. I consider it completely normal that I was curious enough to look, but I wonder most about my response. It was acceptable for Rob to show me his penis even though he had no idea how I felt about the situation. Would I have reacted in the same manner if Rob had been black? I may have. At this

point in my life, I am just grateful that he had just shown it to me and not tried to force it into me. Rob might have flashed me, but least he didn't put his hands on me.

According to Crenshaw (1995), acts of domestic violence against black females are often covered to protect the integrity of the African American community (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). As an adult who has experienced the harsh reality of racism and the effects that it has on African Americans, I have been prone to protect the image of the black community. I do not suggest that my aptness is ethical or advantageous to myself or the overall community to which I wish to protect. Nevertheless, these were not concerns of mine as a teenager. I lacked maturity and the comprehension of the white supremacist, patriarchal workings of society, aspects that are necessary for in-depth reflection and critical thinking of these matters.

I am unsure of what level these sentiments were displayed in my environment, but females almost always took the blame when alleged acts of sexual violence occurred. When the Miss Black America contestant Desiree Washington accused Mike Tyson of rape, investigators wanted to know what type of clothes she was wearing, her relationship with the rapist, and her sexual reputation. This is not to say that claims of rape should not be thoroughly investigated. However, asking such questions send the message that certain behaviors justify sexual violence. I had heard people talking about girls who said they were raped in Clyde, and the negativity usually surrounded the girl. "She's a fast girl, a little hot mama!" "Her wardrobe is an invitation for trouble." "With the way she looks, he probably thought she was 18." Rather than protecting the black community, I sought to protect my own gendered image. As a black female, it was difficult task to combat what at the time seemed to be an innately depreciated value.

The "force" that I felt from these encounters is a force that has been central to the oppressive images of black women in the United States. Like black men, black female slaves

were forced to Southern auction blocks where their bodies were devalued through its marketing and the examining of potential buyers. However, black women were exposed to an additional form of devaluation. Their breasts made them wet nurses, their vaginas made them the recipients of sexual advances (Collins, 2000), and the vessels through which more slaves could be born.

However, my experiences with sexual violence challenge common discussions concerning black woman as victims. While the media often displayed black men as sexual predators, they were not always displayed this way in the black community. When it came to sexual crimes, the elders taught me not to entice it. Consequently, it seemed that I were ever violated, it would be because of my own invitation. Only white men were referenced in discussions of the raping of black women. Possibly, the omission of black males was their attempt of protecting the image of the black community (Crenshaw, 1995). Therefore, it is important to view a black woman's experiences in multiple ways that extend beyond racial discrimination, one that exalts the complexities of the race and gender subjugations (Crenshaw in Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas, 1995).

Know Your Role

Who taught me to be *that* woman? The woman who secretly despised her mirror's reflection, the woman who gives up without a fight, the woman with many words yet no voice? The many selves that have emerged from this one body were created both purposely and haphazardly, but all seemed to have derived from some sense of ideal immersed in a racially, socially, gendered hierarchy. I am positive that I never purposely sought to obtain any of these characteristics, but somehow I embodied them. In the southern black community of Clyde, womanhood was characterized by mothers, teachers, store clerks, and ushers at church. They wore pants and skirts, spoke loudly and moaned soft songs about Jesus. They could mend your

wounds and cut you with words. They stood tall, crossed their legs, and bent their knees in prayer. Women always had a role, and they knew the appropriate time and place to display each of these behaviors. While this role displayed care and dominance (over children), their self-proclaimed strength was the mask of submission. A teacher, not the principal. A preacher's wife, not the preacher. The baker, not the breadwinner. It was obvious in most situations that a woman's "place" could exist anywhere in society as long as it was underneath a man.

My first observations of black womanhood were my mother and grandmother. Despite the differences of the historical eras that shaped them, race, gender and social class held them nearly in the same position. Both lives seemed to be subjugated by their unpaid labor of caring for others in the capacity of cooking, cleaning, rearing children, and pleasing their men. For my mother, this was in addition to the newer age expectations of full-time work outside the home. As I view these lives through the lens of Black Feminist Thought, I see the outcomes of their lives as being related to the racism, colorism, sexism, and classism that exists in our country.

Despite these familial images of womanhood, the current images of successful black women outnumber those of black men. There are many ways to decipher these findings. Considering that black women are currently earning over sixty percent of college degrees awarded to African Americans, one might consider the possible causes of such a vast contrast (Dyson, 2004). As a contributor to this statistic, I reflect upon my related experiences. Black females socially exist beneath both black and white men. Living within a traditional monoracial family structure allowed me to see the sexism that occurred between black women and men. My mother intentionally raised me to position myself to be economically independent of a black man. And although black women receive numerous discriminations in society, they are not perceived as much of a threat in an educational or work environment as black men. Together,

these factors have assisted me in achieving educational and thus economic success. Still, this discrepancy between African American men and women possibly leads to dysfunction of the black community.

Because race is so intertwined in the various aspects of our life, it is often difficult to determine which form of discrimination is being displayed or which factors are impacting my life. Besides, it seems to be a cultural norm that I have adopted from the black community to focus on race and racism (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). And as a product of this type of thinking, I continued my adolescent life being more attentive to race. Racism had definitely impacted Clyde, and it was evident in the general socioeconomic status of this predominately black town. Although there were blacks in Clyde who were economically successful, statistically the African American population suffered in comparison to whites which help to create a more positive image of whiteness.

The lack of a diverse population limited perspectives on what it meant to be black, and specifically for me, an African American woman. The overarching ideologies of white male domination had trickled down to black women in the community stifling their abilities to achieve adequate education and economic uplift that was independent of a man.

Despite the lack of value that seemed to be placed on a black woman's education, my mother earned a high school degree. She never attended college though. Her income came from work at local sewing factories, nursing homes, school cafeterias. My father, on the other hand, went to college and joined the military. Although my mother never earned a college degree, her understanding of the oppressions black women experience influenced me to become an academic. As she would say, "Don't grow up and be like your mama, working like a dog for

pennies. And definitely don't depend on a man to provide for you. Get your own education, and bring home your own bacon!"

Survival for most African-American women has been such an all-consuming activity that most have had few opportunities to do intellectual work as it has been traditionally defined. The drudgery of enslaved African-American women's work and the grinding poverty of "free" wage labor in the rural South tellingly illustrate the high costs Black women have paid for survival (Collins, 2000, p.4).

In reflecting upon my mother's "survival," it becomes apparent that the images that we are subjected to become models for which our multilayered identities take form. While my mother was never a slave in the traditional sense, she seemed to be a slave to the male-head of our home. At times, she could display an angry aggressiveness toward my father which was likely a response to his alleged infidelity, but the strongest subliminal message came from her willingness to stay married to him.

I will never forget sitting in the living room with my mother one Saturday as she looked over that month's phone bills. There she sat going through each line of calls highlighting any phone number that was unfamiliar. She called and had a brief conversation with an unknown woman. "White men don't treat their women like this," she mumbled after hanging up. Sadly, she believed the words she spoke. Possibly, it was her limited exposure to whites along with the flawed racial representations that led to her mis-education. If I had not already internalized it, I was beginning to culminate a belief based on my encounters with rape, my father's infidelity, and the images of black manhood that had been presented.

"Stephanie, your mama is fine! I don't have time to be walking 'round with your head low. If you are not a strong woman, this world will eat you alive. But remember to just call on

the Lord if you feel you can't go on. He'll give you strength." These words from my mother carried simultaneously carried two conflicting messages. A message of hope came from the spiritual healing of God. But her weakness was revealed as the power of man was displayed (directly through my father and indirectly through God).

My father had allegedly been unfaithful. And although I now understand marriage more deeply and the temptations that can lead one astray, I still find his actions unacceptable. But what is intriguing about the ordeal is that this undesired behavior became an accepted, destructive norm in my house. By no means did my mother want my father to have relationships with other women; she just failed to use her power to curtail it. I believe that part of her reasons to stay married was tied to financial insecurity, one reason why she encouraged my financial independence. The other was her interpretations of the bible. Although infidelity is an action that the bible supports as grounds for divorce, the social climate in Clyde said otherwise. Likely, her decision was closely related to an internalized belief that promoted female subordination and dependency.

W.E.B. DuBois (1903) suggests that blacks are "born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world" (p.12). The veil that DuBois speaks of describes physical demarcation of difference from Caucasian individuals, one which negatively affects others' ability (as well as our own ability) to see ourselves outside of the oppressive prescriptions of White America. While I am able to connect with these words, there are some aspects of Dubois's experience that limits the understanding of many African Americans' experience. Although the veil is used in a universal manner to describe the visible pigmentation of blacks, the variations of skin tone that exist within the black race affect the "thickness" of the veil. DuBois had both intimately interacted with racial discrimination and recognized the distinctions and advantages of

light skin as he was among the educated “Talented Tenth.” His veil was sheerer; he did not *know* the same veil that I do.

Additionally, the maleness of these perspectives of double consciousness limits our understanding of the black woman experience in the United States. Women have cultivated a double consciousness that focused on both a male-dominated worldview as well as minority gendered perspective (Nielsen, 1990). Couple that with the Duboisian angle of double consciousness and we come closer to comprehending the lens through which black women experience their world which may quite possibly be an inharmonious, multilayered identity. According to Katie Cannon, “the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman’s reality as situation of struggle—a struggle to survive in two worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed” (Collins, 2000, p. 26).

CHAPTER FOUR

LOOKING OVER JORDAN

Most people in any given society are unaware of the culture that surrounds them. Like the act of breathing, we hardly stop to consider the involuntary acts that contribute to the absorbance of a specific way of life (Webb, 2001). In this very manner, my acceptance of black inferiority seems to have been subconsciously embraced. Playing in the shade, hot comb Sundays, bleaching creams, permanent relaxers, white and “unauthentic” black Barbie dolls, and the oohs and ahhs of my light-skinned cousin Natasha were all experiences of my childhood. They were the norm, all that I could ever expect because of the high frequency of such events in my life as well as the lives of many other African Americans. While these aspects of my life have encouraged me to deem Eurocentric beauty superior, they are not the complete source of my shifting feelings of racial inferiority. My experiences with Christianity have been in the backdrop of each of these experiences (beginning with my parents and eventually my own). It was illustrated by churchgoing, bible reading, preaching, praising and praying within the constraints of a religion that had traditionally been used to proclaim the unequal status of women and people of color. Although my current understandings of the religion do not include racial discrimination, the context by which I came to *know* Christ and his teachings were somewhat racially biased.

In Clyde as well as the majority of the United States, Christianity was the dominant religion. Its history is found in the notorious practices of the Ku Klux Klan and considered by many as the heartbeat of the Civil Rights Movement. It has positioned itself among many ethnicities and is portrayed within a multitude of denominations including the Baptist doctrine by which I was raised.

In this chapter, my comprehension of race collides with my understanding of Christianity. Although my religious experience began as a unilateral practice of the black community, experiences in public school allowed me to see the ethnic impacts on Christianity. Through greater interactions with my white peers and faculty, I am introduced to a difference face of Christianity—a white one—which differs greatly from the black church I was accustomed to attending. It is within these experiences of cultural difference that I began to grapple with identity understanding it as being a complex web of racial, gendered, and now spiritual exchange.

According to Cross & Fhagen-Smith (2001), a “young person’s emergent identity may turn on assimilationist themes, or a religious-spiritual code” (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2001, p.252). Although the Nigrescence Theory recognizes the impact that religious practices can have on one’s identity development, it tends to treat it as a separate entity from race. That is, one’s ego identity can persist unaffected throughout the stages of racial identity conversion. In this occurrence, it births two independent parallel processes by which identity is continuing to be shaped our racial experiences as well as through our religious beliefs (Sneed, Schwartz, & Cross, 2006). Whereas a person can begin a life subconsciously oriented toward a white culture while intentionally focusing on the religious aspects of one’s identity, I propose that the overt racial climate that exists with places like Clyde make it impossible to separate. Particularly with school, my only racially integrated environment, race became so intertwined with my daily functions that Christianity itself continued as a racialized practice. While there are contrasting methodologies found among predominately black and white churches, there is certainly commonality between them. Black Feminist Thought allows me to recognize the correlation between its principles that support patriarchal leadership and my inclination to define my

womanhood with submissive measures. Moreover, the strong gendered division within familial and societal practices is a central principle to both.

Separate But Equal

In the mid-20th century, DuBois (1940) advocated that the ultimate goal in pursuing racial equality was “to obtain admission of the colored group to cooperation and incorporation into the white group on the best possible terms” (p.200). In a speech that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered before the Golden Anniversary Conference of the National Urban League, King stated that the integration of schools “brought hope to millions of [African Americans] who had formerly dared only to dream of freedom” and that “it further enhanced the [African American’s] sense of dignity” (Washington, 1992, p. 65). It is my belief that I was raised in response to these hopeful feelings of which Dr. King and W.E.B. DuBois stated. For many African Americans, racial integration had not been just a dream; it was a prayer to the Most High. And for many people, the abolishment of racial segregation provided “proof” that God had heard and answered their prayers. While many African Americans may have benefited from the integration of schools, there are other consequences that have served to be detrimental to their self-esteem. My high school experiences with integration often blurred the line between a curse and a blessing.

Prior to high school, I maintained an all-black circle of friends. My classes were predominately black, and the three or four white kids that were present gravitated toward each other. The transition from middle to high school presented an environment that seemed very similar to the setting to which I was accustomed. It was a student body of black children taught by nearly all black teachers (however, there was an increase in the amount of white teachers), and everyone was still trying to find themselves and figure out where they fit in. While my

routine of home and school remained virtually the same, this particular period of my life was crucial to my identity development and my perceptions about being an African American. In my observations, the black identity was composed of more than just being a brown-skinned person of African descent. Holding this particular racial identity involved socializing with other blacks, having what I now consider a shifting sense of cultural “pride,” desiring the economic uplift of the black community, and a reverence to the Almighty. Although the social politics of Clyde would cause most of these aspects to remain intact, high school would provide more opportunities for integrated socialization as well as a greater will to expand my own thinking.

Masses of black students congregated in lobbies and courtyards before classes began, but at the sound of the bell I was separated from them. Instead of traveling to each class with the same classmates that had always accompanied me, something divided us—academic track. Most of my circles headed into rooms on one hall and I along with a handful of other blacks waltzed into another. I was little more than shocked by the sight of my first college preparatory class. All white people. Well, except for Bridgett, Carolyn, Dion, and Frederick. I can’t help but remember them by name considering that we were pretty much attached at the hip after realizing we had been separated from our group. Although the social parameters of Clyde had caused more contact with my white classmates, they were not my friends. Nevertheless, I found it necessary to begin a new relationship.

During my teenage years, my mother had specifically warned me not to trust whites. “They all eventually turn on you,” she would say. I was always doubtful of my mother’s warnings, but I trusted her more than the white students I didn’t know. The cultural mistrust that my mother held was a result of her experiences with repetitive acts of racial discrimination, and mine had been acquired through her teachings (Terrell, Taylor, Menzise, & Barrett, 2009).

However, my reluctance to interracial interactions was not as strong. The patterns of deception and mistreatment that many African Americans have endured throughout history had not yet been personally experienced.

The class was filled with familiar faces. The white students were the same ones that were once sprinkled in our classes throughout elementary and middle school. For years, we had brief casual conversations with them, ate lunch beside (not with) them, and one of them had shown me my first penis. Although I *knew* the white students, having whites represent the majority of my class created a different atmosphere and caused disequilibrium of the mind. Where the Eurocentric standards of living had always been present, they had always existed as the backdrop of my life. At this moment, they became the forefront as well providing the proximity that would allow a closer comparison with “the standard.”

The class looked like a 1960 bus in Montgomery. All the white people in the front and the five us sitting all the way in the back. We were allowed to choose our seats, but in some weird way it seemed better to form an unspoken alliance with the other African Americans. It wasn't just a question of why all of the black kids were sitting together; the white students did the same thing by rote. This was the result of nine years of social segregation and the understood color line that Clyde had taught us.

Even though I had not directly had a negative experience with racism, most of us had been instructed in response to our parents' encounters with racism. This is an illustration of where the Duboisian idea of double consciousness and the Nigrescence Theory are interwoven. As a result of America's history of racial oppression and the South's tradition of upholding these ideas, we attempted to exist separately from the whites we were around at school. My parents had suggested this form of separation, but the notion seemed much bigger than them. Heeding to

these rules was common to nearly all of my classmates (no matter the race). We were aware of being black and wished to maintain a sense of community within these racial parameters. However, we were all aware of societal standards, although we did not recognize it as an ideology of white supremacy, and often responded to it with reverence. Assimilation was a method we acted out with both of our psychological selves; however, it was both an assimilation into the dominant culture as well as a mimicking of an African American culture that has developed through this method prior to our existence.

While schools did not create the social construct of race, they maintain the ability to develop and enforce racial meanings. As an implicit institutional practice, whiteness is coproduced in a symbiotic relation to blackness. Where whiteness is the standard proxy for eminence, virtue, and advantage, color (or in this case, blackness) embodies deficit (Fine, Weiss, Powell, & Wong, 1997). “Though school administrators often defend their tracking practices as fair and objective, there usually is a recognizable racial pattern to how children are assigned, which often represents the system of advantage operating in the schools” (Tatum, 1997, p.56).

Most of my classes were segregated, and no one ever questioned it. No one ever discouraged us from segregated ourselves within the classes either, not even my teachers. I didn't know them personally, but from what I heard nearly all of them had been classmates of my father, grew up in the projects with my mother, or were so old that they had actually taught both of my parents. From that alone, I gathered that they *knew* racial segregation very well. Maybe seeing us racially divided was not harmful in their eyes. Maybe it was familiar, and they felt it beneficial to us. Maybe they viewed self-segregation as an important aspect of racial identity development (Tatum, 1997), and maybe I did too. However, socializing with these white classmates seemed to be a natural progression. I had nearly every class with them for my entire

high school experience, and between the group projects, field trips, and study groups, we were bound to form some type of relationship.

Creating a social life that resided on the borders of the color line had its disadvantages. The mean stares and being called “sell-out” or “white girl” by other African Americans was enough to cause a feeling of emotional banishment. However, racial difference prevented the development of a true friendship with my white peers in Clyde. I shared classes, club membership, lengthy conversations, and eventually an interest in music with the white people I knew, but these relationships lacked depth, trust, and the intimacy needed to sustain a strong relationship. Additionally, there was always a reminder—a stereotypical race-centered question or negative comment about the way I dressed or how I spoke—that I was culturally different. And even if we wished to challenge dispositions, most parents on both sides of the line discouraged it.

We were taught at an early age to understand borders—where they exist and the consequences for crossing them (Dalmage, 2000). I learned about these racial borders in first grade when I told my parents about my classmate Andrea playing with only the white girls in the class. This knowledge and acceptance of borders carried amongst the entire student population throughout high school. When the bell rang for lunch, the masses began to separate. The white students casually walked toward the lunch line, and the black students almost instinctively stood in clusters (chatting in the courtyard, watching other students play basketball during their gym time) waiting on them to be served. Afterwards, the black students filed through the line. We had our tables, and they had theirs.

Although I began to enjoy the company of my white classmates, it was a great relief to be around other black students. They provided a comfort zone. Mrs. Johnson’s history class was my

saving grace for this very reason, but also because her actions led me to my religious salvation. I am unsure why I was placed in her class though. It seemed like some sort of mistake considering the racial demographics of my other classes. Mrs. Johnson's history class was not predominately black. It was all black. Besides her, there were no white people to be found. Not only that, the class was filled with many students who had failed the class the previous year. While I was glad to be around other black students, I felt like I had been shortchanged. Constantly being around people I saw as educationally superior made me begin to feel superior to other black people that were not in my same position. Nevertheless, both classes fed my psyche. Mrs. Johnson's class gave me the cultural community to which I was most accustomed, and the rest of my classes made me feel that I was becoming closer to the American ideal.

DuBois (1903) suggests that African Americans are capable of maintaining a sense of pride black culture while simultaneously upholding positive views of the dominant culture which sees them as inferior. DuBois attributes this dual way of thinking to slavery, institutionalized racism, and oppressive behaviors in its adherence to the color line. However, he considers racial pride essential to obtaining racial equality. "It is race pride that fights for freedom ... It is the man ashamed of his blood who weakly submits..." (DuBois in Horne & Young, 2001, p.131). A century has passed since this idea of double consciousness arose; however, its development has taken new form. The color line is not visibly displayed with signs of Jim Crow. Rather, these racial discrepancies are found within the practices of schools—institutionalized racism and the internalized belief in a racial hierarchy. As a result, many African Americans are left with racial doubt, are mis-educated about their culture, and create identities that cope within this cultural misunderstanding.

“Stephanie,” Mrs. Johnson called after her class was dismissed. “Stephanie, I am moving you to the front of the room,” she firmly stated pointing to a desk located directly in front of her podium. I had no idea why she had picked me out of the crowd. Of course, I laughed almost constantly during her class, but I was not the only one. Desiring to keep my good girl image, I didn’t question her request. The expression on my face must have spoken for me as she proceeded with an explanation. “Stephanie, you are not like the rest of the kids in here. You actually have potential to do great things. I want you to sit up front so that you can focus.”

Many unconsciously believe that a professional educator is “one who [can] ‘save’ certain children from the prescribed, inferior future that awaited them—from their blackness or ‘Otherness’” (Kincheloe, J.L., Steinberg, S.R., Rodriguez, N.M., & Chennault, R.E., 1998, p. 162). I was the same dark-skinned black girl who wore her Veil of Color like everyone else in that particular class. The most portentous characteristic that differentiated me from my peers was my economic class. Race was our commonality, but class, just like race often does, possibly made me appear more proficient. The rest of my classmates were *lost* causes, but I was likely considered more *savable*.

As the Nigresence theory suggests, nearly everything in our environment acclimates us to the principles of white supremacy. Our home environments, schools, and extracurricular activities all have all been created within a context of this ideology, and our beliefs tend to follow suit (Cross, 1991). Like many teachers, she had incorporated the lessons that our white dominated society had taught us into her teaching agenda. A teacher’s care is often displayed by teaching students to “assimilate into mainstream ways of speaking and acting, learn the given Eurocentric curriculum, gain access to the social and economic system as it was, and thus be successful” (Titone in Kincheloe, J.L., Steinberg, S.R., Rodriguez, N.M., & Chennault, R.E,

1998, p. 162). From Mrs. Johnson's perception, my removal from my black circle of friends was a noble act. And it is my belief that her heart was in the right place. It was her head that wasn't.

"I'm in charge of the Y-Club, and I would love for you to one of our meetings. We're having one after school." "Sure, Mrs. Johnson. I'll be there." I had no intentions of actually attending the meeting, but I found myself there. And within a few short weeks, I found myself serving on council as the only black member of the Christian organization.

Experience had taught me not to stand close to the color line, but Mrs. Johnson had thrown me right across it. I was completely out of my comfort zone. Aside from the color of my skin, there were many other differences that caused me to feel awkward. Standing next to them, my style of dress attracted too much attention. Although our Southern style of English prevented a language barrier, the styles, rhythms, and pitches that I was accustomed to were not there to comfort me. While I tried to join many of the conversations, I usually ended up just listening. My world was completely different from their world—we lived in different neighborhoods, our families didn't work together, we didn't attend the same churches. And even though we had become better acquaintances through our classes, being in a new environment removed the commonality of school that we usually relied on for stability.

My experiences with the Y-Club completed my grand induction into whiteness. I was already familiar with Eurocentric ideals of physical beauty and mis-educated to believe the stereotypes of their civility and my innate evilness. Now I was beginning to learn the acceptable behaviors from Christianity. At our conferences, a speaker talked to us about God and the importance of making Jesus' teaching a part of our daily lives. Later when most of the students were socializing, I would sit in solitude thinking about what I had heard. These thoughts about

God traveled with me in the back of my mind, and I slowly began to become interested in reading the bible.

I was immediately drawn into the narrative accounts of Jesus and His disciples, and each page of the story was more interesting than the next. However, the life changing moment came as I approached the famous “sermon on the mount,” a sermon that many believe reflect the essence of the Christian faith. The three-chapter long sermon which explained distinctions between materialistic and spiritual values captivated every ounce of me. I read imagining the same Jesus I was introduced to at Grandma’s house standing above a multitude of men calmly explaining the most effective ways to approach life. I cannot explain the emotions I had as I read Jesus’ words. But afterwards, I was as the bible described the multitude that was present—completely “astonished at His doctrine” (Matthew 7:28).

According to my juvenile analysis, accepting Christianity was among the most important aspects of achieving a strong black identity. Reading the bible was a ritual of both my parents and grandparents, and such a practice was seen as a way of becoming wiser and closer to God. But although the bible was the same in both arenas, each environment used it to address the various needs of their community. Church had been a safety net of black fellowship and a home for spiritual growth, but the school’s Christian organization lacked part of this appeal. Being the only black member led to an initial discomfort, but I imagine the racial dynamics of my college prep classes prepared me for this immersion and allowed me to overcome those feelings. Still, there was a lingering presence that was absent in the black church. It seemed to rest in the idea that I was *in need* of Christianity. Of course, this concept is what brought many African Americans to the church. But this was much more than a need for God, it was a need for *their* God. The hallowed image of whiteness intensified my perception of the religion, and my

developing connections with it help to draw the fault line of the Duboisian (1903) double consciousness. And both identities—black and American—seemed to heavily rest on the principles of some form of Christianity.

The problem of the color line, as W.E.B. DuBois put it, remains. And this line is distinct marker which places value and esteems whites while regarding all others as inferior. And these racial divisions are such a significant facet of the United States that it is reflected within the church. Among the responses to this line, African Americans often find antagonist attitudes concerning race. Consequently, a psychological war which finds no rest upon witnessing the physical and emotional atrocities of oneself in society's mirror begins to internalize the same ideals in mirror of one's own mind. The principal dilemma then is found in these double lives we feel forced to create. "Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals..." (DuBois, 1903, p.202).

Since most of my social circles had been predominately white for so long, I had become "white" by many people's standards. Of course, this label did not address my Veil of Color. It was a description of my actions, again dictated by the positive generalizations that were often associated with white people. A foreigner in my own skin, this initiated my attempt to "become black." Some alterations, such as my speech, were concepts I had never really thought much about. Nevertheless, I had the ability to dive in and out of character depending on who I was around. When I was around white people, I acted one way. When the crowd was black, I acted another way (in a manner that differed from my "original" self, one that placed emphasis of perceived expectations of blackness).

Exhibiting stereotypical behaviors was a response to my threatened original identity (Cross, 2001). As an example, I began using a deliberate Ebonic-style of speech, a language that

was discouraged in my home. Although these behaviors did not characterize all black people, it was an accepted depiction of African Americans among both black and white communities. “Shifting” was an act of assimilation for acceptance and survival. Eventually, it just became my identity, one that I saw as better than the initial one I had created. The problem is that once the two identities began to merge, I found it necessary to create a black identity. I didn’t know myself, and I had faded. Although many African Americans often feel the need to develop multiple racial characters to elevate themselves in this society, some consider it a more taxing expectation of African American women. Because of the objectification that exists within a Eurocentric heterosexist male-dominated society, African American women find themselves at the very bottom of the social ladder. As a result, we find ourselves shifting between models of controlling images of black womanhood (Collins, 2000), the dual imageries of blackness and whiteness, and who we aspire to be.

Black women are relentlessly pushed to serve and satisfy others and made to hide their true selves... And shifting has become such an integral part of Black women’s behavior that some adopt an alternate pose or voice as easily as they blink their eyes or draw a breath—without thinking, and without realizing that the emptiness they feel and the roles they must play may be directly related” (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p.7)

My mother hated the variations of my speech, and I didn’t understand why. She modeled a form of code switching every time she spoke with a white person, especially when she considered them a professional—a doctor, a teacher, a bill collector—all who she assumed were white. Still, she constantly complained about the way I had begun to speak. She’d mimic me then say “You sound like some poor white woman.” This irritated me. I never enjoyed hearing a black

person refer to me as “white,” (understanding the color line, the title removed me from the culture I knew best) and the fact that Mom added a negative class descriptor made the characterization worse. Sometimes, I think that was her way of reminding me that I would never be able to attain the social status that she assumed I desired.

My mother had no idea how many times I cried in my room after her and a gang of family members (all following her lead) teased me about sounding white. Had she known of the negative experiences I had surrounding my vernacular, she probably would have consoled me. I never told her how some of my white friends made a spectacle of the way I spoke, how they’d ask me to repeat certain words as a joke, or imitated stereotypical black phrases like “know what um sayin” in front of me. I had a history of being teased by white friends, and although I laughed with them, they made me feel worthless. The fact that I could ignore the undesirable treatment simply to feel that I belonged to it shows the complexities of these relationships. First, there is an obvious lack of self-esteem which is highly connected to the negative perceptions held about black people. This damaged self-concept reflects the internalized racism that had been expressed through mis-education, colorism, and other forms of self-hatred (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001). Secondly, the dominant culture of society as well as the nooks of the black community teach (directly and indirectly) the necessity in assimilating into white culture. As a result of these factors, I began to believe in white culture’s ability to provide wholeness to my identity. Additionally, the loneliness and abandonment I often felt caused me to hold onto the remnants of relationships that I possessed (even if they lacked intimacy or were based upon a fictitious persona).

Although my mother was also guilty of linguistic shifting, she did not allow the change to succumb her ability to communicate effectively with other black people in her family or circle of

friends. Becoming multilingual, in this case having “the ability to know how and when to move among the different languages of Black-ness,” (Toure’, 2011, p.11) was something I lacked at the time. Of course, I still knew my home language. Although I did not appreciate her insensitive discourse, she taught me that I did not have to remove *our* language from my vernacular to be successful. Later, I came to understand that each of these languages represent a distinct part of who I am as a person. But during this particular time in my life, I was blinded by the false superiority of whiteness that my subconscious goal was to mirror the images that were presented before me.

According to Bonilla-Silva (2006), “subscribing to an ideology is like wearing a piece of clothing. When you wear it, you also wear a certain style, a certain fashion, a certain way of presenting yourself to the world” (p.53). What I had adopted was a white ideology, and this way of thinking influenced every aspect of my being. My language was not the only characteristic I had changed. I had different styles of dress that seem to blend in with the “white” styles. I widened my preferences for musical genres being sure to listen to the proper songs around certain people. I even refrained from speaking my mind too often. I did everything I could to create an image that wasn’t seen as “ghetto” or the “angry black woman.”

These responses reveal a very raced and gendered perception of my identity. As I sought to develop a positive image, I began to view this angry, black female persona as a negative one. In reality, it was a typecast as well as a perversion of much needed characteristic of African American women. Anger is healthy emotional response related to one’s psychological interpretation of being maltreated. Attaching the word to the “black woman” not only creates a harsh generalization, it also attacks African American women’s strength. Removing this strength

silences us revoking the voice needed to adequately respond to racism, sexism, and other injustices (Banks, 2009).

The Way

I am positive that my living in the South as well as having Christian parents influenced my decision to practice Christianity. Still, I wonder how positive those influences have been. According to hooks (2001), most black people's understanding of love rests on religion, specifically the Christian principles teachings they were taught. We attend church on Sundays, listen to inspirational gospel music, and are involved in family devotionals at home. Arguably, the bible's message is love which is illustrated in Jesus' commandment to his followers: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Although most people verbally supported Jesus' love ethics, it was not always reflected in daily life. As an example, much of the history of our nation, which was supposedly founded on Christian values, reveals the ritualistic capitalizing of others' weaknesses through theft, murder, and coercion. We continue to see these behaviors in subtle forms of discrimination across social classes, genders, sexualities, and the races.

The racial division in Clyde was a noticeable behavior that contradicted my understanding of the bible's moral code. People did not seem to love across the races having little interest in creating relationships or empathy needed to understand the differences that had been experienced. Furthermore, black people did not seem to love within their own blackness. In many respects, we hated ourselves. As I analyze my experiences with the church, there seems to be evident correlations between its perceived dogma and my belief in black inferiority.

Because Christianity rests on the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, He is central to any discussion about this religion. But who is Jesus, and what effects has His image had on my life? According to Robert J. Morgan (2005) and most Christians, Jesus *is* the following:

Advocate. Judge. Lamb of God. Lord of Lords. High Priest. Bread of Life. Teacher. Messiah. Light of the World. Savior. The Almighty. Prince of Peace. Son of God. Bright and Morning Star. Redeemer. The Word. The Way, Truth and Life. Alpha and Omega. The Beginning and The End.

These epithets were a part of the Christian communities I experienced from childhood to present. They were used in sermons, worn on t-shirts, and occasionally made their way into casual conversations. In addition to the numerous titles that are used to describe Jesus, I would add another title, an obvious one that was never mentioned during my introduction to Him—white man. It is a characteristic of Jesus that I observed long before I could read the word Jesus or understand any sermons about Him. And although the topic of race and skin complexion made its way into the most basic conversations, it was never a part of any discussion about God. Maybe religion was considered the one area where race didn't matter. Maybe it was *supposed* to be that way, but it wasn't. With so much emphasis placed on skin complexion in my environment, how could I ignore the race of Jesus?

My grandmother's house was filled with family pictures. They were stored in albums, they were in the China cabinet, and they were in frames on the walls. But the largest picture in the whole house was of a young, olive skinned man with long, sandy blonde hair. If the Christian religion is to be the moral code providing meaning and instruction for one's life, then the visual image of God becomes crucial in upholding ideological practices of white domination. If the Creator of the universe is a male deity, then it becomes plausible to assume that the nature of things continue to operate in a manner similar to the patriarchal system of our biblical interpretations.

This acceptance of Jesus, while it may not have been the first steps in *my* self-degradation, has served as a cornerstone of the inferiority that many blacks, including myself, sustain. Although discussions of the societal inequalities involving white dominance are often found within the “black church,” we cannot ignore the origin of its unique history. The historical existence of blacks in America has sustained within the parameters of a racial hierarchy. As if the institution of slavery was not enough, other means, such as the use of religion, were employed to further construct a feeling of natural inferiority in the soul of every black (Frazier, 1997, p. 130). Christianity was used to give divine sanction to this alleged black inferiority. Deeming slaves’ cultural religious practices as pagan and encouraging slaves to adopt Christianity, society was able to provide blacks with a doctrine for their life.

A metaphoric interpretation could be subconsciously absorbed—God is white; therefore, white is God. Biblical scriptures also support this belief: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ...because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do” (Ephesians 6: 5-8). Considering that these words were written centuries before America’s chattel system, it is not a specific message to the black slaves who resided here. Nevertheless, it provided a message of submission to those who controlled by a dominant hand. If our black slaves held faith in such scriptures, it would be easy to internalize an unconscious belief that whites are earthly “gods.” The adoption this ideology contributes to the perceptive cycle of black inferiority amongst African Americans. According to Dyson (2004), “Christian theology shook hands with slavery and sailed off into the sunset of white supremacy” (p.223).

The systematic denigration of people of color and women is connected to Christianity specifically in the ways that it was used to justify slavery and other racial and gendered

discriminating practices. Christianity provides a view of man and its relationship with nature and the universe. “Emphasis within this worldview is placed on humanity’s dominance over *all* other beings, which become ‘objects’ in an ‘objectified’ universe...Being ‘made in God’s image,’ given the European ethos, translates into ‘acting *as* God,’ recreating the universe” (Richards in Collins, 2000, p. 293). Within this context, certain relationships become justified and accepted as cultural norms. A male president governing a country, a white slave master owning blacks, a husband (of any race) dominating his wife all become representations of God *himself* (Daly in Kessler, 2004).

It can be difficult to perceive Christianity merely as the promoter of white supremacy. Of course, one could point to the fact that Christianity has been used to justify acts of racial discrimination. While those are valid points, I received a much more positive image of Christianity during my upbringing. When we learned about the accomplishments of African Americans at school, Christianity was usually involved. I had been fed images of slaves working in fields singing Negro spirituals to withstand the emotional burdens of slavery. ♪“Swing low, sweet chariot, comin’ for to carry me home...”♪ These songs not only spoke of the hope of Heaven, but also a land of freedom on Earth (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). The Underground Railroad would not have been possible without the help of Quakers, an organized group of Christians from the Religious Society of Friends. Even Harriet Tubman, the “conductor” of the Underground Railroad, carried the symbolic name of “Black Moses” which showed the relationship many blacks had with Christianity. The parallel lies within each of their ability to “free” people in bondage with God’s guidance. In every instance, Christianity had been portrayed as a friend to the African American freeing us from the shackles of slavery and leading us to the Promise Land of society’s version of racial integration.

The Christian influence carried through the 20th century as the spiritual-infused “We Shall Overcome” became the anthem of the African American Civil Rights Movement.

Christianity is a religion that can serve the needs of the dominant group, or it can buttress the interests of marginalized groups. Particular interpretations of Christian tenets can provide support for a given racial or ethnic group. Thus, how racialized Christians understand their faith is funneled through the perceived needs of their racial group (Meister, 2010, p. 231).

Although these justifications of Christianity provide another way in which it was used, it does not discharge its association with white supremacist thinking. For example, most of the justifications given to support the positive use of Christianity by African Americans were communicated to me in an educational setting, an institution known for mis-educating students within the “hidden curriculum.” Christianity and Jesus, the mascot of whiteness, sends the overarching message that we need a white man to save us from our sins. Using examples like negro spirituals and Quakers assistance to the Underground Railroad further promotes the idea that blacks gained their freedom only by the help of whiteness. As a result, many draw a conclusion of dependency to the “White Savior.” As Dubois (1903) reminds us, “Christianity is a “religion that on both sides of the veil often omit the sixth, seventh, and eighth commandments, but substitutes a dozen supplementary ones (p.61). These commandments which prohibit murder, adultery, and theft that existed within blacks’ slave environment. Viewing Christianity as a religion that follows principles of white domination or a one that supports black liberation depends on one’s perception. However, if we consider the dual perceptions of black Americans, we may see Christianity as the matrix for which double consciousness ascends. If we understand the veil as one which allows us to see ourselves through Americanized standards, then we must

also view it as a tool for political and social consciousness, a context where we find religion closely connected (Kahn, 2009).

In many ways, blacks' first acceptance of Christianity on American soil can be viewed as their first steps toward gaining double consciousness and the struggles between racial inferiority and egalitarianism. Christianity was used as the justification for many acts of racial injustices. With religion providing a system of principles (proclaimed to be unquestionable true) by which are used see ourselves and monitor our behaviors, much of the white supremacist ideology was subconsciously absorbed. Since American Christianity was birthed out of a Eurocentric male-dominated heterosexist social context, the values gained from its practice are likely to follow the same philosophies.

If there ever was a place to cross racial lines, it seemed that church would be that place considering the love ethic that is so often preached (yet simultaneously ignored). And although church is generally a racially segregated affair, the idea of church in the black community denotes a historical "crossing" or blurring of racial and cultural practices. Additionally, it is reference of white assimilation by which blacks adopted the most significant philosophical features of whiteness. Although the message of Christ is one that has traveled various lands of the world long before it reached the Americas, Christianity becomes a whitewashed religion as it relates to the United States and the black church. As a characteristic of Nigrescences's pre-encounter stage, assimilation describes the African American whose social identity is created around the sense of becoming American, one that affirms "White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant" characteristics (Cross, 1971, p.16). Religion was a method, particularly permitted, whereby blacks could unclthe themselves as a racial Other by behaving "American."

The Negro, losing the joy of this world, eagerly seized upon the offered conception of the next: the avenging Spirit of the Lord enjoining patience in this world, under sorrow and tribulation until the Great Day when He should lead His dark children home (DuBois, 1903, p.131).

Mama said that faith in God was how “we made it over,” and I had no reason to doubt her considering the role that the church had played in the many blacks’ quest for racial equality. Christianity is a complex religion to grasp because of the many faces that it embodies. And it becomes extremely difficult to convey a clear image of it when we acknowledge the liberation found within it for African Americans, yet we continue to witness the lurking shadow that reminds blacks of their perceived inferior status in society. Perhaps, Christianity and the black church depict a vivid picture of double consciousness.

Because my hometown was racially divided, I gained my first accounts of “white church” on television. Although I would typically refer to it simply as “church,” I do so here to signify the racial difference of its congregation. Television had provided me with images of Billy Graham, the gentleness of his sermons, and the multiracial multitude of people who responded to his invitation to accept Christ. I had also grown up seeing Michael Guido’s “Seeds from the Sower” messages during the commercial breaks. With most aspects of my life, I had witnessed the standardization of whiteness and blacks’ creative assimilation of making it *their own*. In our quest to live socially acceptable lives, we tend to pretend that the standards by which we measure our lives derive from our own invention.

When Shelly, one of my white “friends” asked me to visit a new church with her, I happily agreed to attend. On this particular weekend, I had spent the night at my grandmother’s house. Grandma was excited that I was actually going to church without my parents. To her, this

signified that I had taken my spirituality personally, not just “playing church” or needing the nudge of my parents. When I heard the horn blow, I knew Shelly had arrived to pick me up for church. “Bye, Grandma!” I grabbed my purse and headed toward the glass screened door with Grandma behind me. I could see Shelly smiling and waving from her car, and Grandma was on the other side of me glaring in disgust. “What’s a cracker doing out there?” I was shocked by my grandmother’s words. That’s who I am going to church with.” “All this time I hear you talking ‘bout church, I think you talking ‘bout a black church.” I paused. My two worlds were separated by a door, and I did not know which way to go.

“Go on! But umma tell yo mama!” The threat to tell my mother allowed me to see that even within Christianity, there were significant racial borders. I had been raised in a Baptist church my whole life, and was about to attend a church of the same denomination. However, this similarity had no impact. The reinforcing actions, the prayers that I would grow to be a “woman of God” did not include this presumed whitewashed prescription. Because other intimate spheres of my life had been orchestrated to be segregated, church was expected to display a similar pattern (Priest & Nieves, 2007).

The ride to church was quiet, a bit of small talk between us with Christian music playing in the background. It wasn’t the gospel I was used to hearing, but it was nonetheless Christian music. I tried to be attentive to Shelly, but my mind was racing wondering how my mother would respond to Grandma’s news. Luckily, the ride was short and I was able to turn my attention to my new experience of church. Heads began to turn as I walked into the building. A few people stared, and a few people smiled trying not to stare. Promptly at 11:00, the service began.

Like I expected, white church was much different from black church. This church was guided by a strict program—the welcome, three songs, offering, blessing, song, sermon—to which everyone adhered. A deacon stood before the congregation welcoming everyone to church. Within his welcome speech, he asked if the church had any visitors. I could feel everyone’s eyes turn toward me. I was certainly not in the mood to be pointed out, but it would be an obvious lie if I ignored his request since I was the only black person in attendance. I raised my hand. “Please stand,” he said motioning me to rise. After standing and explaining that my friend had invited me, amens flooded the room. It seemed that they were giving praise to my friend (and God) for my invitation. Then, the congregants began to greet their neighbors with smiles, handshakes, and hugs. “So glad that you’re here,” a few people whispered to me as they shook my hand.

Afterwards, songs were sung from a hymnal as an organist played. No one in the congregation sang a song that “fell on their heart,” and no one caught the Holy Ghost. A set of deacons then walked to each row passing a collection plate to gather a monetary offering. A short prayer was prayed, and a 20-minute sermon was delivered. Church was over in exactly one hour, something that I was definitely not accustomed to experiencing. After the service, many of the congregants followed Shelly and me to the parking lot. A small crowd of smiling faces surrounded me giving a mini interview. They asked where I lived, who my parents were, and other aspects about my personal life. But above all, the most invasive question was “Are you saved?” The question carried great implications, especially considering they never asked Shelly about her salvation. My blackness was a veil that was viewed as an innate evilness.

According to Metzger and Coogan (1993), many churches have used the bible to portray Africans as bearers of the mark of Cain, one who was cursed by God as a “restless wanderer on

the earth” (Genesis 4:10) as well as children of Ham, whom Noah cursed as “the lowest of slaves” (Genesis 9:25). The moral and social climate of the time stated that blacks were less than human, barbaric, and demonic which justified the acts of slavery and segregation (Higginbotham, 1996). While the system of slavery and legalized segregation has been abolished, these negative perceptions of African Americans continue to be passed on with each generation. As I think about these historical perceptions, I now wonder if me being black gave those church congregants the impression that I needed saving.

Although all Christians use the bible as a spiritual reference, the religion takes on different faces depending on cultural background of the believer. The terms “black church” and “white church” carry a specific connotation depending on the direct experiences one has had as well as those depicted in the media. When one thinks of the black church, images of loud, charismatic preachers, female congregants wearing fancy hats, or a robed choir clapping and swiftly swaying from side to side may come to mind. The term “white church” is likely to trigger an opposite image. For me, it was the sound of hymns being sung from voices which resembled the dull, harmonious melody of the organ that accompanied it, a lifeless congregation awakened by an occasional “amen” or the sermon’s crescendo of “eternal damnation.”

Behind the physical differences between black and white churches, there seems to be a general trend in ideology. Black and white Christians both read the bible. But like the reading of any book, the reader brings a collection of experiences that affect each conclusion. Therefore, the collective experience that blacks and whites have had in the United States is likely to have affected the way they interpret biblical scriptures. The sermons created with each minister’s personal perceptions help to create the “black” and “white” Jesus that I know. In black churches, sermons often have the message of hope, faith, and perseverance which is heavily tied to the

racial marginalization that is experienced by many African Americans. Similar messages are used in white churches, but not in the same context. In the white churches I have attended, I have never heard any discussions of racial injustices, a topic that is heavily infused in the black church. Today, it is easy for me to identify trends of racial equality, social justice, and race-specific forms of encouragement toward African Americans in the black church. However, this was not always the case.

My church was small and country. It wasn't like the mega churches you see on television today like TD Jake's The Potter's House or Creflo Dollar's World Changers Church International. The church was small, the congregation was even smaller, and we only met one Sunday a month. "Black preachers in small towns can't afford to just have one job. These folks 'round here can't pay 'em enough to make a living." That's what Mama used to say. I'm not sure if what she said was true, but of the five other black churches that I knew of, all of their pastors had second jobs. None of them met every Sunday. Instead, some would meet on first and third Sundays while others meet on second and fourth. Some considered fifth Sundays a day off while others used it as Communion Sunday. So if you were committed to a regular attendance in the House of the Lord, you could travel around to different churches and attend church every Sunday. The black churches in Clyde worked as a community. Churches were often "on program" at another church, especially during special events like revivals and church anniversaries. This meant that the particular church participated in another church's worship service. It was very common for members of one church to regularly support another church and its activities. And while loose formalities of church membership existed, I was taught that "Christians should never consider themselves a visitor in the House of the Lord" because we were all sisters and brothers in Christ.

Since God embodied a male figure, it was assumed men would lead while women took a submissive role in the church. Men prepared the sermons, delivering messages which were used to inform but apparently excited women into dancing and screaming with the Holy Ghost. Outside of the general service, women held many of roles that were familiar to them in the home. Women led children's Sunday school classes, cooked for church socials, and raised money for various functions. There were obvious gender biases in the church, but they existed unchallenged. Instead, women accepted their "godly" roles as a religious duty.

Although the black church has been a force in challenging racial oppression in the United States, modeling their religious practices after Christianity has posed some challenges which further mis-educated African Americans. According to Carter G. Woodson (1972), the black church is "merely a loan from whites... [and] though largely an independent Negro institution, is dominated by the thought of the oppressors race" (p.55). The adoption of these philosophies has brought blacks in conformity with many models of oppression. One particular example is sexism.

For many African Americans, the church is a nurturing resource for the emotional wounds inflicted by a racist society. However, it becomes a double edged sword which fights the battles of racism, but continues to corner them into a gendered role of womanhood. In the presence of male leadership, black women take a backseat exchanging their power for spiritual sustenance (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Black church then becomes a place for black men to thrive despite the racial discrimination that existed in the world. Women, on the other hand, remained socialized to fulfill gender hierarchical responsibilities.

Mama was strongly connected to St. Paul's Missionary Baptist Church, not because of any close relationships with the members or the quality of the preaching. Rather, her devotion

came from lineage and tradition. The church was a family church, one that generations of her mother's family had belonged. Although most of Mama's family had moved away, joined other churches closer to their homes, or just didn't go at all, she was a faithful member. All in all, there was no more than thirty, and they did not always attend every Sunday. Besides my sister and I, there were only two other children— a girl named Rosalind and my light-skinned cousin Natasha. There was no "children's church" or childcare like you see today in many churches. Instead, the youth had to sit there for two to three hours (depending on if it was Communion Sunday, a church anniversary, or how the "spirit" moved in the church) being completely bored out of our minds not understanding what was going on around us.

Church (mine, like most of the country black churches I attended) always began with some form of devotion, something that seemed to be "felt" rather than taught. From a child's perspective and much of mine as an adult today, it seemed like a series of moans performed to a gospel-like rhythm. It was what I had imagined field slaves to hum as they picked cotton in the summer's sun. Occasionally, these moans would be interrupted by one of the deacons, generally my father, who would read a line of scripture to the same tune of the moans. Afterwards, the moans would continue and gradually cease. Then, it was time for the prayer. Another deacon would kneel and pray a prayer that seem to last forever. It was typically a ten-minute prayer usually interrupted by a random song from, not the choir, but the member of the congregation. It was common for a congregant to start a song that "fell on her heart" by which the entire church would help sing. Once the freestyles of the congregants died down, the choir would sing three or four songs that had been rehearsed during the week.

Once this was over, the pianist would play a tune, and the ushers would walk pass each row of pews instructing everyone to stand which marked the beginning of the offering ceremony.

No plate was passed. Instead, everyone had to walk single-filed to the front near what I referred to as the communion table. It was a wooden table with “DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME” carved in the front. The table was where the bread and “wine” (grape juice) was displayed during communion, and it was where the offering plates sat during this time of the service. Mama usually handed me a dollar to put in the plate, and I was always happy to give it (mainly because I was finally allowed to get up from the pew and walk around). Then another deacon would pray. “Bless the offering for which we have received. Bless those who gave and those who desired to, but couldn’t. May this offering be used to honor You and Your kingdom. Amen.” All this was done to the beat played on the piano.

If all went smoothly, the sermon would immediately follow the offertory prayer. But every now and then, someone would catch the “Holy Ghost” right as the last note was played on the piano. The Holy Ghost was something that frightened me. It was an appropriate name for what these people “caught” because it was like a ghost or some type of unseen force temporarily possessed their bodies. For some reason, a woman was always a victim, usually a middle-aged to older woman. All of a sudden, a loud screech or wail would come from her mouth and she’d dance around waving her arms about in an uncontrollable fashion. Sometimes, the spirit would literally sweep these women off of their feet, and they’d fall to the floor or on one of the pews. A few people might hold or encircle the spirit-filled woman to prevent the involuntary movements from causing her bodily harm. I usually moved far away from the scene, partially because I didn’t want to get hit and partially because I thought the condition might be infectious. Soon enough, the spirit would leave the woman’s body leaving her sweaty and in tears. Another song was sung, started by another congregant. This was a way of showing reverence to God, praising

Him for being in the midst of the service and revealing Himself to us. Finally, Reverend Blacksmith would approach the podium.

“Amen...Amen... and Amen. One for the Father, one for the Son, and one for the Holy Spirit.” Reverend always said this extremely slowly as if he was buying time as he thumbed through his bible. This was the part when I did one of three things—took a nap, rambled in Grandma’s purse for sweets, or scribbled in my notebook. I did this until about age 10, the age that Mama said was old enough to pay attention in church. What I could not understand was how *anyone* could pay attention to Reverend Blacksmith’s sermons. He was a very nice man, but I am not sure how he ever felt that he was “called” (by the Holy Spirit) to preach. He may have had a lot of wisdom to share, but his speech impediment prevented me from understanding anything that came from his mouth. It undoubtedly took a trained ear to comprehend the message because he received just as many amens as any other preacher I ever heard. Of course, the congregation could have been using each amen as encouragement or simply acting in tradition.

I was baptized at the age of eight. For many people, this act would be considered an act of religious tradition much like with the christening and circumcising of babies. According to Matthew 28:19, baptism is an act of personal obedience and represents an outward demonstration of faith (Dyer, 2000). But at age eight, it was simply about meeting expectations. Always after Reverend Blacksmith completed his sermons, he would proclaim “the doors of the church are now open! Won’t you come?” Two ushers would then place two chairs beside the communion table. And if you sat in one of them, it meant that either you wanted to join the church or be “saved” from eternal damnation. If you wished to be saved, you *had* to be baptized. Upon seeing the joy on Mama’s face as my older sister approached a chair, I did what any other younger

sibling wanting a mother's admiration would do. I followed her and sat in the other chair.

Applause rang throughout the church, and my mother was beaming from ear to ear.

“Why do you come forth?” Reverend Blacksmith asked (I could understand him a lot better when he was calm, not preaching in a rhythmic style). “I wanna be saved,” replied my sister. “Do you understand what it means to be saved?” Reverend continued. My sister had a thorough explanation, but all I gathered managed to hear was “so I can go to Heaven.” So when Reverend Blacksmith asked me the same questions, I just repeated what I had heard. My answers must have been sufficient because after the next Sunday's meeting, my sister and I were taken to a pond way out in the country to be baptized.

We were barefoot standing at the edge of the pond, both wearing a traditional white robe along with a shower cap to prevent our hair from getting wet (even God didn't like nappy hair). A few members of the church were gathered around as they came to support our decision to be saved. Reverend Blacksmith was waiting in the pond. My sister walked into the pond first, and someone started singing *Wade in the Water*. I was afraid and cautious of the dirty water I was stepping into, but I continued to walk forward. The water was cold, but I forgot about its temperature when I saw my sister being dipped backward into the pond. To this day, I am unsure of how she remained calm during such an event. Then, it was my turn. He mumbled something about becoming “brand new,” and then he leaned my body back into the water. I didn't feel like a new person when I arose. I just felt wet...with the exception of my hair, and I considered that a blessing. I was “saved” from eternal damnation.

But as it were, I had become less associated with the black church where I had gained my first introduction to Christianity. The black church began as my first model of church, one whose performances were normal ways of worshipping God. My feelings about the black church shifted

and became more negative after interacting with whites and acclimated myself to their ways of worship. My feelings about the black church seemed to resemble the surprisingly negative view DuBois held about the behaviors found in the black church. Describing the “frenzy” of a “Negro revival,” which mirrored my experiences in the Southern black church, he states that “such scenes appear grotesque and funny, but as seen they are awful” (DuBois, 1903, p. 126). It is within these feelings that the appearance of double consciousness is revealed. The same mind that can critically examine the American politics of domination is the same mind that observes the “African” style of worship as embarrassingly comical.

Jesus in Black and White

Within these two ideas of Christianity, there existed a black and white Jesus. In my eyes, Black Jesus represents justice and equality. He was the savior of the misfortunate and the reason that racial equality had improved in the United States over the centuries. Black Jesus had given black folks a song to sing in the midst of trials and tribulations. Holding that view, Jesus *is* the only hope African Americans have in a world of white supremacy. But despite my years of being raised in a black church setting and being taught this philosophy, for years I had credited the white church as playing the most important role in my Christian faith. This is likely do to with the fact that the proposed black church existed as a sector of the American Christianity that our by which our society operated. And my double thinking which was created in reference to a particular supreme entity ultimately credited whiteness as the essence of all things good.

When I moved away to a predominantly white college, I began to become more involved in white churches there. The experiences in the white churches there were generally the same as the ones in Clyde—an hour of stares followed by a mini interview from several congregants (if they spoke to me at all). Somehow I managed to ignore these annoyances and focus on the

message of the sermons. I liked white church, but I sometimes missed the gospel music and the freestyle that permeated each event. The traditions of the black church gave me a sense of comfort. Even though I did not always understand it, I knew it and knew it well. Occasionally, I would visit other black churches in the area, but it was never a permanent stay. Somehow, I began to view the very things I mourned about the black church in a negative light. The Holy Ghost dances, the long sermons, and heart-felt songs were now features to be omitted and irrelevant to the worship service.

After seeing my grandmother and mother's disapproval as a teenager, I decided not to discuss my involvement with church very much. A year later, I found myself one of few black members of Visions Ministry, another predominately white church. It was one of the few "mixed" churches in Marigold. By no means was it racially balanced, but a few African Americans, Hispanics, Chinese, and Nigerians were members. The people there were friendly and inviting, but I am not sure if my other experiences with white churches caused me to have lowered expectations.

I developed a close relationship with the pastor of Visions Ministry and his family. With them, I never felt like I was on an interview. From the weekly phone conversations, Sunday dinners, and visits to each other's homes, I felt more like a friend. But when I really think about it, I wonder if I were just a "project" of a progressive church. This church was no Promise Land, and I was always aware of the fact that it was predominately white and located in the South which meant there was a certain persona I had to present. Above all, I was impressed by the pastor's way of delivering his message. He was charming, sharp, witty, encouraging, and practical in his approach of sharing God's love. And I was growing in my faith through my involvement in this church.

On a normal Sunday afternoon, I attended a baptism of a few congregants to show my support. Near the end of the baptism, I had an overwhelming feeling of guilt and praise. The recent death of one of the members had caused me to think about life more seriously, and I felt that I owed God praise for all that He had done for me. I began crying uncontrollably and a spirit seemed to take over my body. Although it did not cause me to scream, dance, or wave my arms uncontrollably, I still acknowledged it as the Holy Ghost. When the pastor asked if anyone else wanted to be baptized, I was already halfway into the water (without a shower cap) as if the Spirit had taken me there. No one started singing *Wade in the Water* as they did during my first baptism, but the pastor similarly referenced becoming “brand new.” The pastor leaned me back into the water, and I was raised a new person. I believed I was a new person before I entered the water because of the renewing of my mind. However, the baptism was just an outward demonstration of my change. With a soaking wet dress and a growing afro, I walked to my car after the closing prayer. I was filled with happiness, and I deeply wanted to share this occasion with my mother. But I knew that it would be an enormous feat to receive a joyful response from my mother.

Discussing church with Mama was already challenging, and things only got worse with the baptism. When I told Mama what had occurred, she became extremely furious. “You’ve already been baptized! Now all of a sudden, it’s not good enough!” I knew that my decision derived from a personal commitment to Christ (unlike my first baptism), but Mama only viewed my actions with racial lens. From her perspective, I did not value my initial baptism because it was within the black church, thus needing it redone with the white church. And although I didn’t at the time, now I understand her anger. Mama had raised me in the black church, and she diligently worked to make sure she was an exemplary model of a Christian. Mama was the one

who constantly reminded me of the moral aspects of life and how to live a life pleasing to God. Although Mama's assumption about my baptism was wrong, she had every right to be suspicious of my actions. I had been traveling down the road to black inferiority for a long time, and she had recognized the most recent contributing factors. What she failed to realize was these factors were just water to a weed that had been growing for years, and the seed had been planted in her own home.

"The South," a distinct culture which is heavily influenced by a historic dependence on slave labor and the dominance of Christianity, was where I had found my faith in God and learned to revere whiteness. Considering that it is the birthplace of American slavery and Jim Crow, it should be no surprise. Its ground has felt the bloodbath of the Civil War and the marches of the Civil Rights Movement. It's where groups of African Americans could be heard singing "We Shall Overcome" and groups of Caucasians gathered for a "nigger lynching" and cross-burnings. And on both sides of the spectrum, one could find what many would consider the presence of God, Jesus, and various elements of the Christian religion.

With religious options being narrow and its forms relatively homogenous, religion in the South greatly differs from other areas of our country (Hill in Duncan, 1992). According to Duncan (1992), "the three most important elements that maintain the traditional values that affect contemporary life chances of rural women in the South are the Bible Belt, the Black Belt, and the color line" (p. 100). Christianity was a dominant religion practiced in Clyde, and "the church" was central in my raising. Church most often refers to the building where Christian ceremonies or services are held, but in many cases it defines a specific lifestyle that one has chosen to live. As the elders would say, "the church is in you." This statement referenced one's ability to uphold the moral principles of Christianity, and I proved it to be possible.

CHAPTER FIVE

BROKEN MIRRORS: BAD “LUCK” IN AN INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE

Interracial marriages are unions between any two different races, but black-white couples have become the general representations of such unions. The historical distinctions between whites and blacks as well as legal ramifications that supported segregation have led to its salience. Additionally, it is one reason why unions between Caucasians and African Americans are viewed as a social taboo. With racial separation being a continued social tradition, interracial marriages are seen by many as blatant disrespect to the philosophy of protecting racial purity and the biblical interpretations which support this notion. As a result of the slow evolution of our society's race relations, we still find a pervasively negative attitude toward interracial marriages, especially in the South.

In this chapter, my social environment as well as my interracial marriage causes me to face race and gender in multiple ways. A black identity and a white identity are no longer an abstract ideal. Blackness represents my ties to my immediate family, and whiteness becomes the image of my husband. A love for both of these creates a battle to have a positive identity that encompasses both racial identities. The relationship not only poses an internal problem, it also conjures issues between coworkers and other whites in the community where I teach. The culmination of these experiences causes me to reexamine my current identity. In the process, I adopted the pro-black and anti-white that is characterizations of Nigrescence's immersion-emersion stage. Race and gender then collides with Christianity, and I simultaneously began to question the validity of Christianity and examine the role that it plays in my black female identity.

Erased

Insofar as truly interracial marriage is concerned, one can legitimately wonder to what extent it may not represent for the colored spouse a kind of subjective consecration to wiping out in himself and his own mind the color prejudice from which he has suffered so long (*Rythmes du Monde* in Fanon, 1967, p.53).

“Girl, you got yourself a white man!” These were the words I heard from a black woman sitting next to me in the hair salon. An interracial couple in the South is enough to grab the attention of onlookers, but our union was a different type of love affair. A black woman. A white man. The two images violate the typical depictions of a romantic relationship and most certainly a marriage. In the United States, a white man is the image associated with the power that systematically upholds the principles and beliefs that govern our society. A black woman is quite the opposite. Her image has unfortunately come to embody the most negative illustrations of womanhood. She is an “angry black woman,” a promiscuous, sexually aggressive body, a slave and servant at the table of white America, and the vessel which births a generation of lazy, demonic black Americans (Collins, 2000). These are the perceptions that have been understood before my arrival, and these are the beliefs that I also internalized as I pursued my relationship with a white man.

Like most black-white interracial relationships, my relationship symbolized racial betrayal in many people’s eyes. However, there seemed to be an unspoken justification that existed among many black females. Their smiles said that their thoughts toward me were not as negative as they were toward black men. I did not contribute to the “one less available black man” pool. Because I was a black *woman*, my decision to date outside of my race did not affect their quest to find a good black man. In fact, it may have made them aware of the romantic options that existed outside of their race. The squinted eyes and pinched lips told me that some of

them did not completely approve of the idea of interracial relationships, but the majority of the words that came from the women in the salon were supportive (even if their reasons derived from stereotypes).

In many ways, my decision to act against the unspoken rule of anti-miscegenation demonstrated an act of power or maybe a quest *for* power. Among interracial marriages in the United States, one involving black women and white men continue to be the lowest percentage. The reasons for these differences may be found in a black woman's sense of racial loyalty (Dyson, 2004). Of course, there was always the feeling that I should remain "loyal" to my fellow African Americans by marrying black and producing black children. However, my pursuit of marriage was focused more on the creation of wholesome "all-American" family. And no matter how white Christianized I was or how white my social circle was, I would never fit the all-American profile that most people held in their minds. At this time, I was deeply naïve. "If I could just get a little bit closer to whiteness..." seems to have been the unconscious driving force of my actions. As a result, these feelings were misappropriated toward an ideal of white dependence. Because I felt my blackness labeled me a barbaric creature in other's eyes, I was in need of a form of domestication. If a white man was willing to make me his bride, it would demonstrate the removing of the "veil" that I had wretchedly worn.

In the *Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois (1903) discusses his sudden discovery of this veil of racial difference. He explains that he had no desire to remove the veil, but sought to wrest for them "by reading law, by healing the sick, by telling the wonderful tales that swam in [his] head" (p.12). Like DuBois, I considered education a plausible avenue toward the opportunities that were afforded to many whites. However, I only considered education to be a single variable

in the equation. Although I did not comprehend my world in terms of its white patriarchal power, I was still able to recognize that I needed more.

“I wish I could get me a white man!” one woman cried. “Child, you ain’t got to worry bout nothing when you with a white man!” another woman interjected. “He ‘gon treat you good, and yo whole life paid for.” The belittling continued, and I sat in the salon chair smiling through the pain. I had no idea who those women in the salon were and why they insisted on spreading all those lies about white men. Almost every word that came from their mouths made me feel like a gold-digging Jezebel, like I was only in a relationship with Nathan for monetary gain. I sat there in the salon chair getting my hundred dollar weave sewn into my hair further erasing a characteristic I associated with being a black woman. It was clear that these women had internalized the representations of Jezebel and Gold Digger as an acceptable identity for black females.

First, their assumptions relied on the idea that black women were incapable of being economically independent. It thus becomes a conventional choice for her to seek refuge and stability with a white man. Because romantic relationships are also seen within a sexual context or a context of possession, the black woman’s position takes on a more complex meaning. Not only is she seeking economic uplift, her body is the capital that allows this exchange possible. Although not in the physical sense, the modern black woman is objectified in ways similar to black women during slavery.

Nathan, my soon-to-be husband at the time, had come to bring me my debit card that I had mistakenly left at home. Maybe that act alone had given the ladies confirmation that a white man would pay for your whole life, but somehow I think that they had those ideas about white men long before Nathan ever walked into the salon. They spoke with so much authority, in this

matter-of-fact tone, that you would've thought their assumptions came from experience. But from their comments about wishing they could get a white man, I knew that they hadn't. Although I did not rely on Nathan for financial gain, having a white mate was a romanticized thought. I was capable of paving my own economic way. But it seemed that even if my blackness remained socially problematic, it was better than having a double burden with a black husband. And somehow this optimism overshadowed the obvious discriminating repercussions for being interracially married.

"I don't know why some black women be trippin' bout dating white guys," one lady continued. "I know why!" another added, "cause they ain't packing!" Laughter filled the room, and I must admit that I smiled in the midst of the knee-slapping uproar. Although most African American men may have appreciated hearing a complimentary statement concerning their anatomy, the comments were filled with conventions that supported the idea that blacks are sexual objects, and the black woman's *need* for their package insinuates a sexually aggressive nature. The historical jezebel and the perceptions surrounding heterosexual black men and white men enlighten multiple boundaries. Generally, men are considered active while women are passive. However, race complicates these gender perceptions within the context of American society.

Black people and other racialized groups simultaneously stand outside these definitions of normality and mark their boundaries...Normal female heterosexuality is expressed via the cult of true White womanhood, whereas deviant female heterosexuality is typified by the "hot mommas" of Black womanhood (Collins, 2000, p.83).

And these internalizations, which justified many of unwarranted sexual acts between slave masters and black female slaves, come full circle in the ways that black women are treated today.

We are still seen as submissive beings and animalistic sexual creatures, but not only by White America. These views of black women have been internalized by African American men and women alike. It is likely the reason that black women model these behaviors in the fictitious worlds of music videos and movies as well as the reality of daily life. Consequently, blackness and womanhood become synonymous to these sexual depictions, and those who simply wear the Veil of Color become sexual targets and continue to be victimized as I was during my childhood rape incidents.

Even though I felt it was based on a stereotypical myth, I found a bit of humor in the racial dick comparison. In spite of the negativity that it generated toward African Americans' sexuality, the "big dick" myth had been twisted in many minds as a power the black man over the white man. And my "American" self, aside from all the moments I should have injected truth to liberate African American women, felt obligated to correct them on the penis myth. "Don't believe the hype," I said boldly. Most of them didn't want to believe me, but they all knew that I had more authority to speak on a comparison of white and black men. I had dated both. "It don't even matter, girl, cus you probably ain't got to put up with half of the shit these niggas be giving us." And with that comment along with the mmhums and affirming eyes of other black women, the conversation ended.

Even though none of these women explicitly stated it, I knew they were referring to infidelity. Although all races and genders are capable of being unfaithful in their romantic relationships, the stigma is usually associated with black men. I had heard these stereotypes about the black man most of my life, and I had experienced this form of infidelity. I had also had what I now consider the privilege of encountering white men who were unfaithful to their spouses. Despite my knowing the truth first hand, I still felt more comfortable supporting the

idea that white men were more faithful than black men. I had spent decades being exposed to the black men and their infidelity, and the media only perpetuated these images. Because I had fewer experiences with white men being unfaithful, it was easier for me to see white men who were as an exception to their race.

These comments [stereotypes about black men] and others like them are repeated so often they have become the chestnuts of black female conversation. When black women gather and the discussion turns to men, invariably these words are uttered (in one version or another) and amen-ed to universal nods of approval. (Folan, 2010, p. 41).

As a result, we continue to mis-educate each other. I sat in the salon listening to all they had to say about men (and indirectly about women). Even though I knew most of what they said was far from the truth, I basked in the lies enjoying being revered as some sort of idol for having escaped the plight of being the black man's woman (and being closer to whiteness). I knew that everyone thought my life was better, and in some ways it may have been. But in no way had my life been enhanced by their standards or my white husband. My academic achievements had helped me earn a college scholarship, and I had worked two jobs to pay my bills throughout college. I had become a teacher and had worked hard to earn three college degrees. My "whole life" had been paid for by me. It was my credit and my money that purchased the car I drove, the home I lived in, and the hair that was being woven into my hair. All Nathan had to do was walk in the room, and his whiteness stole every accomplishment I had made.

It angers me to tears thinking that my race and my gender made me inferior to my husband. It irritates me more to know that this showering of insults came from *my* own people. But even more than that, I was angry at myself for perpetuating such ignorance. Having the perfect opportunity to correct these myths, I chose to remain silent and take my inferior position

as if it was a prize. It would be a difficult task to teach them without isolating myself.

Consequently, I was more apt to give Nathan another badge of honor as a white man by glorifying the size of his penis rather than showing those women that a black woman could be successfully dependent of a man. Or in this case, a white man. Maybe in some strange matter of the mind, I felt the necessity to remain loyal to the idea of whiteness. It is no secret that I maintained a suppressed self. I felt it a necessity to conceal traits of my black identity in order to accomplish my goals. And maybe having a white husband made me more of a success even if it was just in the eyes of a few onlookers.

I wondered about all the women in the salon. I wondered about myself. Where did we gain our knowledge of white and black men? Had injections of societal poison cause our delusion? “White men don’t treat their women like this.” Those words from my mother had echoed in my head for over a decade. Although Mama’s words sprang from a sea of emotions and mythical perceptions, she spoke them as an undeniable truth. Those words had planted the idea of an interracial relationship in my mind, and other external factors which supporting racial superiority/inferiority only served to strengthen the idea. But underneath that decision was a muck of confusion. No matter how much praise I received in the salon, I could not escape the fact that my relationship was a social taboo in both black and white communities. I could not escape the conflicting biblical interpretations that supported and opposed my love for Nathan. And I certainly could not escape my mother, a woman who had verbally placed white men on a pedestal yet held a firm belief against interracial relationships. I suppose her reasoning were related to the reason I had believed that my life would essentially be enhanced by having a relationship with a white man. The white man had obtained a dual identity among blacks in the United States. He was the face of power, but also racial discrimination.

Having spent most of my youth and early adulthood trying to understand the concepts of identity, I find it an intriguing concept that first, I would choose to get married with limited experience with romantic relationships. And secondly, I would even entertain the notion of marrying a white man considering the confusion and dismay that accompanied the formation of my gender and racial identity. When it comes to my personal identity, I consider my ethnicity and gender to be the most significant. And while I didn't always recognize my internal conflict as being related to gender, I realize that the perceptions associated with gender can be extremely impacting.

Witnessing marital infidelity and my mother's dependence upon my father for financial security made me determined to be independent of a man. The evolution of my dominant personality and my drive toward success were sometimes viewed as masculine characteristics, and my natural desire of a man's affection along with the traditional values of being womanhood led to acts of femininity. Within the ideals of a romantic relationship continued my constant struggle of negotiating beliefs of a woman's place. I had observed the social norms of womanhood, and I didn't necessarily like what I saw. Whether it was household labor, rearing children, sexual relations, or occupational choices like teaching, black womanhood seemed to be centered on servitude. Although each of these responsibilities can derive from an inner desire, the expectations that surround them often cause me to forget that I have a choice.

Marriage is often portrayed as the "happily ever after" in a woman's life, and it characterizes the traditional sense of womanhood at its fullest. It's the theme that encompasses the imaginative play of girls during childhood. It's the dream within the mind of teenage girls who scribble their boyfriend's name on a notepad, and it's the goal that many young women have as they enter college. I cannot say that I was ever a little girl who fantasized walking down

the aisle or visualized the man of my dreams riding up on a white horse. My childhood experiences had led me to a more pessimistic ideal, and that was that a “happily ever after” likely did not exist for me. As a child, I had seen how boys could steal your innocence with no remorse, and my teenage years had proven to me that my female body was for the taking. And once when I thought I had the sincere attention of a male, our racial difference caused it to disappear. I buried the shame along with my innocence, but the rejection I felt from my race was carried more closely to my heart. I imagine that past rejections (romantic or platonic) had elevated my fondness for Nathan. After each of those unfortunate encounters, I was left a little bit more empty and hopeless. In spite of now recognizing that gender played a role in many of these matters, I believed that my blackness had somehow cursed me from ever having a man appreciate, love, and care for me. These were the encounters, all which I attributed to my Veil of Color, that caused me to gradually internalize a negative view of African American identity.

My experiences in Clyde had shown me that black men were capable of marrying black women and creating a family. Of course, my immediate and extended families were the first examples of this. Nearly every woman to whom I was related was married with children. And people like my great aunt Coretta who never married were able to fulfill her womanly duties by becoming a mother through adoption. Outside of my family, I saw black couples at church sitting beside each other in their Sunday best, eating together in restaurants, and supporting each other at community gatherings. And I imagined that those families were devoted to having the quality time that my family had (Saturday game nights, family vacations, homework checks with Mama, bedtime stories with Daddy, etc.). Although this was a happiness that I had experienced, it was from the perception of a child. To get a glimpse of what life could be for a woman, a black woman, I could open my eyes and ears to the romantic relationships around me.

Although I was convinced that my parents loved each other, I never saw the display of their affection. No hugs or kisses, only the pushing motion from my mother if Daddy attempted to do so. Somehow I know that their relationship began in a more intimate manner and that Mama's actions were the result of Daddy's infidelity or her distrust for him, but the visual of their affection toward each other was left in my imagination. The reality was that there was a distinct disconnect between them, one that was not unique to their relationship but an epidemic affecting many others.

I had eavesdropped many conversations between my mother and other women (friends and family members), and a positive word about a black man was rare. Conversations usually centered on his infidelity and his lack of empathy concerning the stresses associated with her role (caregiver, lover, monetary provider, etc.) in the home. Of course, these complaints are not unique to black women, but because I was only exposed to black social environments, I equated these characteristics to black men. Even though these observations and understandings were based upon a child perspective, I carried these unexamined beliefs through my adulthood. When I thought of men, women, and their romantic relationships, I saw a fantasy overturned by the nightmare of black men destroying the souls of black women.

But just as the tugs of cultural traditions and societal pressures had influenced how I viewed my physicality, it had also impacted my quest to find a "good" man. If black women were supposed to marry black men, then I was sure to find a life of marital turmoil. To find happiness, I would have to be an exception and escape blackness in some form. Although my identity crisis and perceptions of black inferiority were major factors of my behaviors, my desire to cross the color line did not stem from a desolate motive. Racial segregation violated my

biblical interpretations of God's creation of a human race, but ultimately it seemed that by adopting characteristics of "whiteness" I could gain acceptance among the majority of society.

Fighting Words

Will you marry me? I never heard the words. Sitting on a beachfront deck shortly after sunset, I sat across from Nathan at the table where we had our first date. Nearly two years had passed, and we had managed to dance around the complexities of race creating a love in spite of it. I watched Nathan slowly reach into his pocket and retrieve a black ring box. I paused completely speechless for a time as he opened it. The ring inside was completely beautiful, but seeing it erased the joy I initially felt from my face. I had always believed that doubt would be nonexistent during my marriage proposal and that I would be swept up with uncontrollable happiness. But instead, I wanted nothing more but to run and hide from emotional turmoil.

No other ring, location, or spoken words could have changed the perplexing thoughts I held inside. The truth was that I loved Nathan, but I am unsure if it was the love that was supposed to sustain a marriage. The love I had was primarily based on our friendship, and my sexual desire for him was fueled by his ability to provide me with the most intense orgasms (and seven years of celibacy). Nathan was kind, honest, generous, compassionate, romantic and very handsome, but there was a space of emptiness that stood between us. I was fully aware of this emptiness, but it was clouded by the sex, my mother's overt racial discrimination toward our relationship, and my goal of being a married woman. In my eyes, a good man was a white man. Although I was attracted to black men and had relationships with them prior to meeting Nathan, I feared them. I was sure that marrying a black man would make me victim to an unfaithful husband. I had witnessed the grief and anguish of a wife's broken heart and knew the impacts it could have on the children involved. And I was determined to avoid that life.

I believe I was more in love with the idea of being a wife, and more specifically being a white man's wife than I believed I ever loved Nathan at the time of his proposal. Somewhere within my life experiences, I had developed several beliefs that led to this event. First, my understanding of womanhood relied heavily on my ability to become someone's wife (and mother). The reality of a fading physical attractiveness as well as the constant ticking of my biological clock made me fearful that men would not desire me. In addition to these perceptions, I had embraced a belief that white men would be better husbands and the chances of me finding one that would marry me were slim, especially in the South. So when Nathan displayed his seriousness to our relationship (e.g. meeting his parents, taking me ring shopping), I felt it was a sign of progress. Now that the ring had become a reality, it frightened me.

Although the concept of double consciousness is commonly accepted as a characteristic of African American identity, it becomes prevalent in those who become bicultural as I had become through my relationship with Nathan. While the concept of two-ness simultaneously resides within the individual, varied experiences cause one to rise further above the surface. Acknowledging our love affair in the context of race and a tabooed union caused me to view my future with colored lens. This sight forces me to answer the unasked question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" (DuBois, 1903, p.11) This was a question that I avoided upon my first "encounter" with race (Cross, 1991) as I became involved in my first interracial relationship during high school. After the secrecy of the relationship had been publicized, the counterpart to my love affair was withdrawn from our predominately black school and enrolled in an all-white private Christian school. My personal response to DuBois's question is revealed in my actions of immersion. Unlike Nigrescence's emersion-immersion stage which is characterized by an immersion of black culture, I attempted to immerse myself into a white frame of mind. And

Nathan's presenting of *the ring* was the jolt that removed me from my fantasy and back into the reality of racial consciousness.

"Where did you get that from?" I promptly asked wishing to be exiled from the situation that had presented itself. Interrupting the traditional chain of events was my way of eliminating a question I was not ready to answer. I knew that accepting this engagement would come with a price. And the ring that Nathan held in his hand brought a reality to the cost—the possibility of having a depthless marriage, feeling like I had betrayed the black community, having to defend my relationship to countless amounts of people, and losing an identity I struggled to hold onto. Despite all of my admiration of whiteness, I still desired to have a connection with blackness. My language, social circles, and recreational interests were all used in measuring my racial identity. Of course, these notions of racial identity were primarily based upon superficial perceptions and ignorance. Still, they were real and alive in many of the communities in which I dwelled, and I had to acknowledge them. My resistance to these beliefs had the potential of leaving me isolated and alone, and this power had caused me to double-dutch the color line for years. I am certain that if this power did not exist, I would have sprinted toward whiteness.

To my question "Where did you get that from?" Nathan never had a chance to respond nor did I think he was prepared to do so. I frantically grabbed the ring throwing his well-practiced proposal speech aboard into a sea of bewilderment. And I, standing between perceptions saturated in love, hate, and confusion, placed the ring on my own finger. This moment was more than a proposal. It was a time when I had to fall from my romantic fantasy into the reality of racial consciousness. Although the racial difference was an obvious characteristic of our relationship, Nathan and I hardly ever discussed race.

Race was a concept we felt could become a problem if we acknowledged it, and so we didn't. Of course, there were incidents that arose when we received stares from the community or ones when my family behaved in a racially intolerant manner toward our behavior. It was usually dismissed though. At this particular stage in my life, I was not aware of how much race had affected who I was as an individual, and I certainly was not ready for the impact these differences would have on a relationship. Nathan and I felt we had successfully developed a love in the name of color-blindness, but I was afraid that this type of love would not weather the storm that would challenge our decision to cross the color line.

My color-blind behaviors only created a bigger problem that would reveal itself much later in our relationship. By ignoring race, I was enabling Nathan to continue his meritocratic beliefs. I made race an irrelevant factor of our lives when I knew firsthand that it had the power to discriminate and oppress. His white privilege and my lack of it were nonexistence features of society. Rather, all that we were and were to become would be granted based on our merit and never our race (Dalmage, 2000).

My avoidance of the issues of race was coming to an end as I had to confess my engagement to my mother. As an older African American mother of the South, Mama carried beliefs that acknowledged her own double consciousness, but also intercepted with her personal responses to her racist encounters with the world. Where I had been apt to see my veil as "the problem," she associated racism with whites. Both views are flawed in that they attach the issues of white supremacist ideology with the actual human bodies that reflect the race perceived as guilty rather than approaching it as a psychological disease that is capable of affecting us all. Although she held very strong generalizations concerning an apathetic black race, she saw white people as ultimate contributors of the destructive race relations that our society had created. As a

result, her disapproval of my relationship with Nathan was solely based upon his whiteness, my blackness, and the historical antagonist characteristics they symbolize.

The Storm

“You done lost yo damn mind!” This was my Mama’s first response to the news of my proposal. “What in Heaven’s name do you think you trying to prove?” I am not sure why Mama asked questions because she never let me answer them. She just kept interrupting, yelling and screaming at me. I don’t think I ever heard her curse so much since I had known her. Tears began to stream down my face, and I began to slip away. My former experiences with rape had led to the perfected skill of blanking out. I laid the phone in my lap and mentally *left* the situation. Racially derogatory statements faintly flooded the air making it my escape almost a failure. Hearing a pause of silence, I placed the phone back to my ear.

“Congratulations, baby girl!” It was Daddy. If ever was a time I needed him, it was at this moment. My father and mother almost never saw eye-to-eye, and this time I was most grateful. Although I was not sure exactly how he felt about my relationship with Nathan, I knew that he was more open to it than my mother. Daddy had previously told me that he considered interracial dating acceptable, a choice that even he had once considered. This made me feel more comfortable sharing my moment with him, but the sound of Mama’s voice in the background made it virtually impossible. “If she wants to mess up her life, tell her to go right ahead!” Her words were sharp, and they pierced me right in the heart. The phone call was ended shortly after that.

The South had taught me many aspects about race, and I fully understood that race had the potential to divide. I had grown up along the invisible lines of race in my town, and although I followed them for much of my life, I never fully comprehended them. I definitely felt that

Nathan's race should not stop me from marrying him. Sadly, I don't think I ever had a chance to really focus on intricate aspects of my relationship with Nathan because I spent much of my time avoiding it and now defending it.

I was glad that I had the conversation with my mother privately. I can only imagine how Nathan would have reacted hearing my mother react so negatively to our engagement, especially considering that her feelings were centered on his race. I knew that if I had heard his mother speak that way about me, I would have been emotionally distraught. There was no way that I could hide my emotions though, and Nathan observed them as soon as he saw me. My eyes were red and swollen from bawling. My voice was crackling, and every sentence was interrupted by a rattling sniff. I burst into tears again explaining my mother's disapproval of our union. Nathan was angry. I was glum and confused.

I was faced with deciphering through my personal views, biblical teachings, and the perceptions of Clyde, Grantsville and the world to determine my own values. Mama always said "people are people" and that we all should be treated equally. In my childhood Sunday school classes, I saw pictures of children of all races sitting around the feet of Jesus, a white Jesus! And every Black History program I attended as a child (in school or church) quoted Dr. King: "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood" (King in Sundquist, 2009, p.15). I guess the "table of brotherhood" referred to bonding within a platonic relationship, something much different than a marital union. And I guess Jesus was the only "white" man I was allowed to love.

As much as racial segregation is viewed by the black community as a tool of oppression and a ladder for white supremacy, African Americans often miss the mark when attempting to

deaden its root. On the surface, the problem seems to be a matter of allowing black people the same opportunities as whites. Sitting at the “table of brotherhood” can be interpreted as an intimate seat of friendship, but for many it simply meant removing the color barriers (laws) that negatively affected blacks educationally and economically. Rather than viewing the beliefs that support white patriarchal power as the culprit, African Americans have a tendency to view in only in terms of skin color. Blacks are able to identify white privilege as a contributor to the racial hierarchy of our society, but fail to see their own mis-education as an additional provider. Believing spirituality was a way of achieving power, many African Americans have used the principles of Christianity to support the fight for racial equality. While these behaviors proved to have great outcomes, many still carry a grudge toward whites. And although Jesus is perceived as a “white” man, he is exempt from these adverse perceptions because of his perfected connection to God.

I was fortunate to have other family members who were more supportive of my relationship with Nathan. Some saw it as a sign of progress viewing interracial relationships as visual proof that we were one step forward in ending racial discrimination (Ramano, 2003). Others believed that dating a white man was the best option considering the selection of black men that were around (a reality or possibly another perception of black inferiority).

“Niece, I think you’re making a smart move,” my uncle said. He and Nathan had developed a good rapport from the few times they had met. “Who else are you going to marry?” my uncle continued. He motioned his hands toward one of Clyde’s street corners where a group of young black men stood. “Don’t be like these girls ‘round here—girls with college degrees marrying goddam thugs!” My uncle and I both knew that not all black men were thugs. We had proof of that in our own family as the majority of men in our family were college educated.

Nevertheless, my uncle was aware of the statistical data surrounding black men in the United States. Additionally, he had obviously recognized some unfortunate trends in the black community and had questions similar to those of Patricia Hill Collins (2004):

How can heterosexual African American men marry and raise families when 25 percent are arrested, incarcerated, or on parole? What are educated, heterosexual African American women to do who find themselves facing a Black male shortage that leaves them with few to no prospects of meeting and marrying African American men of similar status? With 70 percent of all college degrees awarded to African Americans going to women, how do middle-class Black women marry within the “race”? (pp. 249-250).

These were the facts about black men in America. However, these truths did not completely justify my actions. This is not to say that interracial marriages need justification. Like any relationship, they can exist in love without questioning. However, my situation takes different measures as I had acknowledged my feelings of racial inferiority. Rather than focusing on the current negative conditions of black men in America, one could redirect their attention toward the perceptions that landed them there. Stereotypes and destructive images, of course, could cause people to be prejudged and falsely accused. However, many African Americans exhibit characteristics of the stereotype simply because they use the stereotype as model by which they develop their identities. It becomes a vicious cycle whereby white domination continues to reign. Marrying white as a response does not provide an answer to the problem. In many ways, it continues the problem, especially considering that some enter the relationship with attitudes that support the prescribed white supremacist ideology or ignore race altogether.

Many black males lived in my community, but even if I were interested, my entire situation prevented me from meeting many of them. I had perceptions of black men, and black

men had their perceptions of black women like me. With many African American men, I was labeled “white” simply because certain aspects of my character or behaviors did not align with their views of blackness. Although the racial climate of Grantsville was very similar to Clyde, Peach State University provided a seemingly different atmosphere. The increased daily proximity of a multiethnic population as well as the decreased amount of familial pressures made way for a more open perspective on race relations. The color line was still present there, but it was more of a dotted line making my crossing it a little easier than it would have been in Clyde.

My uncle partially understood my dilemma and supported my interracial relationship, but in reality my relationship was so complex that even I did not understand it. I had always identified with being black no matter how much I had been enticed by the ideal of whiteness. And now, that identity was in question. It seemed as if being engaged to a white man somehow revoked my full membership in the black community. As an example, my friend Tammy stopped inviting me to co-ed events because she didn’t want Nathan in her social circle. This both saddened and angered me. It’s not that I felt that I would not be able to associate with or develop friendships with blacks anymore. I just knew that some blacks would be reluctant to befriend me if they knew I was married to a white man. And I was becoming more aware of the limitations being involved with Nathan had placed on my current relationships with black people.

In black communities, interracial relationships are often seen as a sign that one is removed from the black community...Black communities can act as a deterrent to interracial unions, since these relationships are constructed as incompatible with black pride, cultural affinity, and fighting racial injustice...(Childs, 2005, p. 87)

As a result of all of the racial stress that came from my family, I tried to separate my relationship with Nathan as much as possible. I acknowledged that my mother disapproved of

my relationship, and I was determined that her views would not stop me from getting married. In fact, I think it was her resistance and my strong will led to our short engagement. Both Nathan and I felt that the longer we postponed our marriage, the more stress we would have leading up to it. Since neither of us were fans of divorce, the marriage would signify the permanency of our relationship and possibly end the struggle between my mother and me. And even though my romantic connection with Nathan was not as strong as it should have been, I blamed the pressure on my mother. I was always hopeful that our relationship would blossom and not be stifled by others' negativity. Additionally, I wanted everyone to see a perfect relationship and that I was blissfully in love. I concealed the shame I felt from disappointing my mother, the confusion I had about my racial identity, and the fear of permanently losing a connection with the black community. Even though many of my actions showed my reverence to the white ideal, I was learning that I would never be afforded the privileges that many whites had. Grantsville had taught me that it was sometimes easier to socialize within the parameters of racial segregation, but I felt in my heart that the challenges would be worth it.

I'm sure that my uneasiness and confusion was not sensed by most, but I was becoming mentally numb. I was numb from thinking so much about race and whether or not my family accepted my decision, and I was numb from feeling like a social outcast. I wasn't the first person in my family to marry outside of my race, but I was the first person to bring a white man into the family which I found to be much different.

So far, three German women and a Puerto Rican woman named Rita whom everybody said was "black like us" had married into our family. Even though each of these was an example of interracial relationships, skin tone was the ultimate indicator. If it weren't for Rita's light brown skin and dark curly hair, she probably would not have been so easily accepted. I had not

heard any negative comments about any of these women, but the awkward silences that existed around many of the white women may have spoken volumes. My light-skinned cousin Natasha married a Moroccan man, and he received a welcome similar to Rita's. He was brown-skinned, friendly, and dressed in an urban style. Seeing other races and ethnicities blend so well with my family made me wish that Nathan was another race, some other brown minority. Then he could be an honorary black man. I wished Nathan was friendlier. Then he could be one of the "good" white folks that I heard about as a child. I wished that I was a man. Then, I would not experience any of this turbulence. I could make my decision, stand firm behind it, and watch everyone salute it (or deal with it).

In African American communities, interracial relationships are an intricate subject. Because of society's racial hierarchy, the relationships are viewed in regard to racial statuses. Whites are considered the American standard while other minorities are grouped together in the category of Otherness (Childs, 2005). Additionally, skin color is also a measure used in this grouping. Following the rules of colorism, minorities whose skin color and features closely resemble African Americans are considered "black" or of equal status. Those who have lighter skin are placed in an opposing category. The color line is still present; however principles of colorism are applied to determine its acceptability.

The gender of the partners adds a complex component to these tabooed relationships. Black men who marry white women are criticized for abandoning black women and harboring racial self-hate. However, the negativity surrounding black women and white men is related to the collective "memory" of sexual violation by white men. Some consider these unions a reminder of an unfortunate history. As DuBois (1903) writes:

The red stain of bastardy, which two centuries of systematic legal defilement of Negro women had stamped upon his race, meant not only the loss of ancient African chastity, but also the hereditary weight of a mass of corruption from white adulterers, threatening almost the obliteration of the Negro home (p.16).

The way I saw it, black-white interracial relationships were the same no matter which role gender played. But I guessed people viewed the situation differently than I did, and I later learned another view in a conversation I overheard. “Stephanie’s gonna be successful,” a family member said. “Yeah, but she’s gonna put all her success right back in the hands of the white man,” another responded with laughter. This response was said in a jokingly manner, but I knew that there was a bitter truth embedded within it. I realized at that moment that my black and white *was* different. As a white man, Nathan was the ultimate representation of dominance and power in our society. And next to him, I was subordinate in race and gender. Seeing economic mobility in our family as well as the black community represented a hope of a power that could escape some of the perceptions often associated with notions of black inferiority, and marrying Nathan defied the possibility in their eyes.

“Because wealth and poverty are passed down through families, keeping families racially homogeneous virtually ensures that middle-and upper-middle class White Americans will retain family assets and that Black Americans will experience intergenerational debt, if not poverty” (Collins, 2004, p.248.). This was an effect of former miscegenation laws. Nathan and I represented a new generation, ones who had not experienced the overt racism from legal practices. I had benefited from Brown vs. Board of Education and other federal programs that enhanced the educational achievements of racial minorities. I was considered successful in my family because of my educational achievements and economic uplift. Although other people in

my family had married outside of their race, they were perceived differently simply because they were men or they had married a racial minority. Considering men the head of the household, they saw no change in the gender hierarchy of male domination. And marrying another minority posed no threat to the racial dynamics of the relationship. Therefore, my decision to marry Nathan was not just seen as marrying outside of my race. Nathan was a reminder of the power that has controlled our country for centuries. And that power was white and male.

Six months had gone by, and my emotional state had only gotten worse. The lack of my mother's companionship had caused me to become depressed, and I cried all of the time. After finally confessing my feeling of loneliness and abandonment, my mother raised her white flag. "Stephanie, I love you no matter what! I know that we don't see eye-to-eye on this marriage, but you are more important than any of my opinions." I would have rather her say that she fully supported interracial marriages, but knowing having her support *me* was enough at that time. I had prayed daily that God would soften Mama's heart, that my relationship with her would be repaired, and that she could accept Nathan as her son-in-law. Hearing my mother's words gave me a feeling of relief, comfort, and a beam of hope that my faith wouldn't fail me. I truly felt that God had heard my prayers and was beginning to answer them.

Waiting for the first tune of Pachelbel's *Canon in D Major*, I stood in the doorway of the church sanctuary tightly holding my father's hand. The day had come, and the music would be my sign to part the sea of standing onlookers—family, friends, and coworkers—that had come to witness the ceremony. I smiled big and took the first step when the first note was played. Slowly pacing my way down the aisle just as I had practice, I purposely made no eye contact with anyone. I could feel everyone's stares melting my exterior away. What were they thinking? Where they gazing at me the same way they would look at any other bride? Or were they looking

at me differently because I was about to take a white man's hand in marriage? I felt somewhat naked, afraid of ridicule or the fake "congratulations" I might receive afterwards. I wanted to fade away, go somewhere more welcoming, but my father's weeping kept me from leaving. He didn't shed one tear at my older sister's wedding, and I wondered why he was crying so intensely. Maybe this day symbolized the independence of his baby girl. Maybe he knew that his role as a husband had influenced my actions, and he was ridden with guilt. Maybe I wouldn't have to ponder such things if race wasn't so heavily involved.

As I approached the altar, I realized that my father was not the only one crying. Nathan was standing beside the priest with tears streaming down his cheeks. Seeing Nathan cry made me feel comforted. There was no doubt in my mind that Nathan's tears were of happiness, and I was able to escape the embarrassing moment and focus on the most important task of the day—saying "I do." But that moment wouldn't last long enough. I stood by my decision to marry Nathan with every vow, but passing each guest made me feel like I had somehow shamed my entire family. And because our relationship did not exist within a bubble, I was unable to escape the negativity that came my way.

When the battles began—battles between my mother and me, battles between Nathan and me, battles between me and me—the real issues of my personal identity crisis were clouded by our others' perception of our racial difference. My blackness, a quality of myself that Nathan helped me learn to appreciate in many ways, was the same blackness that caused the most friction in our marriage. I had loved Nathan for two years, but I had been black all of my life. Being black carried meaning, a personal meaning that I was continuing to construct as well as a stereotypical one that seemed to dominate most of my environments. And although I didn't have to submit to the latter, I was often inclined to do so. I was caught in the middle feeling the

pressure to choose a racial side. Everything was a matter of black versus white, and my anguish and confusion prevented any real analysis of the situation. Almost instinctively, I sided with blackness uncovering the once buried aspects of my identity and developing an unnecessary defensiveness toward Nathan. His presence represented the demons I had once faced.

No one seemed to care who Nathan and I were as individuals, only our racial difference. Race had surely shaped who we were, but we were not our color. Nathan was not just “that white boy that Stephanie likes,” and I was not just a black woman who had “lost her damn mind” by marrying a white man. As I sit and point the finger at those who negatively judged our relationship or deemed it as an insult to God, I am just as guilty for basing many of my perceptions on skin color. Race had always been a factor of our relationship, and probably more on my part than his. If Nathan was a black man, I am certain that my fear of infidelity and perceptions of his inferiority would have kept me from commitment. And no matter how much blackness I attempted to represent, I was aware that being the wife of a white man somehow restructured my identity. In fact, I had initially welcomed the idea of alteration. Outside perceptions had certainly impacted by beliefs concerning race and identity, and my succumbing to the views of white supremacy, black inferiority, black empowerment/pride, and racial identities further complicated my perceptions of myself as a black woman.

My marriage to Nathan signified a death of “authentic” blackness, a reincarnated soul which sought to find refuge in a peaceful existence between my personal life and social world. Although I firmly wanted to exercise my rights of liberty and the pursuit of happiness, achieving it becomes convoluted within this American context. The “American” soul which strives toward the individualistic attainment of the American Dream—economic success and social mobility—

is yielded upon the realization that society does not see her as an individual, but a representative of a wretched race (Powe, 2009).

Being raised in the Bible Belt South and within a Christian household, I had always been encouraged to view religion as an undeniable truth. The bible was the sacred text which held the answers to the most perplexing questions. Although the black church had demonstrated ways it could be used to liberate black people, these efforts exist among other endeavors that have denounced the humanness of blacks and alienated them from rights “endowed by their Creator.” These varied attitudes concerning God and interracial relationships were revealed by others outside of my family.

“I wanna talk to you for a minute, Stephanie.” Mrs. Harper, my teaching mentor, had entered my classroom closing the door behind her. I had no inkling of what she wanted to discuss, but I knew that it must have been serious when the door was closed. “What do your parents think of your marriage?” she asked. Immediately, I was offended that someone who could barely congratulate me was inquiring such personal aspects of my relationship. Nevertheless, I attempted to remain calm. “They’re ok with it,” I lied. “What about *his* family?” “Oh, I get along with them just fine!” From her stern eyes, I could tell that she was looking for an opening by which she could insert her negativity. And personally, I did not want to give her the satisfaction. “Well, what did your pastor say?” “Actually, he is ok with it. He’s marrying us.” This was true. He was the only pastor I knew in Grantsville who openly supported interracial marriage.

“I think that you should research some reputable pastors to see what they have to say about it,” Mrs. Harper insisted. “What do you mean reputable?” I knew very well what she meant. Reputable in her eyes probably meant that they had to be a Caucasian male who held the

same racist views as she did. “Someone like James Dobson, Charles Stanley or Charles Swindoll?” she suggested. Since I was sitting near my laptop, I didn’t hesitate to use the Internet to search the perspectives of each of these pastors. Website after website, we search for a Christian article that would support her beliefs, but we didn’t find any. She must have been surprised to know that there were “reputable” preachers out there who didn’t think interracial marriage was a sin. Still, she persistently advised me to read my bible. “I’m going to look for that scripture, and I will bring it to you when I find it.” We never spoke of it again.

Marriage was considered a sacred union in many people’s mind, but it was obvious that the ideals of marriage were based upon a monoracial model. That model excluded my relationship with Nathan. Our marriage signified a joining of lives, and it gave a middle finger to the color line. Although my life had been a balancing act on this line, there was an aspect of my identity that respected it. The Eurocentric standards of America and Christianity become interchangeable principles by which many people live. Following suit with this notion, I used Christianity to determine my role in the marriage. I sought this information so that I might solve marital problems that derived from our racial difference.

Beginning in Genesis upon Adam and Eve’s disobedience to God’s words, He punished the woman saying “Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you” (Genesis 3:16) and continuing in Ephesians with the following: “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church” (Ephesians 5:22-23). On one hand, I wanted to blindly support this notion of female submission believing that somehow my inability to comprehend God’s wisdom was preventing my understanding of the scripture. While I believed the bible was inspired by God, it was likely

that its doctrine was negatively impacted by the culture of its time which supported inequalities, like male dominance.

My conflicting beliefs concerning the bible's validity again made me question my identity. In addition to all the characteristics I associated with a black identity (skin color, hair texture, language, etc.), I was beginning to realize that Christianity was also a part of this identity. In this way, my double consciousness which was discussed in the previous chapter in terms of "an American, a Negro" (DuBois, 1903, p.12) takes a more religious descriptor. Now I existed as an American Christian and a Black Christian, and both of these psyches bled into one another. Although I considered Christianity a religion of self-liberation, many of the philosophies mirrored the white supremacist ideology that oppressed me as a black female.

"Women, now I know that almost everything in the world encourages you to be in charge, but you must remember that the man is the head of the household." I was in a couples' bible study when I heard these words. The group leader surprisingly was female, and all of the wives smiled at her comment as if they were guilty of this "sin." I was simply bothered by the idea. As she further explained, "many problems in a marriage stemmed from a woman's inability to be submissive to her husband." The DuBoisian question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" had dual meaning. Not only had this veil caused me to be viewed in a negative light, my gender (or rather my lack of submissiveness) had contributed to the problem.

Biblical gender roles were easy to accept in my infant stages of womanhood, especially considering they virtually mirrored the traditional ones to which I had been introduced in the Bible Belt South. As a matured woman, in many respects, my conscious could not agree with such principles. I was left to grapple with the moral implications of biblical literalism and what it meant for my life, independence, and mental freedom. Through a feminist lens, I could see how

these ideas of patriarchy had been connected to God, a male deity in our imaginations, and Jesus. But as Sojourner Truth questioned, “Where did your Christ come from?...From God and a woman!” (Truth in Katz, 2003, p. 126). The minimization of women in the bible did not reflect our submissive places. The unvoiced women did, however, reflect the culture of male dominance that was present long before the Virgin Mary birthed Jesus. And this Eurocentric Americanized version of Christianity had given Christ a new face which literally erased the face of Jesus.

This is what I consider *the* encounter that triggered my behaviors associated with Nigrescence’s emersion-immersion stage. I had pinned up emotions from feeling racially inferior, and now I had people basically telling me that being a woman made me inferior to my husband. It was just another reason the wear armor in my home. And Nathan being white only made it worse. His skin color made it a racial issue. Nathan’s actions were typical to most of the men in my family. Even though he never said it, his behavior showed his belief in a man’s job to work and provide a monetary income for the family. This was a behavior that I was accustomed to experiencing and observing in families of all races. This was a cultural similarity that had shaped both Nathan and me. Nevertheless, we had learned to pigeonhole each other’s role by our gendered characteristics. And while I had witnessed happy marriages within these constraints, I had also seen many women emotionally beaten from infidelity and physically drained from taking care of household duties, caring for children, and working a full-time job. One thing that was always present was their submission to their husbands, and my lifetime witness to this along with my understanding of biblical principles attributed to my behaviors. However, none of these behaviors or faith came easy. In fact, it was an uphill battle.

Honey, de white man is the de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power,

but we don't know nothing" but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He hand it to his women folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (Hurstun, 1937, p. 16)

In Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the characterization of womanhood is depicted in a conversation whereby an African American woman explains a black woman's role to her granddaughter. In this depiction of black womanhood, we vividly see the understood hierarchy that exists between races and gender. African American women exist outside of the patriarchal power structures standing at the bottom of the pyramid. As a "mule" carrying the load that others dare not carry and our own associated burdens, many of us have wearily accepted this place. I was struggling to remove the load, but a life of silence made it difficult to articulate my pain.

I loved Nathan, but I sometimes hated the whiteness of which I had once loved. It was obvious that race relations had suffered because of the ideals and associated behaviors of white supremacy. While Nathan was willing to acknowledge these facts and correlating events such as slavery and Jim Crow, he was less likely to support the idea that these philosophies remained an integral part of society's government. In his mind, racism was overwhelmingly a facet of our past and that African Americans had become more of the perpetrators of racial discrimination. In many ways, Nathan was the reminder of what I felt had erased my being, and the unacknowledged reality of that infuriated me. I suppose I should have discussed my feelings with Nathan, my best friend and husband, but I didn't. Discussions involving race had the potential to offend, start an argument, and disrupt the peaceful environment I tried so hard to create in my home. The double consciousness that I possessed was a trait that I wished Nathan could have. If he could develop the ability to see the world through my Veil of Color, his

enlightenment could contribute to a healthier form of critical interracial dialogue about our experiences.

Just Like the N-word

Although our marriage has been filled with many events that have demonstrated our love for each other, it has also displayed our conflicting beliefs concerning white superiority and male dominance as well as my struggles with my religious faith. Nathan was completely unaware of the racial privilege he possessed and believed that whites' current social position in society had primarily derived from hard work. Moreover, he held firm in the belief that slavery and the Jim Crow laws that followed had no effects on African American's ability to succeed in today's society. While I believed it was easier for African Americans to gain a better education and create better economic situations for themselves than in the past decades, I understood that it was still not as easy as it was for whites. I had also becoming aware of the social inequalities among men and women which caused me to reevaluate the dogmatic belief of female submission. For years, I accepted this belief because I was oblivious to the disadvantages it had caused me and would continue to create. I had been raped twice and made no connections to the events this submissive perception that most attached to females, and although I had observed the gendered differences among adults, I did not fully understand the magnitude of its affects until I became an adult myself. My faith in Christianity which supported many of these ideas were being shaken by my own convictions.

The quest to define my beliefs concerning these matters were imperative to the black female identity I wished to uphold, but personal opinions made me develop an unsound character. And without the stakes of certainty, I allowed my emotions to sway my behaviors. Illustrating these insecurities at their greatest height were two arguments surrounding the

perceptions of African American identity. While our ethnicity may have been at the heart of both events, I am certain that other aspects of our personal convictions were involved.

“Bitch!” The word was sharp and piercing, and although neither of us knew exactly how to respond to this utterance, we did. It was an MLK Monday, and Nathan and I both had the day off from work. In all of my years, I had never attended an MLK parade nor did I ever have the desire to do so. However, there was something special about this particular year. Being married to Nathan represented “the dream” in my eyes, and I was anxious to be a symbol of change at the parade. I ignored all of the turbulence we had experienced in our relationship and the struggles we were continuing to have concerning our racial difference. I preferred to display the image of a successful interracial relationship. I deeply wanted to be happy with Nathan, and even though our major issues had not been completely resolved, I felt more comfortable avoiding the truth rather than investigating our deepest issues.

Race was a controversial subject anywhere in the United States. Although it was an obvious and distinct racial divide in the South, most people tended to discuss racial issues in the isolation of segregated social circles. In my own experience, the companionship of other African Americans provided a comfort zone of generally like-minded people who were passionate about racial equality. While these discussions may have stimulated growth and empowered us, the critique of common attitudes was less likely to be addressed. Additionally, race also tended to cloud other practices of marginalization like gender discriminations. These experiences impacted my ability to critically examine racial issues from various perspectives. African Americans, as well as other racial minorities, were victims of a white supremacist society. And while I envied and revered many aspects of whiteness, I simultaneously saw the power they seem to possess as

an evil. In spite of this canvas of beliefs, I worked diligently to paint the picture of a happy interracial marriage.

“Nathan, the MLK parade starts at 11 today, and I want us to go.” Nathan agreed to attend. However, he made his disinterest clear explaining that he would go only because of my desire. Immediately, I was offended that his decision was not sparked by an inner desire. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spent much of his life working for racial equality, a cause from which I felt our relationship had benefited. Nathan’s disinterest in the parade made me feel that he did not support King’s cause, but I did not share my feelings. In reality, part of my desire to attend this parade was partially due to my own insecurities. The marriage itself had brought race to an uncomfortable position which questioned my racial stance in regards to the color line. It also challenged the mythical notion of an authentic black identity. Supporting Dr. King’s cause sent an overt message of racial equality, but underneath that was a pro-black attitude.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was known for his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, but he is also a symbol of black unity. As a child, I saw it in the black church as people waved their fans bearing King’s face. Once I was older, I saw it illustrated in the ways he could unite thousands of black people (e.g. 1963 March on Washington). When I showed interest in the MLK parade, it was an attempt to connect with other black people. This pro-black attitude parallels the characteristics of Nigrescence’s immersion-emersion stage. Possibly the most defining aspect of this phase is the great depth of immersion in one’s racial group identity. During this particular phase, one is focused on developing an understanding of race and what it means to be a black person. This is usually illustrated in a strong sense of racial pride and negative attitudes towards whites which are viewed as the oppressors (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001).

I didn't want him to be offended during a racial discussion. Such an offense could be interpreted as me calling him a racist. And even though he had characteristics that qualified him for such a title, the technical definition of racism differed greatly from its casual connotation. Racism was a belief that racial difference produces an inherent superiority of whites, an unavoidable internalization of American society. The intensity of such beliefs differed from person to person. Although practices of racism are often subtle, subconscious, a failed realization of racial bias, the term usually embodies the most extreme behaviors of intentional bigotry in most people's mind. Racism was "whites only" signs and the lynching of black men. If Nathan translated my words into a racist label, it would be like calling him the grand master of the KKK. That was something I wished to avoid. I growing habit of silence only intensify the anger within. And this emotion which had the ability to destroy the soul also had the power to attack externally.

Nathan's lack of enthusiasm caused him to get ready very slowly, and I grew frustrated as a result. "Listen, Nathan. Parking is going to be bad enough. We need to get there early enough to find a parking spot and find a good place to watch the parade!" I was anxious to leave the house, and my patience was growing thin. "You don't have to get an attitude with me! I said I was going!" And with that, we headed for the car. I sat in the passenger seat, and he drove...very slowly. "Do you know what time it is? I knew I should have driven." With those spoken words, I could hear my mother's voice in my head: "Stephanie, you have to be mindful of what your say and know when to be quiet, especially with a man." I thought my mother had intentions of protecting me with her advice, but I also felt her ideas further oppressed me. Nevertheless, I knew I had crossed the line. The pressure of society to become submissive had caused me to feel angry and resentful toward Nathan's obliviousness to his advantages. As a result, I was often

aggressive and overly assertive when I didn't need to be. Constant complaints are less likely to result in the desired behavior no matter which gender one is communicating with. But I believed that even if I had communicated more effectively, Nathan would have resisted because of my "dominant" reputation.

As a human, I believed that I had the right to assert my power when I felt it necessary. Having witnessed the emotional discontent many women carried from wifely submissiveness, I was determined not to follow this pattern. But in many ways, I did. I had been disappointed by the ways many women in my family sacrifice their happiness and subjected themselves to a submissive lifestyle. It was a regime I felt myself falling into, one that I was desperately attempting to escape. I just did not know how. Additionally, my experiences with rape had created a defensiveness and aspiration to control the situations that surrounded me. Although I had initially attached these feelings to black men, I began to associate these feelings with Nathan and his maleness upon our first physical argument. The day he held me down in argument brought me back to a place that I never thought I would be with a white man. It was then that I realized that this evil (feeling dominant) was a gendered characteristic. I always knew that all men did not consciously desire to control women, but I was determined not to be submissive to a man if I could help it.

Mama had always warned me about my mouth—how I allowed my opinionated nature drive my words. She always said that I was just like my father, and I was proud of that. I never enjoyed witnessing the "silence" of women in my family. They were loud in volume, but many times their actions followed the systematic structures of male dominance. I watched them work full-time jobs, care for their children, and slave over housework never once asking for assistance

from their husbands (even though they desperately wanted it). It was widely accepted that woman was created after man, and this belief created this notion that women were created to be helpers to men. Even though I adhered to many of these social patterns concerning men and women, I also struggled to counteract them. Of course, I wanted to have a voice in my home, but I also wanted my behaviors to support it.

On one hand, my mother encouraged me to be independent of a man. From the same mouth, she also taught me to limit my power. Mama made it clear to me that having such a voice makes a man feel challenged in his manhood. Considering this to be true, I wondered whether this oversensitive male ego was an innate feature or a heightened characteristic nurtured by the culture of our society. I recognized that it could possibly been a combination of both. If I were to successfully communicate in my relationship, I felt it was important to consider the environments in which we had been raised and the ideologies by which we had come to live.

I thought about my marriage bible study, and how the women had been reminded of certain biblical principles. “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord;” I could not forget these words. Although my bible study leader had made me feel uncomfortable with her encouragement of female submission, I truly felt that if I could comfortable with the idea of submission, my relationship with Nathan would be less stressful. Although we had our share of issues with race, most of the problems had involved the struggle of power. I had lived in the shadows of whiteness and maleness, and he had been raised in a world that proclaimed his male dominance, and his race only enhanced it (whether he recognized it or not). No matter how much marriage represented love and companionship, it also involved the compromising of oneself.

And because I had grown tired of the racial and gendered compromises I had made, marriage would not be as easy as I had once thought.

My lips were sealed, but the look on my face said more than I had that day. “I don’t wanna to go to the parade if you are going to have an attitude,” Nathan firmly stated. “You didn’t wanna go long before I got this attitude,” I replied. I could no longer sit in silence, and I felt myself going into a tireless rant about his behavior which led us back to our driveway at Bella Terrace Court. I could not believe he had turned the car around and driven back. It was now eleven o’clock, and I was missing the parade. He had successfully controlled the situation, and I wanted nothing less than to be controlled. Not any day, and definitely not on MLK Day. Of all the days in the year, it was the one day when people would acknowledge the fight for racial equality. Although all races have benefited from this fight, I felt a close connection with the battle as an African American. The protests, marches, boycotts, and “colored” sections that often serve as the pictorials of the Civil Rights Movement were filled with people who looked like me. And I was aware that if I had lived in that particular time period, it would have been me.

Nathan never understood the importance of celebrating anything that focused on race, and he was adamant that it was an example of “reverse racism.” Because of these views, it was a challenge to watch certain television shows or read certain magazines without him being critical. “All you watch are black shows.” It was true that I watched shows with all-black casts, but I watched plenty of other shows that did not. These comments bothered me because his assumptions were false, but especially because he was not as critical of his behaviors. Maybe the fact that many of his favorite shows (e.g. CSI, House, The Office) usually had one black cast member view himself in a different light. I wondered why he never seemed to acknowledge my

Sex in the City marathons or my obsession with Brad Pitt movies. His comments made me wonder if he simply considered them to be normal. If he considered white to be normal, that belief had surely influenced his perceptions of other races. Within the United States, those who are considered white rarely think about race (Halley, Eshleman, & Vijaya, 2011), and Nathan was no exception.

“Don’t you think it’s racist to have a network like BET that boldly states that they are a black entertainment network? And what about those magazines like Essence and Ebony. If a white person did that, they’d be called a racist!” “They do,” I replied. “It’s called NBC and Cosmo!” These conversations never ended peacefully, and the frustration of constantly feeling ignored and misunderstood was carried into the events that occurred on that MLK holiday. I felt the argument served as an open door by which he could escape from the parade. He had no desire to go. And now that he was upset with me, he had no desire to appease me. Although Nathan’s refusal to attend the parade had been a result of my nagging, being a white male made it feel like a slap of racism and the stabbing of dominance.

Once Nathan parked the car in our driveway, took the keys from the ignition, slammed the door, and walked toward the front door of our house. I was fuming. I wanted to punch him so badly, but instead I settled on name-calling. I opened the car door to walk around to the driver’s seat. “Bitch!” I said authoritatively. It was a verbal blow that I had endured in my own experiences with Nathan. Even though I was raised in a household that never used such derogatory language, the social use of the word “bitch” allowed me swallow it a little easier. Many songs referred to women as bitches, and women were beginning to accept the title with pride (arguably an unfortunate response).

The controlling image of the “bitch” constitutes one representation that depicts Black women as aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy. Increasingly applied to poor and/or working-class Black women, the representation of the “bitch” constitutes a reworking of the image of the mule of chattel slavery (Collins, 2004, p. 123).

“Call me what you want. I already know who I am,” was my usual reply to his “bitch” insults. But I was lying. I really had no idea who I was, and Nathan’s words always left me emotionally scarred. The term “bitch” had always been offensive to me as a woman as it was used to put me in “my place.” And so using it on him was my way of twisting this derogatory reference. I was trying to revoke his power. And I knew that hearing “bitch” come from my mouth would hurt Nathan way more than it had ever hurt me. “Bitch” was a word reserved for a woman. Calling Nathan, a full grown man, a bitch was belittling. My words reduced him to a female which seemed to be the greatest insult to his manhood. So when I called him a bitch, it came from my gut. Nathan stood in the driveway. His face was red, and his hands were in fists. I knew he wanted to hit something. His boxing gloves were in the house, and he would not have time to resort to his punching bag as he often did in anger. Because of my fear, I locked the doors. I knew the potential of his anger, and I knew that it was a situation that I did not want to experience. Using my spare keys, I started the car and drove out of my driveway. I never went to the parade.

I always sensed that much of the issues in our relationship had a lot to do with Nathan’s inability to understand or have a desire to understand the black experience, the racial identity crisis within myself, and the defensiveness I had as a result. However, the confirmation that I was an integral part of the problem came to me on a drive to South Carolina. A metallic purple

Chevy Caprice was approaching the rear of our car. Noticing the impatience of the man driving, I changed lanes so that he could pass easily. Thumping bass echoed in the air, and we could see the driver (a young black male with dreadlocks) dancing in the car with his arms waving from side to side. “Now how ghetto is that!” I said. The driver began driving closely to the bumpers of the cars in front of us continuing to dance to the sound of his music. “That’s how that kind of person is…” Nathan began his discussion. Immediately, I interrogated him. “What do you mean ‘that kind of person’? An argument sprang out between us, but something caused me to pause. I felt the intensity growing in my heart, and a burning passion was evoked as soon as I made the assumption that Nathan’s comment was a racially biased one.

“What the hell, Stephanie? I am so tired of this black and white shit. I don’t give a rat’s ass if that man is black. If he were white, I would still say that he was driving like an ass! That’s what I mean by ‘that kind of person.’ You are the one who just said that the man was ghetto.” On any other day, this conversation would have turned into an hour-long argument, but for the first time Nathan had shown me that I was guilty of what I accusing him—prejudice. Ghetto was a negative expression that was usually reserved for an African American whose outwardly appearance or behaviors made one believe they were from a low socioeconomic background (i.e. the ghetto). Like many black people’s views of the word *nigger*, I considered my use of the word “ghetto” acceptable because of my race. Erasing race from the equation (if that was even possible), I knew that my actions were not warranted. This realization caused me to overlook Nathan’s yelling and profanity, listen to his meaning of his words and try to understand his stance. I just wished that he would try to understand the black experience as I tried to understand his.

“As soon as I elaborate on the conversation *you* started, it becomes a black and white issue. It’s bad enough that I cannot speak my mind and always feel this unnecessary pressure of being politically correct. I can’t fight society and come home and fight with you too. You gotta stop this shit!” That was the moment when I truly began to examine the contributions I had made to our marriage. Surely, I had brought a lot of good to the relationship. Otherwise, Nathan would never have asked me to marry him or continue to be involved during the stressful times of our relationship. However, I would have to acknowledge my in own insecurities and faults in order to grow as a person and improve our marriage.

The war may have begun with my mother’s prejudice against Nathan, but I don’t think I can fairly say that it continued because of her or completely from our racial difference. I have to acknowledge that much of our problems seemed to be centered on ideas that each us held about race and our roles as man and woman. Race had the ability to complicate the matter and often was a scapegoat for other problems that existed in the societal view of marriage.

It was true that both Nathan and I had been affected by living in a white male dominated society. Although Nathan and I shared similar upbringings of middle-class life in Georgia, his race and gender had given him privileges that I would never know. The history of these privileges had caused my mother to find error in our interracial relationship. These were privileges that caused me to grow bitter, and these were privileges that Nathan seemed oblivious that he had. However, these were no excuses to continue a relationship under these circumstances. Although I feel the nature of my frustration (racism & gender biases) were valid, I understand one must execute the communication of these issues effectively. And the listener must be open to receiving a new perspective and willing to critique his own flaws. In no manner

do I insinuate that people remain silent as my mother recommended, socially submissive as the bible suggests, or limit the passion we exude concerning these subjects. While experience taught me that communicating disrespectfully (i.e. screaming, name-calling, being physical, etc.) do not yield positive results, I recognize that these behaviors likely resulted from the silence itself. Ignoring unwarranted behaviors and avoiding confrontations perpetuate the problem. By not discussing race with Nathan, I essentially supported his views giving him a justifiable reason to hold firm to his. My festering emotions created an additional challenge when I attempted to discuss them with him. Had I addressed these issues of race early in the relationship, the problems may have been resolved or the relationship may have ended sooner.

In addition to this revelation, I understand my entering Nigrescence's immersion-emersion stage as a complicated place in my development. Holding white supremacist ideals had proven to have negative effects on my self-esteem—from my own beliefs and now my husbands'. Considering these experiences, it seems necessary for me to develop an appreciation for African Americans as well as black culture. However, developing a blind love for "blackness" was just as damaging to my growth. First, it involved the acceptance of a false notion of blackness which was socially constructed just as race itself. Characteristics of this construction contained broad generalizations which included the white supremacist perceptions that were connected Nigrescence's pre-encounter stage. Secondly, these behaviors lacked the evaluation needed in developing an identity that celebrated my racial and gendered self while still maintaining a relationship with other identities.

CHAPTER SIX

MADE IN OUR IMAGE: THE STRUGGLES OF RAISING A BIRACIAL CHILD

In spite of the fact that most (and I would venture to say all) people have multiracial ancestry and that biracial children have populated the United States for centuries, the subject is still taboo in many parts of the country. It is even more of a taboo if the racial crossings are composed of African American and Caucasian descent. Many have argued that black-white biracial people inherently live between two worlds, unable to enjoy the benefits of full membership within one group. Others argue that being biracial allows individuals to profit from the advantages of both heritages. While racial identification is a personal choice, the monoracially-oriented society we live in encourages individuals to choose one racial identity over another. How and if one makes this choice is a decision that is impacted by several factors beginning with the skin color of the individual and the attitudes that exist within the environment where one is raised.

Within the context of Duboisian double consciousness, African Americans possess a comparable “biracial” identity simply from being black and living within the white supremacist ideologies of America. Although African Americans are considered “American” by residential default, the majority of African Americans do not possess the principle quality of whiteness (skin color) which remains the overarching characteristic of Americanism. The perceived absence of this quality becomes the catalyst of racial discrimination. Considering the binary racial experience of blacks, those considered biracial through biological inheritance are likely to have a more complex view of race.

In this chapter, the birth of my biracial son causes me to examine race and the importance of having a racial identity. Previously, skin color had been the ultimate indicator of race. Now

race had blurred the lines between white and black, and double consciousness takes a different shape. The internalized one-drop rule ultimately causes me to see my son as black. As a result, the pressure to maintain a black identity intensifies as I now perceive myself as a model for my child's racial identity. There is a pressure to create an environment which resembled my upbringing, but I am forced to reexamine them considering my acknowledgment of identity struggles with black inferiority. This examination is accompanied by a dual sense of white invisibility. Whiteness had the ability to hide itself as a dominant force of humanity, and it had the ability to erase itself from the equation when it collided with another race. While attempting to create an environment that fosters a positive an identity for my child, I continue to struggle with race in my own identity.

The Big Question

“What about the children? Have you thought about that?” I could never forget Mrs. Harper's words. Upon the news of my engagement, Mrs. Harper's focus was immediately drawn to the “dangers” of me having mixed race children. “Your kids won't know who they are, and they are bound to have problems. Who will they be friends with?” And with those words, the color line was drawn. The normality of monoracial families began to reveal its benefits. Having two African American parents did not exempt me from having to racially identify myself to society. The darkness of my skin had labeled me black, but the pressures to maintain “black” behaviors were always present. Because my child would have a known heritage of both black and white, the pressure to choose a racial identity seemed more intense. Moreover, it was apparent that these words were not simply for the proper identification of my future biracial children. More than anything, it was a reminder to alienate myself from whites.

“Who will they be friends with?” was a question that referenced more than the social circle of my future children. Friends, in Mrs. Harper’s mind as well as many perspectives of the South, were determined by your racial affiliation. If you were white, you primarily associated with white people. If you were black, you socialized with black people. Certainly, occupational and extracurricular circumstances cause people to blur the lines of interracial socialization, but there is often little intimacy found within these spaces. In previous eras, there were laws that regulated the social interactions blacks and whites, and many continue to live within this silent code.

Having biracial children in the post-segregation era certainly means that they could avoid the legal restraints of racial discrimination, but they would still have to respond to the unspoken rules of racial identification. Much of society still subconsciously abides by the methods of the one-drop rule which labeled multiracial individuals containing black ancestry to the status of the socially subordinate group. Understanding that the physical characteristics of a person highly influence one’s perceived racial identification, it was likely that my children would be considered black.

From the context of the earlier part of the conversation, I knew that Mrs. Harper felt Christianity justified her protest of interracial relationships (and their offspring). I had been exposed to Christians like Mrs. Harper before, ones who firmly believed that God desired “racial purity” in spite of their belief that all humans had derived from only two people—Adam & Eve. By viewing the belief as a moral code, people like Mrs. Harper could attend to my personal affairs without any guilt. In her eyes, she was only trying to prevent a great sin from occurring. Although she could never reference biblical scripture, she relied on traditional perceptions to justify her views that my relationship (and therefore my children) was an immoral act. Her

demeanor was sincere, but it was also filled with racial intolerance and ignorance. This was white supremacy at work. Mrs. Harper's obvious belief that she was a superior race and that my social and sexual infiltration of it was damaging led her to make racially insensitive statements toward me. I wanted to challenge her assumptions and question her concerns, but her age kept me quiet. I could hear my mama's voice telling me "respect your elders." And by the context surrounding her words, I understood this to mean I could not openly disagree with them.

"What about the children?" This is a common question surrounding interracial relationships, and people continue to use it—the presumption that mixed raced children will suffer emotionally in our society—as an additional reason to reject interracial unions. When the children are brought into the equation, what people are really concerned about is the color line. If people were sincerely concerned with creating an affirmative environment for biracial children, they would be equally concerned about black children. Racial separation instantly creates a hierarchy by which the social subordinate is left to feel isolated and inferior. Variations of society's social neglect of blacks have had numerous effects. For example, research has steadily shown a gap between the educational attainment of blacks and whites, especially among African American males. Many studies also show a racial link identifying that high academic performance is often associated with whiteness (Buck, 2010). Thus, this equation negatively influences African Americans (males especially) who are heavily concerned with obtaining a strong "black" identity. Additionally (if the true concern was of the emotional state of the children), it would be more effective to focus on the eradicating the racial prejudicing behaviors of others that affect biracial people than simply encouraging people not to marry interracially and produce biracial children.

An interracial relationship in itself defies the principle of the color line, but the sexual bi-products of such unions literally blurs race. It causes disequilibrium of the psyche and a redefining of race. These are the relationships that created the black race as we know it, one that began as African and through the inclusion of mulattos, octoroons, and varied multiracial beings shaped a multifaceted spectrum of color we now specifically refer to as African American. Despite our country's history of blurring these racial lines, it is generally ignored and considered unfortunate exceptions. As Americans, many people boldly live by an understood creed which seeks to continue a practice in white dominance. Any act that does not follow this pattern poses a threat to a legacy of white supremacy.

In my childhood, race did not seem like a choice. I was black, an African American because both of my parents were. My children, however, would have a different experience. A black mother and white father would make them biracial in my eyes, and undoubtedly my child would notice these inheritances. Nevertheless, the world was likely to see them as black no matter how they racially identified themselves. Those perceptions would be enough to elicit questions and self-reflection. I struggled with my own blackness, and it had negatively affected my life and others around me. Living in a society that normalizes whiteness created a feeling of otherness, and the subconscious comparison of myself to the norm created an inner depression from coveting characteristics that I could never obtain.

Although the Nigrescence theory provided an evaluation of the personal transformations I made from my youth to the beginning stages of adulthood (pre-encounter, encounter), I found myself teetering back and forth within the immersion-emersion stage. There were times that I wanted to immerse myself into "blackness," socializing with only black people, study the histories of black people, and participate in many activities that were viewed as being an aspect

of African American culture. Then, there were times that I wished to expunge myself from such tendencies, not because I was reverting back to my pre-encounter behaviors. My inclination derived from my belief that race was socially constructed, individuals were capable of their own autonomy, and racial separation could have negative effects no matter which race practiced it. This was a struggle that I had experienced most of my life, and I worried that my child could have a similar experience. But just as my encounters of racial discrimination had led me to understand my racial difference among whites, my experiences were continuously affecting my feelings about whites and blacks. Being an educator within an institution of blatant racial hypocrisy made it difficult to see white supremacy as an ideology rather than equate it to white people. Consequently, I sought relationships with other blacks. While the act of self-segregation opposed my inner desire to racially integrate my social circles, the decision seemed rational considering my aspiration to avoid the emotional strain of racism.

It was obvious that struggle was necessary for my growth. I could reflect and recognize that it had been my defiance of the color line that had caused most of my emotional challenges. These were challenges that required my understanding of race—a societal view, religious perspective, and eventually my unique comprehension. These were trials that caused me to question the ways that I (along with my environment) responded to race no matter how customary they were). It is within these responses to race that my identity has been constructed and reconstructed.

Living in the skin of two socially opposing races would likely make for a more complex contemplation than I had had. My children were obviously going to have to experience some challenges concerning their racial identity, and I would have to recognize that whether or not I liked hearing it come from the mouths of people like Mrs. Harper. The blissful ignorance and

unacknowledged racism that I desperately wanted to disregard was not only vital to my child's experience in understanding the world, it was important to my own personal growth. By facing these discrepancies, I escape denial and began to work through my own conception of race.

Despite the efforts that many have made to allow multiracial individuals to claim multiple racial identities, the common method of racial identification lies in one's visual ability to categorize physical features like skin color and hair texture. Before I ever saw my son Braden, before I ever held him, told him I loved him, showed him his worth, the world had labeled him. On the 13th of September, I awoke from deep sedation. Hours before, I had given birth to my newborn son through an emergency cesarean. Anxious to see my son for the first time, I skimmed over the documents that lay on the desk as I waited for a nurse to bring him in the room.

Even on the day of my son's birth, I was consumed with race. This was the least of Nathan's worries. While he recognized there would be racial challenges associated with Braden's biracial inheritance, Nathan was apt to believe that the black population's practice of self-segregation would cause more problems to Braden's confidence and identity. He was more concerned with being recognized as his father and the acknowledgement of a white inheritance. Being on the advantaged side of race, it was easier for him to focus on "reverse racism" than the racism that I along with many other people of color had experienced. Besides, he had married a black woman which evaded the possibility of racist attitudes by most societal views. Thus, viewing racism in only overt terms creates people like Nathan a cloak of immunity.

Immunity carries with it a certain power, for being immune means not having to be mindful of that from which one is exempt. The complicity in racism that privilege provides remains nameless and unnoticed. The responsibility that comes with the location

and role of white privilege can be denied (Rains in (Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriquez, and Chennault, 1998, p. 81).

My skin color had always been an important aspect of my being. Skin color had determined my beauty, influenced my social networking, and caused a great deal of strife solitarily and even more so being united with a white man who did not recognize this part of my life. The race conscious attitude I had was not a trait that Nathan had developed. He had only lived within the powerful legacy of a white identity. But on this day, while he may not have experienced the inequalities of the black race, he would witness the distinctions of race.

Name: Smith. Gender: Male. Race: Black. I paused as I was forced to face a truth that I had ignored for so long. Black? My emotions ran wildly throughout my body. Nathan had accompanied me to every doctor's appointment since the day that we found out I was pregnant. He was standing right next to me when I asked the doctor "Is my husband allowed in the delivery room?" No one cared about Nathan and his how his race contributed to Braden's racial identity. The world saw Braden as black simply because I was.

I placed the form back on the table and focused on Braden who was being rolled into the room. Nathan was right. He was beautiful. He was pale with tan undertones, a head full of straight black hair, slanted black eyes, and four dimples. He was beautiful, but his racially ambiguous phenotype caused me to wonder if he was really my child. He looked nothing like me. There was an initial distance between us that extended past my remembrance of giving birth to him. It was Braden's skin that caused this distance. I was so accustomed to using skin color as a marker of racial identification and specifically to recognize racial ties that seeing Braden caused a bit of shock.

The same color line that had separated me from my white classmates in grade school and has caused such turmoil in the beginning stages of my marriage was the line I had drawn between my son and me. I stared at him from across the room before I held him. I wondered if the nurse had given me the wrong baby. Once I held him, I could see that he looked very much like Nathan. However my initial response to him carried a meaningful conclusion to my perceptions and the reality of race. There was no doubt that Braden was my child, and yet a portion of my psyche attempted to erase him from any maternal ties. These thoughts, based on a societal definition of race, become challenged in the face of this sort of opposition. The initial feeling I had as I held this pale “white-looking” baby against my dark brown skin was an illustration of the social construction of race. The indescribable bond that we developed in the previous months was abruptly interrupted by skin color. Seeing the documents that proclaimed his blackness made it even more evident that skin color was a factor. It was my skin color that had determined Braden’s race.

A few moments later, a middle-aged Caucasian nurse entered the room. “I just need to check your pressure,” she informed as she lifted my arm. I was a little reluctant to bother her with my questions (mainly because she seemed unfriendly), but I figured my asking couldn’t do much harm. “Ma’am, will the race of my baby be on his birth certificate?” I inquired. “Umm, I’m certain it will be. Why do you ask?” “The doctor put ‘black’ on this form,” I said as I held up the document with my available hand, “and my husband and I want to make sure the *right* race will be on his birth certificate.” Nathan left his seat and approached my bedside in a way that showed we were a united front. And with that, she logged my blood pressure and walked toward Braden who lay sleeping in his crib. I had no idea why she was approaching him. She slowly

leaned down about three inches from his face then looked up at us. “Looks black to me,” she said. And with that comment, she left. I was completely speechless.

In that moment, the Veil of Color was placed upon him right before our eyes: “Within the Veil was he born, said I, and there within shall he live,—a Negro and a Negro’s son” (DuBois, 1903, p. 137). Moments before I had questioned Braden’s racial inheritance and felt a temporary unrest in his bodily features—physical reminders of the power that had granted me many negative experiences. And now I stood in the presence of a consciousness that loathed the existence of such racial labels.

“Well, I guess I’m nobody,” Nathan mumbled in frustration. The perpetual practices and uses of race had always functioned within the constructs of an invisible whiteness. While the physical attributes of whiteness continues to be observed and visualized, whiteness as a power that continues to oppress people of color remains invisible (Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriquez, and Chennault, 1998). Nathan’s actions of marrying black and having a biracial child reveals both the visible and invisibility of whiteness. His physical whiteness was seen which entitled to several privileges in society. I could understand how Nathan must have felt. However, in the creation of our child, the whiteness that was once seen was erased socially to preserve the “standard” that had historically been created.

Nathan and I had conversations about the race of our children long before Braden was born, and we were confident in our prenatal expectations of his biracial identity. Before those talks, I had been comfortable with the idea of identifying my children as black. “Nathan, the world is his mirror. If the world is going to call him black, he might as well see himself that way. That way he can be ready for what will come his way.” Even though I was not totally comfortable with my blackness, it never made sense to deny it. I always knew that my race was

something that I could not change. Nevertheless, I was determined to perfect the image of blackness that people perceived. With Braden being biracial, I did not want him to misinterpret the whiteness he inherited. He had a white father, but he would never be seen as a white man. The sooner he realized how people would generally see him, the better. I believed it would prevent future confusion with racial identification.

“Stephanie, how would you feel if he passed as white and never acknowledge you?” Nathan’s question provoked much thought. A scene from *Imitation of Life* slowly covered my mind like fog on a spring morning. I could see Sarah Jane, with her olive skin and dark silky hair, sitting amongst her white classmates and teacher while hiding the secret of being lawfully black. I could see her mother, a caramel-complexion black woman approaching the classroom to give Sarah Jane the lunchbox she had left at home. Then, I could see Sarah Jane sliding down in her seat not wanting to be seen by her mother, not wanting her race to be discovered. And I could hear her screaming “I hate you!” when her secret was uncovered with her mother’s words: “There she is. That’s *my* Sarah Jane right there.” The thought of Braden denying me as his mother was mortifying, and I could be sympathetic to Nathan’s concerns.

Understandably, there are differences between denying black and denying white lineages. Socially, the two races carry contrasting perceptions (white/superiority, black/inferiority). If a biracial person identified as Caucasian rather than acknowledging a black heritage, it could be viewed as an act of shame. However, I believe that the same could occur in a reversed situation. Consider the biracial individual who lives within a black community that views “white” in oppressive terms. If this individual chooses to identify as black and denies his white heritage, then the decision may also have been based on shame from the pressure of the environment. Of course, there is a multitude of ways that a biracial people can racially identify themselves, but it

is generally influenced by their physical characteristics as well as the overall perceptions of the environment. When Tiger Woods described himself as a “Calablasian,” he could have simply been attempting to recognize each aspect of his ancestry (Caucasian, Black, and Asian), but many perceived it as rejecting blackness. While I fully comprehended the perceptions surrounding a white or black classification of a biracial, I could empathize with Nathan’s feelings because we were both parents wishing to be recognized.

Being a teacher of several biracial students had allowed me to see a different perspective of the racial identification of biracial people. In the cases of most of my students, the parents consisted of a white mother and black father. Despite their family make-up and their physical features, their permanent records usually indicated that they were white simply because their mothers’ were. These common practices were influenced by the U.S. Census Bureau which began classifying a child’s race by the race of the mother in 1989 (Census Bureau, 2010). Much of the staff would shake their heads in disapproval, and I must admit that I was one of them. In my mind, these children had two choices—biracial or black. And I was somewhat offended that parents had chosen to ignore their children’s black heritage. But why was I offended? And why did I consider it acceptable for a biracial child to identify himself as only black, but not white? For centuries, the one drop rule provided a systematic way of identifying black people in the United States. Although this method of racial identification is not a lawful practice today, the internalization of its practices forces a racial identity on people who possess certain genealogical and/ phenotypic characteristics (Brunsma &Rochequemore in Herring, Keith, & Horton, 2004). Considering that the school was predominately white and situated in a highly conservative community, classifying these brown-skinned biracial children as white seemed to be an attempt

for them to access power. The privilege of whiteness was likely recognized by the parent and desired for their offspring.

I wondered how the parents made their decisions about their children's race. Was the choice to identify their biracial children as white a silent protest to the one-drop rule? Did these parents believe race to be a maternal inheritance? Were these African American fathers aware that they were dismissed on paper? Did the parents feel that identifying their children as white would grant them more privileges? Did the parents believe black was inferior? Was I envious of their right to choose? To this question, it was very likely. It seemed that a white woman could have a baby of any race, but I had only one choice. The hospital's nurse had proven that. Still, I had to be attentive to the ways that children understood race no matter what the adult perceptions were. More importantly, I had to understand that Braden's experience with race would be different from mine, and he would determine his own personal identity. Braden could *feel* white, black, or biracial and label himself accordingly no matter how he looked.

Within my own personal journey, there had been times that I felt both black and white. And although many of characteristics that caused me to feel white are still a large part of my identity, I do not view them as belonging outside of my black identity. While there are certainly similarities of the "black experience" in the United States, "African American" is a multifaceted identity resulting from the varying experiences in race, place, class, gender and the autonomous responses to such experiences. How one racially identifies or with whom one identifies with ultimately depends on the experiences of the individual. According to Maria P. P. Root (1996), attempting to create a racial identity seldom serves a purpose outside of preserving the misconceptions our country has created around race. Although Root was speaking in reference to her own biracial identity, this essentially seems to be the case for all of us. The struggle for me to

name myself and exhibit a set of perceived correlated behaviors were all connected to society's racial obsessions. As my identity relates to the Duboisian idea of double consciousness, the "two-ness" is what makes me African American—having prominent features of my African heritage, an associated black culture, and learning to successfully navigate through white supremacist ideals of America in spite of them. But while this sense of two-ness is still felt, the warring between them is not as frequent as it once was.

Despite the positive reconstruction of my identity, I was bothered knowing that Braden would likely struggle with concepts of race. How he racially identified would ultimately be his choice, but I was aware of how other's views could affect him. I had teaching memories of a 9 year old biracial girl named Olivia. She had lived with her white mother and her white stepfather ever since she was an infant. She had a similar complexion as Braden, curly hair, and light brown eyes. At recess one day, Olivia was jumping rope with a group of white classmates. "Olivia, do you ever feel odd being the only black kid in the class?" one of the male students asked her. It was clear that the student was simply curious, and his age probably made it easier to ask what would be seen by adults as a controversial question.

"I'm not black! I'm white," Olivia attempted to assure him. "No you're not, Olivia. You're black." The rope stopped turning and Olivia stopped jumping. The little boy looked confused and so did the rest of the students surrounding them. I sat on the bench stunned at the situation unfolding. Two seconds later, Olivia ran away crying burying her head in the bosom of one of the white teachers. I wondered if she would have run to me if I had been the only teacher available, and I wondered what the teacher said to console her. I have no idea what I would have said, especially with me being black and seeing her as anything except white. But more than that, I wondered how much she would be affected by her parents racially identifying Olivia as white.

The thoughts of Sarah Jane, my student Olivia, and Nathan's scenario stuck with me, so watching that nurse disregard Nathan's fatherhood infuriated me. My father, also in the room, was aggravated as well. However, I think his aggravation was for a very different reason. With squinted eyes and a wrinkled forehead, he stood by the window frozen from having too much on his mind and not saying anything about it. I think he was trying to be respectful, but I noticed his demeanor change as I exchanged my concerns with the nurse. He seemed to grow angrier the more we talked about it when she left. Although he never said a word, the look on his face said "what's wrong with being black?" Both Nathan and my father had valid reasons for questioning the motives of our obsession with Braden's racial classification. The nurse along with most of society was willing to assign him to the black race with one glance (whether it was the sight of the brown undertones that peeked from Braden's skin or the sight of my own dark brown pigment). Fueled by white supremacist thinking, this method was a way of securing the social authenticity of whiteness that racial mixing threatened. And so the desire to acquire a portion of this whiteness could be viewed as racial self-hate.

Like many African Americans, my father had accepted the one-drop rule as an essential part of life. Many viewed it as a way of including all oppressed people for the fight for racial equality. Others simply subconsciously adopted it from societal practices never questioning its worth. It's hard to determine where my father's opinions lied, but I knew that his attention was focused on me. I had already married a white man which was perceived by many as an act of racial dilution. Not wanting my son to be labeled as a "black" male further supported this case. Historically, a person of African and Caucasian decent would have only two choices—pass as white or be black. Like me before this point, my father likely did not understand my significance of identifying Braden as biracial. I'm sure he viewed me as being ashamed of being black. I

wished that he could've somehow gained an understanding from just the presence of Nathan in the room, but that didn't seem to be the case. When it came down to Braden's race, Nathan really was invisible. The invisibility of whiteness had allowed Nathan to stand a social normative, a standard by which others like me are judged. The invisibility of his whiteness that empowered him to benefit from white privilege was now the same invisibility that erased him from the racial recognition of his son.

While I could easily adjust to having a son who could pass for white, I do not think Nathan was ready to have a child who could not pass for being biracial. It was the curse of whiteness. The whiteness Nathan was innately born with and the whiteness that we both had absorbed from society's common ideologies were continuously impacting the ways we responded to dynamics of our interracial family. "I think that Braden is the most beautiful baby in the world," Nathan explained, "but it makes me a little sad knowing that I probably won't ever have a blonde-headed child that looks like I did when I was little." Of all the characteristics a child could inherit from his father, Nathan chose to focus on blonde hair. Aside from skin color, blonde hair seemed to represent whiteness in its "purest" form. While the birth of Braden was causing me to reevaluate race and compare the racial politics associated with biracial individuals to my own African American life, Nathan seemed to be having his own momentous "encounter" with race. It would seem that our marriage would have caused some type of recognition of racial privilege, but it was likely that it only elevated his subconscious sense of entitlement. A white man marrying a black woman did not disrupt the seemingly natural order of things. If men were considered to be patriarchal leaders and white was considered superior, our marriage (while our intentions greatly opposed this logic), our particular arrangement made his whiteness and maleness more dominant. It would take the social removal of his racial lineage to realize just

how much race impacted our lives. The empathy that I wanted him to have was only visible when it affected him personally.

While I was not initially concerned with Nathan's feelings, I later wondered how much race was involved with his view. If he was attracted to me, a dark skinned black woman, why did he desire Braden to look the complete opposite of me? If he had married his ex-girlfriend Lauren, an Irish-looking freckle faced girl, would he have shared the same concerns? Would he have been just as upset at his child having red hair and a face full of red freckles or would it have been an acceptable trait associated with Caucasians? According to Nathan, I was "the best looking woman to ever walk the face of the Earth." Did Braden's male gender make black look different? I was aware of the predisposition that was often associated with black males. While blackness carried a negative ethnical connotation in many environments, it seemed even more so with black men. The paralleled gender of white and black men creates a social competitiveness for dominance. Because of the lessened sexual exploitation of black men during slavery (compared to black women), black men were not seen in a total submissive state. Consequently, African American men became a greater threat to white patriarchal power. And maybe it was this perception of black maleness that Nathan did not want present in his home.

Nathan's words illustrated the internalized view Eurocentric standards of beauty. Holding such views while being married to a dark skinned black women poses another question. What did he see in me? The romantic relationship that we cultivated was emotional, but indeed sexual in nature. As I am reminded of his teenage infatuation with Nia Long, an African American actress, his preference of rap and hip-hop music, and his rare encounters with blacks (living in a predominately white town), I am certain that my blackness carried a superficial meaning upon our meeting. The blackness that he grew to love in me was one that likely derived from the

controlling sexual images that spaces like the media had promoted. My black was different. It was the kind of female black that you had sex with. It wasn't the type he wanted to carry his bloodline.

I know a lot of black people that would have been angry if they heard Nathan say that, but I wasn't. Nathan was being honest in him deeming these traits superior, and I was not even considered the implications of his statement at the time. My justification for his comments was that most parents want their children to physically resemble them because a visual genetic connection feeds our egos. And I knew that if Braden lacked the tanned skin and dark hair that he inherited from me, I would proudly parade my little pale-skinned, blonde baby around town. This pride would not simply be because my child naturally belonged to me, but also because it was a popular belief that the best-looking black babies could pass for white. And how could I judge Nathan for desiring a baby who looked more like him. At least he was comfortable in his skin, so much that he wanted it passed to the next generation. And that was the pride in blackness that I wished that I had. I had spent most of my life altering my physical attributes and behaviors so that I may become closer to the standard whiteness represented.

The Eye of the Beholder

I loved Braden when I carried him in womb, and he was *my* child no matter what he looked like. However, race and skin color did matter. Although it was growing as a less important measure of prejudgments, it mattered to me. And it definitely mattered to my friends and the general public. "Do you think he'll be light-skinned? What texture do you think his hair will be—wavy, curly, or straight? Do you think he could have blue or green eyes?" These questions bombarded me, and these words and implications were both destructive to me and the people saying them. Their utterances placed an unnecessary focus on physicality, denounced my

(and many times their own) physical traits, and further maintain the color hierarchies between racism and colorism. With this conception, it became *my* “fault” that Braden wasn’t as pale as he could have been or was developing an irreversible kink in his hair. He had inherited the “curse” from his mother, a very dark-skinned black woman with naturally kinky hair.

These reminders of were not simply found in the black community. Even though the responses did not always bear the sting of overt discrimination, the nature of the events was found in the behaviors of whites. However, their power was found in subtlety. It was a “compliment” that you accepted with gratitude, but later found it eating away at your son. To Braden, it was “You should’ve been a girl with those Shirley Temple curls” or “Look at that perfect skin!” Hearing Braden receive compliments like these was like having my light-skinned cousin Natasha with me. Unlike my childhood experiences with Natasha, these comments heightened my self-esteem, but only for a brief moment. The fact that Braden came from my womb made me feel entitled knowing that I had contributed to his existence and therefore his beauty. And this is how oppression seeps in: While there were other comparisons of beauty to be found in people of curly, a white Shirley Temple is used as the model. And if his skin is perfect, then mine is definitely not.

Thus, this begins the wavering consciousness of my mind. I longed for his racial marker to be more distinct in hue, and for him to show closer visual ties to me. But being biracial meant that the plague of blackness, while it could not be erased, could be reduced by the biological inheritance of his father. Knowing that a pale baby came from my womb was a spectacular thought. I had grown up in the shadows of my light-skinned cousin Natasha, never being called a “pretty little girl.” Having Braden didn’t make me beautiful, but being able to create beauty was close enough to the dream. When people said “he’s so cute,” “he has the best skin,” or “your

baby has some pretty hair,” I could say “thank you” with confidence. And when people asked if Braden was my baby, I would proudly say yes. Then in the same moment, I would experience a slight agitation that someone would suggest that his beauty could not come from me. It was true that Braden looked more like Nathan, but it was not uncommon that a child looked more like the father. And if these people were focusing on skin tone, perhaps they disconnected me from Braden just as I had initially done when I first saw him. Still, I was aware of the popular beliefs that light skin was more beautiful than dark skin. This acknowledgement angered me as I was not only reminded of my blackness, but that I embodied some of the least attractive features in many people’s eyes.

It was evident that the growth I wished to gain in the evolution of my own identity was not complete. It seemed that my interracial marriage and the birth of my biracial child marked the peak of post-racial rhetoric. However, the feelings and behaviors that emerged after the birth of my son revealed the need for a more complex evaluation of race. I married a white man within a racist society and the supporting beliefs of my own black inferiority. Marrying outside of my race neither altered my past, modified my present struggles with race, nor eradicated the racism that existed in my community. In fact, the only benefit that it may have had on my life was that it erupted race-centered emotions I had kept dormant, thoughts whose emerging were essential for my growth as an individual. As a result of the challenges I had with race and my identity, life became a quest to cross the color line, the perceived finish line of racial struggle.

I wasn’t blind to the natural advantage Braden had. It was no secret that light-skinned African Americans appealed to society’s mainstream more so than dark-skinned ones. I had a timeline of images in my head that supported my belief. And I knew that Braden’s skin and hair gave him a natural advantage that I didn’t have, an advantage that I wanted to protect. Maybe I

didn't tell him to play in shade, but I made sure he wore lots of sunblock when he did. And I became so obsessed with his hair that I never cut it. While I could recognize my behaviors concerning Braden's skin were not good, I was unsure if loving Braden's hair could negatively affect him. I wanted him to love his hair and his skin because they belonged to him, and I wanted this love to protect him from adverse views that would challenge this. The behaviors that were exhibited during this time might seem to be characteristics of the Nigrescence Theory's pre-encounter behavior, especially considering my tendency to value qualities that I considered to be more Caucasian-like. It is important to note that the immersion-emersion stage is characterized by two contradictory behaviors. In this stage, people are focused on developing a comprehension of what it means to be black. The total immersion in one's perception of "blackness" is one of the most identifying facets of this phase, but the latter part of this stage is characterized by negotiating between one's contrasting ideals of race. Although I was not completely confident in my beliefs concerning race, contemplating the feelings I had with Braden's hair show that I was growing uncomfortable with the hierarchical system that I once used to measure someone's value.

The myth was that white was equivalent to good. So if Braden was considered good-looking, it was surely because of his white father. But when I really thought about it, Braden's beauty was not simply because of Nathan. He was truly a combination of both of us. I had been so accustomed to seeing blackness in a negative light that I overlooked its contributions to my son's appearance. If I considered Braden's skin to have a perfect bronze glow, it was because of my blackness. Nathan was pale, could barely tan, and could never produce a baby that looked like Braden without me. If I considered Braden to have beautiful hair, it was because of my blackness. Nathan's hair was bone straight, and Braden's hair would never have such springy

coils without my genes. It was possible that my blackness enhanced his whiteness, but this was difficult to envision when Braden was first born.

Within this womanly body was a wounded girl whose afflictions had damaged her core. An infectious disease had taken root leaving my soul slightly detached and aggravated from its irresolute. I was torn. I wanted Braden to be proud of his blackness, but it was a challenge to accomplish when I admired so many qualities I had attributed to whiteness. Even though I had to come to a place where I was aware of the insidious brainwashing, I was still being affected by it daily. I knew that by glorifying aspects like his skin tone or hair texture, I was exalting whiteness because I (and most other people) had attributed these traits to Nathan. But at the same time, I wanted him to be proud of his physical attributes because they were naturally his. As a result of my own battle with race, my mission was to make sure Braden didn't grow up thinking white made him a better black. Additionally, I did not want Braden's childhood to focus on race, but it seemed to be a lost cause. After only being in the world a few hours, people were already labeling him and making his skin color the focus of his existence. I knew I had a war ahead of me, and I knew that the battle within me was contributing to it.

All of us have internalized images that represent a specific racial category. Within an American context, we begin with the Caucasian which in itself is a category that has been blurred over the years. However, the consensus still rests on "white" skin. There are other categories like Hispanic or Asian, all of which come with physical associations that range from skin tone and hair texture to eye structure and height. As a young child, my son muddled these perceptions as he displayed many of his heritages. His skin was "Hispanic," his eyes were "Asian," and his hair was a unique conglomerate of African, Indian, and European coils. And there he sat with a dark skinned mother whose features spoke nothing less than African.

“Daddy, what is Braden?” I heard this whisper from a four-year old as he stared at Braden from across the table. Ashton was my friend’s son, and Braden and I were eating dinner with her family when he asked his father this question. “Why don’t you ask Braden’s mom? She’s sitting right there.” I was nervous for many reasons. For one, it made me realize that Braden would have to think about race earlier than I once thought. Secondly, I wanted to make sure I effectively communicated with the toddler. While the little boy gathered the courage to direct his question toward me, I quietly but frantically searched for the right words to say. I wondered if Ashton’s father was as uncomfortable I was and how he would have answered the question if I had not been present. I had only but a moment to think.

“Miss Stephanie, what is Braden?” Ashton asked timidly. I felt strongly that he was asking about his race, but I didn’t want to display my rash assumption. “What do you mean, sweetie?” “I mean, what is he? I’m Caucasian.” It was apparent that Ashton’s family had spoken with him about race. He used words like Caucasian and African American, but he also interchanged them with white and black. I knew that I could discuss race with him openly, but I didn’t know how to give an age appropriate answer. As a result, I found myself stumbling over my words.

“Well, I am African American or black, and Braden’s father is white or Caucasian.” I didn’t know what to say. I grabbed the digital camera from my purse and searched through the pictures. Luckily, I found a picture of Nathan and me (I was kissing him on his cheek). “See. This is me, and this is Braden’s dad.” Ashton made a weird face at the sight of the picture. “Those are Braden’s parents, Ashton. Isn’t that cool?” his father said attempting to show his acceptance of the situation, but the look on Ashton’s face let everyone know that he thought it was odd. Although it was possible that Ashton had seen biracial children before, he was

accustomed to seeing monoracial families. In children's books, television shows, and in our small Southern community, blacks and whites were generally separated. "Braden is a mix of both of us. He's black and white." I said. I looked at Braden. "One, two, three, four..." There Braden sat counting the peas on his plate. He had no idea that the conversation we were having was surrounding his race, and I wondered how he would have felt had he understood it.

I considered this situation a mild event, one that kept the reality of our racial differences present and prepared me for situations that I only thought would arise at a later age. However, I am reminded that "our racial vocabulary provides border markers that are rigid reflections upon our history of race relations and racial classification" (Lee in Root, 1996, xxiii). Nathan and I always said that we wanted to raise Braden to acknowledge both of our races. He would be biracial. But what did that really mean (besides "of two races")? Black had always carried a meaning for me and so followed the idea of whiteness. "What is Braden?" To my former third grade students, he was a "mutt" and a "mixed breed" just like some stray dogs found on the streets. Although I am positive that neither of the students realized they were using derogatory terms, again it signified a perceived abnormality.

"The ambiguous external racial coding or variegated phenotypical appearances of the racially mixed significantly contribute to their ambiguous displaced social position" (Bradshaw in Root, 1996, p.202). These critical moments by which we find others' perceptions of who we are contribute to how we see ourselves. Braden's identity—whether he would reflect nigrescence and "become black" or follow another regime of racial formation would depend on his experiences in life as well as his personal strivings. Braden was somewhat oblivious when it came to society's definitions of race. In his words, "Mommy and me are brown, and Daddy is pink and white." Still, his identity would become complex, interactive and fluid much like mine.

As people of color, we continue to focus and refocus on our experiences viewing them through our Dubosian veil, the lens of the superordinate racial group as well as through life as a racial minority.

The Other Side of Colorism

Skin color never seems to be the primary concerns of any toddler, but even though they may not ask about race or skin color doesn't mean that they don't think about it. Their perceptions of race are not exempt from the body of knowledge they absorb in their environments. Children did not wake up one day aware of race. Throughout their childhood, they would slowly absorb others' meanings of race as they constructed their own. Take any given play day with family members and/or friends. The children laugh and run about playing random games as the adults monitor while holding conversations with each other. "Braden is going to be such a heartbreaker!" a person comments, and the conversation is then turned to him, specifically the attributes that make him such a "heartbreaker" (skin color, hair texture, etc.). All the children are watched, but he receives the longest stares. That is, unless there are other children around who can compete with his perceived beauty (i.e. they have straighter hair or lighter skin). Among family he is treated similarly to his cousins, but everyone—men and women alike—will eventually find a reason to touch his hair. And the children, while they seem to be focused on play, mentally respond to their observances.

By the time my niece was three, she had made it known that she wanted hair like her white female classmates. I wondered how my niece could feel this way knowing her mother (my sister) had worked hard to raise her with confidence in her looks. My sister was what many would call an "Afrocentric woman," but she would just say that she was confident. She was dark-skinned and wore her hair naturally kinky long before it was ever moderately stylish to do

so. She treated her hair with the love I once had for my weaves. And she could be seen on any day wearing an afro, twists, or braids, but never a weave or hair extensions. Although my niece's newly developed racial complex was likely correlated with being the only black person in her pre-K class and the observation of society's straight hair obsessions (found in black and white communities through social interactions and methods of beauty consumerism), I knew that I had contributed to her grief. Remembering my niece's obsession with my weaves made me embarrassed. "Auntie, can I comb your hair?" she'd always say. And once my weaves were removed, she declined every offer I gave her.

Although there were years of wisdom that existed between her childhood and my adulthood, we had been in similar places of our life. We both carried elements of self-hate concerning the way we looked. The transformations that I had made were a result of an extensive amount of struggle, and I wondered if there were ways I could transfer my newfound knowledge to people like my niece and Braden. Knowing that I had heard an abundance of messages that countered the perceptions of my own physical worth, it seemed that I could make a positive difference. But my voice seemed to be drowning in a sea filled with racial mis-education.

One year later, my niece sings a different tune. "Auntie, I want to be light brown like Braden." She has realized that she could never be black or has learned that openly desiring to be white is not acceptable behavior within the black community. Still, she settles on a more common stance in the context of colorism. Although she has never made mention of Braden's hair, she strokes it like a pet puppy when he walks by her and likely has formed an association with *his* hair and light skin.. I could understand how she formed her opinions. Although I am not around her much, she is likely more intuitive to the ways that Braden and other children who look similar to him are treated. I would like to think that my family does not show favoritism to

any of the children in our family, but I am not oblivious to the fact the fact that we could be contributing to her negative perceptions of herself. And all the while, Braden is learning the value of his physical characteristics

I found myself thinking back to a time when I was in the shadows of my light skinned cousin Natasha. This time, it was my own son that caused the shadow. Even though Braden could not help how people treated him, I felt that he had developed a healthy self-esteem and joyful spirit from the way people treated him. His self-esteem was a trait I admired, but I feared that he would one day see himself as better once he noticed why they were treating him this way.

But there was a flip side to being in this place on the color spectrum. While America would eventually tell him that he was not white, African Americans would remind him that he *was* indeed black. “You need to expose your child to more black people.” Tammy randomly stated one day. Tammy was a black woman in her late twenties. She was born and raised in the Southern town of Marigold where we were both currently working. We had become friends over the years, but I knew that our friendship would likely not exist if it weren’t for the survival skills we felt we had to maintain at our job. At this particular time, there were only three black teachers at the school where we taught. Additionally, the racial divide was so strong that even I, a person who initially sought the company of white people, felt the need to befriend other blacks. In retrospect, working at this predominantly white school provided enough daily reminders that I was different that my entire teaching experience could be considered one big “encounter.” Because Tammy had lived her entire life in this type of environment, she was extremely untrusting of white people.

Although I could partially understand her suspicion of white people (considering the abundant amount of racism I had experience in this town), her blind statement showed that she

had made an assumption that Braden was not around *enough* black people. “Braden has a black mother. What do you mean?” I inquired. She began to discuss her observations of how Braden flocked to Edith (his white caregiver) and how he held an adverse attitude toward her. Her explanation had revealed numerous beliefs. First, it indicated that she saw Braden as being black. It also showed that she perceived his actions as racially motivated. Specifically, his love for Edith meant that he loved whiteness and the nonchalant ways he acted around Tammy meant that he hated black people. Or perhaps she was reminded of the black children we teach every day whose cultural identities get lost within the assimilations of our predominately white school. And without having a strong black identity, Braden would be vulnerable to internal identity crises (crises that I felt were inevitable). But ultimately, it revealed a power in skin color. Braden, a biracial child with black and white parents, was still held accountable in adhering to the color line on the basis of his skin color. Since he is not white, the acceptable behaviors of a white person (i.e. socializing within a predominately white environment) did not apply to him.

It was true that Braden loved Edith and was always excited to see her, and it took a miracle for him to even say hello to Tammy. Still, I was offended that she would judge my son so harshly when she had limited contact with him. She had seen Braden around his caregiver and her family, but she had never seen him around other blacks. “I’ve heard that babies have a sixth sense for judging people’s character so maybe it’s you,” I suggested. “I don’t think it’s just me,” she insisted. After a short, but heated conversation, we agreed to just disagree.

I grew madder every time I thought of the comment Tammy had made, and I boiled over it for weeks. Although I felt my response to her was mild, I was not proud of the attitude it had. I was insulted and had let my anger cloud my judgment. I wanted so badly to discuss the matter with her calmly in hopes that we could understand each other. I really wanted her to know that

prejudgments like hers could negatively affect my son's just as much as having limited exposure to black people. If Tammy felt that my son needed more black exposure, was she insinuating that my child was "acting white?" And if "acting" a certain race was determined by one's social circle, was she saying that it was best that he "act black?" In either case, I felt that the superficial ideal of racial identity was an unnecessary pressure, and yielding to those ideals would only result in confusion. Unfortunately, I never found the courage to reintroduce the topic. With Tammy being such a closed-minded person (especially concerning race), I was a bit pessimistic about the way my words would have been perceived.

The questions surrounding Braden's racial identity were essentially the same as my own:

Should I play down race (low race salience); should I deny part of my heritage and stress only the black or white side; should I ...embrace an openly bicultural perspective... [or] seek psychological comfort in a multicultural frame of reference? (Cross & Fhagen-Smith in Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2001, p. 253).

I was aware that Braden had more daily encounters with white people. He had a white (German) caregiver and a white father. On most days, the only intimate contact he had with a black person was with me. On Sundays, we attended a predominately white church which meant that he was around mainly white children in the church nursery. The school where I worked was predominately white, and Braden came there daily before Edith picked him up. Even though he did not interact with them much, he basically saw only white people at my school. And even though my social circles were more racially diverse, he was still mainly around little white children (none of my black friends had children). Nevertheless, I was confident that Braden did not base his social encounters on race. He seemed very comfortable around my family members, and he was never reluctant to socialize with them or other black people he saw in public settings.

The data seemed to be right in front of me. During my childhood, I began to feel more inferior in the presence of white people. My niece was following my footsteps just at a much earlier age. While socializing within an all-black or a predominately black setting is not the solution to the issue, it becomes a notable observance that the fight against the myth of black inferiority becomes a more difficult battle to conquer.

Although Braden was friendly to most people no matter the race, that did not reveal the ways that Braden saw himself in comparison to others. It would be a two year old Braden that enlightened me to his thoughts. “Mommy, am I brown or white?” Braden inquired. I was stunned at his question, especially knowing that Braden had a stable comprehension of his colors. By simple observation, it seemed that Braden would never see himself as white. But it was now obvious that he (in his two years of living) realized that there were complexities to color, specifically skin color. It also showed me that he already felt a need to pick a racial side. Although Braden was exposed to different races of people, most of the families he knew were monoracial. And even among his multiracial friends, the skin tone differences among their family were not as great as ours. His friends of Japanese and Caucasian heritages still had two pale-skinned parents, and the black-white biracial children he knew lived with black people. The children’s literature and television programs that Braden was exposed to were considered multicultural, but they generally followed a monoracial pattern when it came to the familial structure. Even if he knew the colors of our skin, the racial conglomerate that our family represented could be puzzling when trying to classify singly.

Rather than immediately answering Braden’s question, I asked him what he thought about his race. “What do you think? Are you brown or white?” I was positive that he would say that he was brown. He had always said that he was brown, but this day was different. “I’m

white.” It was difficult to understand his reasons for this comment. After a bit of probing, Braden revealed that the babysitter’s husband Roger called him white, a claim that was proven to be true. I found great interest in understanding Roger’s reasons for calling Braden white, but I knew that I would never get an honest answer from him. I only had previous examples to use. It was the time he said, “Braden is smart for his age. He must’ve gotten that from *our* side” or when he said a local store owner needed to go back to his country and “take the red dot with him.” These incidents showed me that Roger was racist even though he insisted that he was joking when I confronted him. His distinction between the store owner (an assumed illegal immigrant) and his wife (a German citizen) was skin color. And it was the same racial associations that supported his rationale for Braden’s intelligence. Although Braden had a very close relationship with Roger, it seemed clear that Roger disassociated Braden’s personality traits with a black identity.

I still wondered how much of Braden’s daily interactions with white people played into his answer. I wondered if Tammy had been right—Braden needed to be around more people of color. Although my experiences in black circles were not absence of white supremacist ideology, it definitely uplifted me more than white people did. In the same thought, I think about the social circles and professional organizations that operate on the basis of race. Many of my colleagues purposely unite with other black educators on a regular basis wishing to fellowship with others who understand their racial experience. Many collegiate organizations, such as the black alumni group of my university, operate in a similar segregationist manner. When I think about our society—how white supremacy continues to be dominant in our ideological practices—I am convinced that these spaces are necessary even if they are for only companionship. However, I am not positive that they provide a space for conversations that continuously move across the

color line. As an African American, I had sometimes felt uncomfortable being racially qualified to attend certain events that my husband or my white friends could not.

I wish for Braden to be confident in his skin which would sometimes involve a closer proximity to people who looked similar to him. And while I am inclined to adhere to Tammy's suggestions of exposing Braden to more black people, I am very reluctant to provide a predominately "black" social experience. I do not wish to pigeonhole him into believing that blackness is based upon the qualities of other blacks of whom he is exposed. In spite of his social label of blackness, being a part of a multiracial family naturally exposed him to different races. Both Nathan and I were close to our families, and they all wanted to be a part of Braden's life. And the love that each of them shared for Braden is what eventually made our family's unite (developing friendships and even traveling together). More than anything I wanted Braden to understand that bigotry lived on both sides of the color line, but love also resided there. It was my hope that he learned to recognize and stray from the white supremacist thinking that I could not seem to shake.

I cannot say I stopped thinking about Braden's ability to develop a positive association with blackness. Similarly, I cannot say that I ever stopped holding negative perceptions about people within my own race. The two opposing psyches had been a part of my life for decades, and awareness did not make unwanted feelings disappear. It just made me more attentive to them and increased my capabilities of redirecting them toward a healthier alternative.

Racial Relapse

Whether or not Braden had begun to associate negative stereotypes to African Americans was unknown. Nevertheless, I was pleased that it did not affect his desire to befriend them. It also proved Tammy's assumptions wrong. But really both of us were wrong. When Mrs. Harper

had asked me who my future children would play with (insinuating biracial children would experience social difficulties), I had responded “with nice people.” Unfortunately, I did not completely practice what I preached. Or maybe I did, but in a white supremacy sort of way. Nice people quite possibly had been internalized to equate to a select view of people. And although they had come to include people of all races, there were always issues of class that had to be considered as an additional oppression.

Between understanding my own identity, being married to a white man, and raising a biracial son, race was more a part of my psyche than I ever wanted it to be. The relationship I now had with whiteness brought the racial comparison to an uncomfortable position. Is black inferiority a myth? Does my relationship with Nathan erase part of my black identity? What is a black identity anyway? Is it possible to love whiteness and blackness? How can I raise my son to embrace both in a society that esteems one over the other? Can I ever escape my feelings of black inferiority? My intentions for Braden were always noble—I wanted him to love people and not allow the prejudices to affect his view of them. I knew that it would be virtually impossible for him to achieve such a goal. After all, I could not rid myself of these behaviors, and I am fully aware of the white supremacist ideals that power them.

At a local playground one afternoon, Braden played alone while I sat on a nearby bench watching. Moments later, a black family approached the playground. Three girls and one little boy (ages 5-7) ran toward the slide. The children were accompanied by three women that appeared to be in their late 20s. The women were dark-skinned and so were their children. They wore a mixture of athletic wear, jeans, t-shirts, and flip-flops. One wore a scarf around her head, and the others wore a “quick weave” style, cheaper weave procedure that is usually associated with black women of a lower socioeconomic status. At a glance, I prejudged all of them. In my

mind, they were a group of single, black mothers who probably lived in government housing. In the next second, I noticed my prejudice and sought to see them just as they were—a group of women with children. My emotions were mixed. On one hand, I was apprehensive about Braden playing with the children. My judgment of the women had led me to believe that the children may have been a product of a bad environment. On the other hand, I was glad that he was having a chance to play with some black children.

When the children saw Braden, they stared at him. I left my bench so that I could get a better view of the situation. “Hey!” Braden yelled. The children slowly waved and continued to stare. I wondered why they were staring at Braden. The children didn’t look mean, just curious. Maybe the contrast of our skins had brought a noticeable attention. I have had many black children ask “Is that your child?” or even “His daddy must be white?” After a few moments, they all began to play. Up and down the slide, across the monkey bars, back and forth on the swings, each of them went about laughing and playing. One of the little girls tagged the little boy, and he began to chase her. “I’m gonna get you, nigga!” he yelled. Nigger was a controversial term which had multiple meanings depending on the speaker. Some African Americans feel that their use of “nigga” defies the negative history of the word and evokes empowerment among blacks. In this view, “nigga” is synonymous to “brother,” “friend,” or “companion.” Although the word was not a part of my daily language, it had a place in some of the songs I listened to and within conversations I had with select family members and friends. I held a small bit of understanding for the support of the term, but I held to my maternal upbringings which associated the word with racism. I had never been comfortable using the word as I understood it differently. “To be a nigger is to have no agency, no dignity, no individuality, and no moral worth; it is to be worthy

of nothing but contempt” (Delgado & Stefranic, 2000, p. 443). And in the American imagination, black people embodied the term.

I stood there frozen not knowing what to say. I wanted to correct the boy and talk to him about the bad word that he had said, but I remembered that I wasn't his mother. None of the children seemed alarmed at his words as they continued to play with him calling them niggers which only vindicated my initial thoughts of the family. After the boy caught a glimpse of my facial expression which clearly showed disapproval, he stopped using the word. And I was just grateful that Braden had not heard him say it because surely he would have repeated it.

Part of me wanted to remove Braden from the environment, but I decided to relax and let him play. I kept a close eye on him from the bench, and my ears were open listening for any other derogatory statements. Everything went smoothly. It didn't take long for the girls to flock to Braden. They were playing in his hair, picking him up carrying him around like a baby, and calling him by name. They pushed him on the swings and down the slide, and he loved every bit of it. After about an hour of play, I told Braden it was time to go home. Immediately, the eldest girl approached me. “Where do you live? My mom can bring him home or we can come to your house?” I was amazed at how well they had accepted him. “Don't you want Braden to come to our house?” the girl said to the little boy. The boy said nothing. He simply walked away toward the sliding board looking upset. Braden had been accepted so well by the girls, but not the little boy. In this particular situation, it is likely that Braden's appearance attracted the girls to him. His features were ones that were often portrayed with femininity and beauty, and since Braden was a boy he did not pose a threat to them. However, he cast a shadow on the black boy or was often left in solitude while Braden was doted over.

Although children's play was the focus of the interaction, my responses to their interactions revealed that I had not made the progress that I felt that I had. Although I recognized my feelings of racial inferiority, identified many of its sources, and had developed a better self-esteem, the battle between me and white supremacy did not decrease upon my initial racial epiphany. Instead of applying my knowledge of racial injustices, I relapsed into the perceptions of black subordination. And if these racial struggles continued to be present in my life, it would mean that my identity would be stuck in an immersion-emersion stage of development never reaching the last stage of internalization-commitment.

The truth was that the hostility that I once had toward whites (after I realized the correlation between whiteness and the myth of black inferiority) had since subsided, and I held positive perceptions of blackness. This possibly transitioned me into the internalization stage which is characterized by more balanced attitudes towards whites and blacks. However, my experiences of teetering between racial perceptions likely meant that this racial nirvana would never be achieved. My identity did not develop in a linear fashion, and the beliefs I held about race could always be amended. My life was continuously being modified by experience.

Similarities in racial experience can provide the parent with insight which can positively impact a child, but it does not eliminate the racial bigotry that continues to empower the systematic workings of our society. The experiences my parents had as African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement encouraged them to instill the importance of educational freedom in me, and the treatment my mother received because of her dark-skin caused her to teach me that skin could be beautiful no matter the complexion. While both of these teachings heightened my self-esteem, my parents were still guilty of perpetuating the negative perceptions, mis-education, and stereotypes that society promoted about African Americans. It was in my

home that I learned that my hair was less attractive in its natural state and that “black folks” were the center of societal problems. America had initiated these ideologies of white supremacy, and much of the black community had cosigned it. Having black parents did not ensure that a black child would have the best figures for which he could model his life. Black people were just as guilty of passing the white supremacist ideologies to their children just as whites; their experience of racial inequality just provided them with a second sight of race. It was possible that both Nathan and I could have a positive impact on the development of Braden’s racial identity. But that would involve a transformation on both of our parts. Nathan had not begun to understand race from the perspective of a racial minority, and he did not completely acknowledge his privilege as a white man. I, on the other hand, was beginning my journey of understanding race and committing myself to critically examining the areas of my life that were damaging to my self-esteem, intellect, and others around me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

REFLECTIONS OF A TWO-WAY MIRROR

The Myth of a Post-Racial America

America's founding document, the Declaration of Independence, claims that "all men are created equal." This phrase has been referenced numerous times by racial, gender, and LGBT communities. While this phrase evokes the necessity of equality among all humans, the reality is that discrimination and oppression describes the history of the United States more than equality. Within the context of race, the equality of man envisioned by our country's Declaration of Independence has been difficult to completely visualize. A few images might be: Blacks carrying freedom papers, a multicultural array of children on a public school playground, an increased use of people of color in forms of media, interracial families and multiracial children, and minority leadership in our communities. All provide the appearance of a racial justice, but these events only provide a fictional imagery of our country's racial impartiality. Racial equality (or any equality) cannot be measured solely by a visual spectrum. People of color continuously experience discrimination in overt and covert ways. Unfortunately, many Americans—both black and white—are blind to such oppressions by the sight of multiracial interactions or a few battles that have been won in the war against white supremacy.

It was this form of blindness that began the research of my life and my feelings of black inferiority. Throughout the examinations of my life experiences, I realized that the inferiority complex that resided in me was a reflection of the ideologies that existed in all of my environments. My hometown of Clyde, the system of public education, Christianity and the church, and my home (led by radical activists of the Civil Rights Movement) played significant roles in the formation of my identity. Although each of these settings spoke to specific parts of

my identity, all of them were tainted with the ideologies of white supremacy. In the following sections, the connections between each of these settings are revealed showing how the myth of a post-racial America is perpetuated.

The Dream and the Hope

African Americans of my generation often compare our racial experiences to the “collective memories” of racism we obtained from our parents. For me, this memory is situated prior to the 1960s America when the legality of racial oppression was blatant and racial barriers were unmistakably marked with signs reading “Whites Only,” “Colored Entrance,” or even “No Niggers Allowed.” These circumstances resulted in the activism of African Americans generating a series of marches and protests. The goal was to enact change from a position of weakness (i.e. creating conflict by disregarding laws of racial injustice and responding nonviolently when whites were brutally aggressive). Although my memory contains the attacks of police dogs, the use of high pressured fire hoses, horrific lynching of blacks, the Ku Klux Klan, and mobs of angry white citizens who boldly objected desegregation, the reality of those events are somehow overshadowed by segments of “the dream” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. shared with the world:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood... that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character... [that] one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers...that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be

made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together (King in Sundquist, 2009, p.15).

In multiple ways, King's dream "articulated a narrative in which character rather than race, hope rather than despair, and vision rather than pathology would guide us into a post-racial society" (Coates in Cassano & Buono, 2010, p. 83). Embedded within King's dream was also the theological message to find comfort in God's Word in our trying times. Quoting Isaiah 40:4-5 in the climax of his speech and ending it with the Negro spiritual "Free at Last" had two significant implications. This particular scripture, which was originally written to comfort the weary hearts of Jews who had been previously held in captivity, is used to symbolically compare their sufferings to those of the black race. In that, African Americans not only find commonality, but are also encouraged understanding the Jew's deliverance. Secondly, King reminds the American people that we can only proclaim our nation a "sweet land of liberty" or shout "Free at last" when white supremacy is destroyed. The King description of a post-racial America has been mistakenly equated with current civil rights legislation, as opposed to a futuristic vision of what is in our hearts.

My psychological disequilibrium is found within this idea of a current post-racial society. I wanted to believe the myth that we live in a post-racial society. The result of this belief has been the lapse in the understanding of my own identity and the formulation of the conflicting beliefs regarding race. It would take nearly a decade of experiences of racial discrimination for me to finally acknowledge my emotional turmoil and another to my own feelings of black inferiority. Not only would I have the realization of racist America as well as the multiple aspects mis-education toward the races, but I would have to equate my unconscious (and sometimes deliberate) blindness, deafness, and silence to racism as participation in white

supremacist ideology. Because I wanted to believe in a post-racial society, I chose to ignore much of the racism that was presented in my life.

The awareness of my involvement in perpetuating white supremacy has been crucial to the development of a healthy self-esteem and overall identity. This type of acknowledgment is also imperative to the advancement of people of color as well the responsiveness of those who remain in racially privileged positions. It is of great importance that racial bigotry be transformed from the inside out. From the micro level of my personal experiences with race (e.g. colorism within the black community, the woes of sustaining an interracial marriage and raising an emotionally healthy biracial child) to the macro level of society (e.g. economic and educational disparities among blacks and whites), one can infer that race greatly matters in the United States of America. My acknowledgement of the issue and commitment to rectifying it came like rushing tides. However, the enthusiasm that drove the critical contemplations of my past and my pondering of my current situation was interrupted in the height of its advancements with the events surrounding an upcoming 2008 election. With the various ages, genders, and hues, of the candidates, the race to the White House illustrated an era where race, class, and gender were not markers for judgment. Of course, elements of racism and sexism could be found in conversations, news articles, and various forms of the media during this political race. Nonetheless, I was ignorantly convinced that those forms of intolerance represented a small numbers of citizens' sentiments.

It is difficult to provide an explanation to how quickly I became engulfed by the post-racial rhetoric which surrounded this particular time in my life. It could have been that my beliefs had not completely restored from the previous whitewashing. Quite possibly, I may have been so focused on the event, considering that a black man (Barack Obama) could be president,

that I overlooked the reality that America was a nation filled with racism. My infatuation with the idea of a black man being president initially held my support of President Obama in contempt. I recognized how much a commonality of race had impacted my support, and it frightened me. Although I knew that my actions differed from racism (i.e. they did not have the power to oppress other racial groups), I felt that basing my acceptance on race was an injustice to my own growth. If I didn't want others to use skin color as a marker of character, I would have to hold myself to the same principles. But it was difficult to ignore the symbolism that a black president carried. As an educator of elementary students, I delighted at the possibility of the psychological benefits that having a nonwhite political leader could bring. I was aware of how political images of whiteness had trickled down impacting my view of race and ultimately supporting an esteemed view of whites. Understanding that this form of whiteness carried social message of power, I desperately wanted change.

Apparently, I was not the only American desiring change as *change* along with *hope* were slogans during Obama's 2008 campaign. For what were his supporters hoping? And what exactly was it they wanted to change? For many optimistic citizens like me, a black president represented the essence of King's dream. Holding these post-racial beliefs suggests that our citizens have moved beyond race, and deep down I knew that this was not the case. If this were so, the idea of having a president of African descent would not create a global discussion, and the multiracial roots of his ethnicity would not be covered with an African American label. His presence would not conjure emotions ranging from joy to hate. Nevertheless, I remained hopeful. Certainly, hope has brought millions of people the courage they needed to face difficult trials in their lives. And this form of hope caused many to imagine freedom or educational equality

before they actively pursued it. However, the hope that I had was a desperate and dangerous attempt to repair the uncomfortable feeling I had concerning race.

I imagine that there were African Americans who quickly celebrated the 1954 Supreme Court decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education* which ruled segregated school as unconstitutional not realizing that it would be nearly twenty years before all states and districts adhered to the policies. And today although many schools are racially integrated, the “education debt” (i.e. achievement gap) continues to negatively impact African Americans due to the short-term solutions geared to raise their educational achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2006), a likely connection to white supremacist and/or post-racial thinking. If white supremacy rests on the idea that blacks, then those who work within the psychological realms of white supremacy are reluctant to implement an effective plan to ensure the academic success of African Americans. Similarly, a post-racial belief causes one to become satisfied with the current educational discrepancies between whites and blacks. The two ideals—white supremacy and post-racialism—are closely related concepts. For one to support the idea of a post-racial America, one must believe that racial differences no longer negatively impact our citizens. And in order to accept this notion, one must be blind to the racial hierarchies rooted in the power infrastructures of our society. Whether an individual is unaware of his own racial privilege or oblivious to the racial injustices he receives, such thoughts are a result of a subconscious acceptance of white superiority.

In many ways, I have “benefited” from my interracial educational experiences, but not in the ways that the hopefuls of the past might have imagined. These experiences have given me insight on how the social and academic world operates on both sides of the color line. Additionally, it allowed me more intimate relationships with other races. And although the

degrees of intimacy have heavily depended upon racial commonality, it continuously reminds me that racial equality remains a struggle in our society.

My adolescence was groomed in a very race-conscious environment through the racial climate of my Southern town as well as the attitudes of my parents. Despite this form of upbringing, the construction of my values and beliefs were entrapped in the dreamlike pursuit of a racial utopia. Media's images of a post racial society allowed me to believe this world existed, just not in Clyde. Like a slave traveling North, I was determined to find "freedom." Although my parent's ideals of race differed significantly from mine, each avenue ultimately leads to the same destination. Whether one experiences the world with a racial lens or turns a blind eye to it, the racism that exists in society eventually influences one's experience. This hope that I had for racial tolerance, the desire to be seen in a way that excluded my skin color, was heavily impacted by my faith in God. Within the world of Christianity, we are encouraged to have faith—faith in God and His word, faith that the unimaginable could transpire.

The scriptures remind Christians of this: "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2:26). But despite the prompt to allow our faith to guide our actions, we view faith as a solitary feature. Throughout my adolescent years, I was faithful that negative racial attitudes would improve and that the color line would soon disappear. When I compare my experience with the memory of political injustices and the brutality that accompanied racial discrimination in the 1960s, I cannot help but feel extremely fortunate and blessed. However, the gratitude of one's heart should never elicit a blind eye to experiences of one's unfortunate circumstances. The lack of this principle was at the center of my behaviors during the development of a racial identity which delayed the emergence of a positive racial self-image. I responded to racism by ignoring it. These proved to be failed attempts because racism

can never truly be ignored. The harmful words, social segregation, and other adherences to the color line were all affirming my inferiority. And my failure to critique and decision not to contest these allegations led to the psychological demise of previous racial identities.

Racism is an injustice that has damaged the notion of our democratic society and resulted in many societal issues. Because race is an extremely controversial topic, many remain silent about racial issues or only discuss their beliefs among other likeminded individuals. Discussing race and racial discrimination is an opportunity to learn from others by understanding the world from others' perspectives, and it is the beginning of the change needed to eradicate white supremacist ideologies. Many experiences, such as my interracial marriage or the ascendance of an African American president, can give the illusion of such changes, but neither suggests a transformation in race relations. Women have been marrying men for centuries yet they still operate within a societal system of sexism and are subject to gender roles in their own homes. Racism works in a similar fashion in that (depending on the degree) individuals can simultaneously interact with each other while holding biased racial perceptions. Still, the discussions that emerge from these interracial interactions can foster growth or produce an eruption of racial resentment across the color line. What results from these experiences is ultimately based on our individual ability to make careful observations and practice critical discernment in our daily interactions concerning race.

The Change

Although it seemed evident that my internalized view of inferiority derived from my earlier experiences, through the analysis of my story I found that my resilience was also fostered through the same cultural socializations. Rather than simply viewing my life through the lens of inferiority, I began to read between the lies and myths of a superior race and understand that my

own ignorance was continuing to bury my self-dignity. My life is lived within the context of a white supremacist society. It is fueled by racial oppression, gender objectification, class oppression among other forms of prejudices. In spite of the double bind presented in the dissensions of a racist and sexist society, I see my black womanhood as a tradition of strength. I have had growing relationships between strong, intelligent, courageous black women who have helped me define and redefine who I am in this skin. They are people like my mother who encouraged me to be educated and independent of a man, foremothers like Sojourner Truth who taught me that a woman of any color deserves an equal place next to man, and Maya Angelou (1978) who inspired me to “rise” above the “bitter, twisted lies” of American “history.”

Though much of my storied experience does not reflect an attitude of pride, the reflective examination of it allowed me to see emotional pitfalls, an evolution of identities, and the emergence of a more psychologically healthy African American woman. From these investigations, I found that it is possible to find a peaceful existence within the multiple identities of gender, sexuality, race, and class. However, a necessity in achieving this objective is to understand the various forms of oppression and avoid the internalization of its damaging persona. Additionally, we must also remember to see the whole picture of *the problem* rather than fragments of an issue. W.E.B. DuBois (1903) is famously quoted as saying “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (p. 9). Thenceforth, millions of people of color have stared at discrimination only viewing it in terms of race. Practices like the lawful Jim Crow allowed us to see oppression through the lens of color, and unfortunately only through a “double” lens. While black citizens of America were herded into the back doors of restaurants, seated at the backseats of buses, and refused adequate housing and educational opportunities, there were other oppressions at work. In actuality, anyone who exhibited characteristics that

contrasted the societal power of white, heterosexual, Christian maleness would feel some form of marginalization.

People of color do not need to stand on one side while the homosexuals, women, and poor attempt to position themselves in an appropriate place. Because of the interrelated disciplines of our identities, the act would be virtually impossible. However, the attempts to categorize these subjects reduce the power that advocates of social equality need to implement change. Thus, the category of race can never be fully dissociated from interrelated categories of gender and sexuality. Therefore, I see myself as an active agent, a stimulus and a variable in this process of life. I am an African American female thoroughly raised in the Bible Belt South who is trying to find place in her personal life and in the world at large. I am a daughter, sister, wife, mother and friend to people who continue to influence my life. And I am an educator, a teacher who has been committed to being a positive force for school transformation which involves the acknowledgement of a racially biased contextual backdrop in our educational system.

Additionally, it involves a commitment to educational equality and continuous reflection, not just new curriculums and teaching practices. All of these attributes affect the outcomes of the other; however, I must be a mere pawn within these experiences. To move forward and be an advocate for social change, I must continue to emphasize and build upon the critical knowledge that has been bestowed upon me.

Only by critically reflecting on their own roles in the schooling process, theorizing about what could be, and working to promote specific changes consistent with a broad vision of a just society, can teachers expand and realize their capacity to challenge the status quo in

ways that are transformative rather than merely reformist (Carlson in Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2008, p. 260).

My proof is found within this: In my pursuit to find meaning of myself, I am lead to the world. And on my mission to the issues of that reside in my home and between the walls of my classroom, I am lead back out into the world. I find that the understanding of it all is to find meaning within the individual and social, the native and foreign, the historical, current and forthcoming. Ultimately, I must reject the mis-education of our American society (Pinar, 2004). This requires a desired independence and a watchful, critical eye.

History shows that it does not matter who is in power or what revolutionary forces take over the government, those who have not learned to do for themselves and have to depend solely on others never obtain any more rights or privileges in the end than they had in the beginning (Woodson, 2006, p. 181).

The Nigrescence theory focuses on the outcomes of socialization experiences within black Americans. It recognizes the impact of racism and how negative stereotypes and the racial climate of our environment influence our identities. This view claims that our identities are formed through conversion experiences whereby blacks are steadily oriented to the concept of a collective black identity in the context of white supremacy. While the Nigrescence Theory (Cross, 1991) provides a framework to which I can comprehend the reciprocal relationship between race and racism, the DuBoisian notion of double consciousness (DuBois, 1903) shows that there is no true “essence” to being black or having an authentic African American identity. Rather, one body can contain dual identities which sometimes simultaneously call upon these multilayered psyches. Additionally, Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000) provides a voice

that recognizes and understands the experiences of black females of various ages and socioeconomic statuses. The complexities of my experience as an African American woman were often viewed with racial lens, but this theory provided me a ways of seeing the evils of white supremacy negatively impacted me in a very unique manner. Although race is a significant part of our societal networking, gender is the comprehensive force in the fight against patriarchal authority. As a black woman, I am subjected to both racial and gender oppressions. The understanding of these theories allowed me to find meaning in the narrative of my life, and it provided the necessary tools to which I could extend this knowledge to the broader field of curriculum.

Final Reflections

Who am I in this black skin? It was this question that evoked my initial inquiries in identity and the perceptions of race. In many ways, I was still the little black girl from Clyde who resided a fantasy of racial equality. And I was stuck in between that fantasy and the harsh realities that society had deemed me inferior because of my race and gender. I was wife who loved blindly disregarding the biases that resided in my own home. And I was a Christian who assumed that simply faith could result in racial justices and unbiased hearts. As I reflect upon who I was in that moment and who I am presently, I understand the meaning of change and psychological revolutions. While I desired a positive transformation in my life, I was not always capable of addressing issues that experience would bring in the future. Emotional maturity coupled with post-secondary educational environments, occupational settings, and the relationships developed in those settings provided me with the experiences needed to challenge my thinking.

Nathan and I began our journeys as individual monoracially classified beings. And although our racial difference has impacted our view of the world, we both were heavily impacted by a white supremacist society. The uniqueness of our experiences has caused our transformations to progress at different rates. While the interracial marital challenges caused me to embrace some of the cultural aspects of a Caucasian identity and look outside of my own racial perspectives, this was not necessarily the case for Nathan. However, the parental experiences we have had raising a multiracial child has caused both of us to understand racial identity as a complex and ever-changing process. Although the histories of racial discrimination and racism should not be ignored, the vastness of its effects should not overshadow my personal responsibility. I must continue to reconstruct my identity and to rise against the ideologies of white supremacy and post-racial rhetoric that weighs so heavily against me.

Constructing an identity is a complex process for any human, but it becomes even more of a complicated process when one's perceived identity contrasts from the norm. I found these complexities through my life as I realized my race and responded to it with each new experience. And although I managed to develop a seemingly positive identity in this black skin in my adulthood, I realize that there is not an end to the forming of my identity as Nigrescence might suggest. There are times when I feel emotionally whole and healed from experiencing forms of oppression and that I have overcome my feelings of inferiority. I have an extreme amount of self-love and pride in who I am as a person, but that does not mean that I will remain in this psychological place. Romanticizing about blackness and whiteness and hating them both are characteristics that are likely to continue as sure as I am African American and there is white supremacy in the world.

Nevertheless, narrative inquiry has provided me a space to which I can express the discomforts of the emotions and the wavering thoughts of my psyche. As a product of the South, I must always continue to be critical of all realms of society—amongst my family, within my educational institute, and even through the pages of my religious text. This inquiry provides my voice and ability to critically examine the world and “talk back” as my parents prohibited me to do. These dialogues allow me educate and empower and transcend the various obstacles that have been carefully situated to prevent our psychological growth, development and overall success.

These reflections of my life experiences enabled me to visualize the numerous possibilities of positive African American identity. Although I encountered many traumas and was mis-educated along the way, my experience in the curriculum studies program reeducated me providing me with the tools I needed to understand myself and better implement my role as an educator. I now understand curriculum to be an interconnected web that involves society, history as well as the individual people that interact with each of these. Education requires individual and societal intellectual reconstruction, and it begins with each of us.

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