

# Using Nigrescence to Recover from My Mis-education as a ‘Successful’ African American Male

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*I use autoethnography to guide a self-analysis of my professional and social identity as a ‘successful’ African American professor. Autoethnography is appropriate as it “displays multiple levels of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Boucher, 2000, p. 739). My journey in becoming educated involved a mostly linear and sometimes cyclical progression through the developmental stages of nigrescence (Cross, 1991; Cross & Vandiver, 2001; Parham, 1989). Consequently, I present and analyze my personal narrative through the five stages of the nigrescence model: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment. Specifically, I interrogate how race has had an impact on my life and I have organized this narrative into four acts or sections of my life. I conclude that there is value in continuing to interrogate my racial identity in the academy. Based on my analysis and conclusions, I end with recommendations that can support African American males in their PK-20 educational journey.*

*Keywords:* Autoethnography, Blacks, leadership, Nigrescence, scholarly personal narrative

*It goes a long way back, some twenty years. All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man! (Ellison, 1947, p. 15)*

My journey to the academy was not well planned by me, but the academy is where I am supposed to be right now, though there are days I still doubt this affirmation. Ellison’s quote from my favorite novel captures my journey of learning, which has consistently been punctuated with my asking people what I should do with my life. As a high school student, I recall specifically asking whether the college majors I selected would lift me out of poverty and ensure

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economic stability, because having little or no money for so much of my childhood had convinced me to work hard to change that situation. I subscribed to the notion that education was the great equalizer. I attempted to match my abilities with the highest paying majors in college to have a better chance at improving the quality of my life. Consequently, I became an engineering major, and then changed to a mathematics major, before finally realizing that my calling was to education. I replaced the pursuit of education for personal economic gain with a broader goal to uplift people through servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1996).

My recent experiences have suggested that there is an interest in increasing the number of African American male scholars in the academy, and the realm of educational leadership is no exception. Indeed, in my field of educational administration, The University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) has created the Barbara L. Jackson Scholars Program, named for one of the most preeminent scholars in field of educational administration. Jackson, an African American scholar, served the field of educational administration for fifty years and used her roles as teacher, professor, scholar, center director, executive committee member, department chair, associate dean, and dean to support and mentor people of color. The purpose of this two-year program is to address the shortage of scholars from underrepresented groups by providing formal networking, mentoring, and professional development for graduate students of color who intend to become professors of educational leadership. However, this program is not focused solely on African American men. In 1998 when I started my doctoral studies at The Ohio State University, I personally benefited by going through a fully funded university-based program with similar goals called PROFS (Providing Research Opportunities for Future Scholars). Two visionaries, Cynthia Dillard and Robert Ransom, had the prescience to start that great program. Though programs similar to the Jackson Scholars and PROFS (now extinct) are taking place throughout PK-20 settings and the academy (Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008), they serve small numbers of people, and more needs to be done. Moreover, programs like these have a broader focus than simply African American males; recruitment and retention of Black<sup>1</sup> men in the academy have been of limited success.

Scholars have documented the many challenges that African American males face throughout the PK-20 educational experience (Brown, 2011a, 2011b; Lewis, 2004; Harper, 2012). They also point to some solutions that are completely feasible. Their work confirms that better policies of recruiting and retaining Black males are needed, and changes should be implemented at a more rapid rate.

After spending over a decade navigating the academy and trying to be authentic as a Black professor of educational leadership, I would like to add my narrative to the conversation. Indeed, I now know that despite a great deal of formal schooling, I am the mis-educated Negro (Woodson, 1933/1990). Additionally, like Ellison's narrator, I now know that I am invisible on one hand. However, on the other hand, I am ironically hyper-visible because of our low numbers. Like other Black men in the academy, I often feel *categorized, compartmentalized, and confined* in a way that purports to be legitimate. I am expected to emulate the vocal expressions and gesticulations of White scholars who are already *inside* the academy. Similarly, my experiences are often questioned if they *sound* too divergent from those of White colleagues. As Black men, we are not expected to disrupt the academy's flow, but instead to blend into the structure and the culture, and to integrate with limited complaining. We are expected to fit within the supposedly colorblind predominantly White institutions and make little of race, while experiencing the reality of the cultural taxation that calls on Black males to be scholars *and* to do race-based service work such as participate on diversity committees (Padilla, 2004; Reddick 2012).

This dichotomy between external expectations of the academy vs. our internal understanding of being in the academy can cause great psychological discord and unrest. On one hand, to conform completely to what the dominant culture expects of a Black male scholar would prolong our invisibility and cause us to deny important cultural dimensions of ourselves, making us feel painfully marginalized. On the other hand, as hooks (1990) notes, “there is a distinction between the marginality imposed by oppressive structures, and the marginality one chooses as a site of resistance for radical openness and possibility” (p. 153).

I now understand that I can only grapple with these perplexing, and often contradictory, demands if I go to that “long way back” place in my personal and professional history. For me, that is an inquiry that takes me back over thirty-five years to search earnestly and painfully for an answer I may not be ready to uncover. However, as Ellison’s narrator suggests as the invisible man, *I* have to ask the question and only *I* can answer it (Ellison, 1947). This essay is my first formally written attempt to answer that question.

What are the questions I have to answer, and how will I do it? I have to develop some level of racial consciousness before I can figure how the pieces work together. Hence, my starting question is, what do I need to be aware of to develop as a more *racially conscious* researcher who can help himself and other African American males in navigating their educational journey? In the next section, I outline the theoretical framework I have selected, nigrescence, which is followed by the methodology section and an analysis of my personal/professional journey using the nigrescence model. Lastly, in my conclusion I provide some recommendations for others in similar situations.

### **Methodology**

Holman Jones (2005) shares that “autoethnography works to hold self and culture together, albeit not in equilibrium or stasis” (p. 764). Certainly what I hope will be detected in my story are the multiple points of disequilibrium (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997) that occurred in my rocky PK-20 experience, as I struggled to become and remain my authentic self in a world that was sometimes accepting of me and at other times unsure of how to tolerate me. Though the world of middle school was more open to my presence than high school would be, both experiences rested on a unguided building of my tenuous cultural foundation in elementary school. I arrived at the door of academe aiming to pursue higher education with less confusion, only to find that stability was not available there either. As Holman Jones described autoethnography, it “writes a world in a state of flux and movement---between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouement. It creates charged moments of clarity, connection, and change” (p. 764).

The autoethnography methodology represents both an opportunity and a danger for me as a Black man in academe. However, autoethnography is the most appropriate choice, because much of what I wish to share is an abbreviated racial autobiography. This is difficult, but revealing: in the words of ethnographer Wade Davis, “storytelling can change the world” (Wade Davis, as cited in Chadwick, 2003). Since racism is a forbidden topic, we need more risk-bearing, authentic stories about how it plays out for Black men in academe, which could inform how it plays out in the broader society. According to Spry (2001), autoethnography is “a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts” (p. 710).

I am still in academe so what I offer as authentic, if it is indeed to be such, carries a low level of relative risk and could cause political ramifications for me. However, if my narrative is

to help other African American men and if it is to be useful in addressing societal and structural racism, then authenticity is indispensable. I am indeed, as Holman Jones (2005) suggested, making the personal political, because this autoethnography represents an opportunity for me as a current insider to tell the truth—my truth. While I criticize the academy and broader society, I am also reflective and even critical of my own behavior. I now have a greater self-awareness, and feel that I am *in* the academy, but not *of* the academy. There is great utility in being on the inside for breaking down barriers to opportunity for African Americans. This makes me at times a subversive, akin to a kind of academic *Spook Who Sat by the Door* (Greenlee, 1990). However, there is, perhaps, even greater purpose if something I share here can help overturn the deficit-based views about African Americans that underlie much of our country's social policy (Brown & Donnor, 2011).

### Theoretical Framework

The assertion that race and racism permeate all facets of American life (Bell, 1992a, 1992b, 2004) has been consistently salient in my own life; this is a real truth and a foundation upon which to develop an important aspect of my identity. First, I should consider how I will interrogate race as it has impacted my life and helped develop my identity. While there are several approaches one could take, the framework that is most relevant to my experience is the nigrescence model. William Cross first wrote about nigrescence in the early 1970s, but rethought and refined this important identity model in 1991. The term *nigrescence* means the process of becoming Black, and it seems to capture the aim of the model well. While noted scholars (DuBois, 1903; Fanon, 1967a, 1967b) established a foundation upon which to build a model of Black identity development, Cross expanded their work by identifying stages that could be used to systematically explore it. According to Cross (1991), “Nigrescence is a resocializing experience; it seeks to transform a pre-existing identity (a non-Afrocentric identity) into one that is Afrocentric” (p. 190). Cross explored the work on pre-school children and Black identity development of two husband-wife teams of psychologists: the Clarks and the Horowitzes. However, in criticizing some of the generalizations and misapplications of this famous racial identity development work, Cross labored to develop a more universal model and he clearly distinguished his model from earlier work by noting that it explains “how *assimilated* Black adults, as well as *deracinated*, *deculturalized*, or *miseducated* Black adults are transformed by a series of circumstances and even into persons who are more Black or Afrocentrically aligned” (p. 190). Cross's five stages are: (1) *pre-encounter*, (2) *encounter*, (3) *immersion/emersion*, (4) *internalization*, and (5) *internalization-commitment*. They are each explained below.

#### Pre-Encounter

Cross (1991) indicates that those in the *pre-encounter stage* can range from low-salience (low-awareness) regarding race, to possessing anti-Black sentiments. The spectrum range transcends class. In this stage, individuals are open to accepting the dominant society's ideology and they really want to be part of the larger White society. In the case of low-salience, individuals have recognized being Black as part of their identity, but they identify more with other types of identity such as religion, sexual orientation, or gender. Because the goal of these persons is to assimilate into White society, behavior at this stage may manifest as a distancing from Blacks and Black culture, which may result in them finding a need to use victim-blaming

## USING NIGRESCENCE TO RECOVER

explanations for racial issues. These individuals can even be critical of Black leaders, the Black family, and Black culture.

### **Encounter**

Pre-encounter is usually the first identity stage into which an individual is socialized. It involves years of experiences and comes from interactions with people one knows and trusts. In other words, it is likely deeply seated and provides a great deal of stability for the person. Hence, an entry into the next stage, *encounter*, typically happens as a result of a shocking personal or social event, or series of events. In either case, Cross (1991) notes that the “*encounter* must work around, slip through, or even shatter the relevance of the person’s current identity and world view, and at the same time provide some hint of the direction in which to point the person to be resocialized or transformed” (p. 199). During this time, the individual ponders deeply personal questions and is prone to experiencing strong emotions like guilt and shame, which may become energizing elements for change.

### **Immersion/Emersion**

As implied by the name, *immersion/emersion* has two phases. According to Cross (1991), during the first phase of this third stage, immersion, the person immerses himself or herself into the world of Blackness by engaging in Black-centered activities such as cultural meetings, political events, and organizations that focus exclusively on Black issues. There is a strong desire to learn and promote Black culture and reject “White culture” and White people. The individual is actually demonstrating a pro-Black blindness because she or he fails to see a balanced view of Blackness, due to heavy and unrealistic favoritism. In the second phase, the individual emerges from this profound, sometimes irrational pro-Black phase. The person develops a more balanced view of Blackness, emerging from the high degree of emotionality and “dead-end, either/or, racist, and oversimplified ideologies of the immersion experience” (Cross, 1991, p. 207). The person finds balance and perhaps even some relief from the intense, heavily emotional first phase of this stage. As emotions plateau, one realizes that “one’s first impressions of Blackness were romantic and symbolic, not substantive, textured, and complex” (p.207).

### **Internalization**

Stage four is *internalization*, and once the transitional period is cleared, the new identity is internalized in naturalistic ways for the person. Cross (1991) notes that from a psychodynamic perspective, the new identity in this stage of nigrescence seems to perform three fundamental functions

- (1) to defend and protect the person from psychological insults that stem from having to live in a racist society;
- (2) to provide a sense of belonging and social anchorage and;
- (3) to provide a foundation or point of departure for carrying out transactions with people, cultures, and situations beyond the world of Blackness. (p. 210)

Though internalization is not likely to signal the end of a person’s concern for nigrescence” (p. 210), it does resolve conflicts of identity if they were experienced at the earlier stages.

Importantly, the person feels calmer, more settled, and at ease with him or herself. Cross (1991) describes a shift from “anxious, insecure, rigid, pseudo-Blackness based on the hatred of Whites, to proactive Black pride, self-love, and a deep sense of connection to, and acceptance by, the Black community” (p. 210).

### **Internalization-Commitment**

Finally, in the fifth stage, *internalization-commitment*, the person is a social activist, in the sense that actions taken for “the cause” follow from beliefs about Blackness that have been developed throughout the stages. People in this stage may devote “an extended period, if not a lifetime, to finding ways to translate their personal sense of Blackness into a plan of action or a general sense of commitment” (Cross, 1991, p. 220). Emphasizing the action component, Cross notes that current theory finds few differences in the individual’s psychology between stages four and five.

For me, these five stages come together in a theoretical framework that is applicable to my PK-20 educational experience and integral to my development in my current role as a professor of educational leadership. Though the stages of the nigrescence model may appear linear, Parham’s (1989) explored whether individuals follow the stages of the model in strict sequence. His research, which Cross was engaged in as original developer of the nigrescence model, has revealed that it is indeed possible for individuals to cycle through some of the stages of the model more than once.

### **Analysis**

#### **Act I- Asking the Question: Developing a Racial Consciousness**

I do not really remember the start of my racial consciousness, but it seems as though I have been aware of race for a long time. Growing up in Albany, Georgia, there was a ubiquitous narrative about the relationship between Black and White people. The storytellers were Black and the story involved aphorisms like, “It is a White man’s world;” “Whites really want to keep Blacks in their place;” or “Those White people ain’t gon’ let you do that.” Early in life, I remember thinking that White people must be pretty powerful, controlling, and just plain despicable. My earliest memory of my mother speaking specifically and positively about some White people was when she told friends she had named me Mark because a family she worked for had a son of the same name. She used to “keep”, meaning take care of, this child who was reportedly well behaved and came from a nice White family. However, in common interactions with White people, I remember my mother would frequently become really angry with some of them for speaking to her in a condescending manner, or for making negative assumptions about my mother or her abilities before they got to know her. While my mother did not raise me to hate White people, she felt a compelling need to make me aware of my color and how I might be negatively perceived as a Black male. Black boys grow up learning about how Whites can wield their power to limit your potential and even your life (Smith, 1961).

My mother did not finish high school, and that bothered her deeply throughout her life. I was born when she was 19, and finding a job to support her family forced her to postpone finishing high school. My dad, who was in and out of the picture, was just too immature at the time to understand the need to be supportive of my mother’s efforts to rear a child. He

## USING NIGRESCENCE TO RECOVER

experienced measureable challenges as a Black man living in the South. My parents were young, and they struggled, financially and otherwise.

During the early years of my life, my mother and I lived with my grandmother, before my mother was able to move into her own apartment. Eventually, my mother was able to move us to Mt. Zion Gardens, a housing project on the south side of the city. The reduced rent of Section 8 housing would help her get established, but I remember there being some questionable policies that were contradictory to enhancing the structure of family. For example, as a kid I heard it was “against the rules” to have a father living with his family in the projects. Ironically, we lived on a street called Slater King Drive, named for a successful real estate broker and civil rights activist who fought for better housing for Albany’s disenfranchised citizens (Lawson, 2004). Though Dr. Martin Luther King (1968/1986) claimed that *Negroes* in Albany decided to “straighten their backs” (p. 286) in 1962, the city remained segregated for years, and most Black folks lived on the south or east side. This is still true. Living in “the projects” was never dull, as there seemed to be a fair amount of tension represented by an odd mix of humor, angst, arguments, struggle, and just basic interest in survival. In general, most people there held education in high esteem. My earliest memories of formal learning are of a Head Start program that was located within the housing project. I recall the excitement of my mother when she enrolled me in the pre-K program. I really enjoyed it.

During my pre-school years, my awareness of my Black identity was slowly forming, as I was learning about my world through a child’s eyes. With the exception of my mother’s negative experiences, most of my interactions with White people did not give me cause to examine their motives, as I was too young and/or naïve to notice racism. I also felt surrounded by Blacks who cared for me, some of whom were pillars in community, even though life was difficult. I recall everyday phenomena that were reflective of living as oppressed people, which included depression, verbal and physical abuse, a distrust of the police, and exasperation with an unfair system. Though I experienced more of these negatives as being connected to Blacks, as they were the only group of people I primarily interacted with at the time, I would like to think that I was developing a belief that Black folks were naturally criminals. Still, I had limited to no encounters with Black scholars or college-educated Black men in my neighborhood. I did, however, see young men who were “cool” and “good with the ladies,” even at a young age. I also saw or heard about those Black men who were adroit athletes who sounded like legends when people in the neighborhood described them. Of course, there were my father’s friends who were blue-collar workers but even they were influenced by the familiar tropes of Black men as athletes, “cool cats”, or potential criminals. Though I admired their work ethic, I was almost completely unfamiliar with the life of a professional, college educated Black man. My first encounter with a group of professional Black men came when I became a protégé of the men of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, which was a life-changing encounter, eventually resulting in me seeking out this fraternity once I attended college. Accordingly, my earlier limited experiences with a broader range of Black men, though not always negative, were reinforced by the media and broader societal view of Black men. Today, those same structural forces that created my reality still circumscribe opportunities of many young men in Black communities, and simultaneously emphasize the importance of having powerful role models for young Black boys.

I started school at Flintside Elementary and remember having a great deal of admiration for the principal, Mr. Cross, who was a tall Black man with a booming voice, bald head, and an undeniable sense of authority. Mr. Cross worked as a principal to create opportunity for the Black children of Flintside and was respected as a leader in the community (Walker, 2003). My

mother respected Mr. Cross and was ecstatic that I could attend Flintside. She also liked the fact that the school was less than a mile from our house, which made it convenient. The student population of the school was mostly Black, and most other Black parents seemed to be just as elated as my mother about the school. I remember having one White teacher named Ms. Johnson, whom I would describe as a good teacher because she genuinely cared about my progress, spoke to my mother with respect, and was very comfortable teaching at Flintside, a school located squarely in a predominantly Black neighborhood.

Around 4<sup>th</sup> grade, we learned that I was to be transferred to Mock Road Elementary School. My mother, like the other parents, was not thrilled about this news, but tried to be positive by saying it would be better for me and that it was a “good school.” As a child, this was disruptive to my life. Desegregating some schools was the goal (although this was over 25 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* [1954]) and the kids at Flintside whose parents felt ambivalent, like my mother did, were going to be the unwilling foot soldiers. I was now bused to a school that was six miles away, where most of the teachers and the principal were White.

It was a real adjustment, but I still enjoyed school, and my favorite teacher there was White. While most of my friends were Black, I did have a few White friends. At this point I was not meeting many mean White folks, so I thought perhaps the stories my family had told me might be wrong. I did not have too many issues, as I liked school and generally did well academically, and my biggest transgressions involved talking too much in class. I was an easy kid to like, as I tended to do well academically and catch on pretty quickly. I was able to adapt to abrupt changes, so I spent little time sulking about the transfer to the school or the racial composition that consisted of more White students than Black. However, even then, I realized that some of my Black friends were not experiencing the same success. Though I am not proud of it now, I remember coming to the conclusion that they probably were not working as hard as I was. Was this a high-achieving Black starting to see himself as ‘different’ from those Black students failing at school?

## **Act II-Developing an Answer: Gaining Awareness in Middle School**

I started 6<sup>th</sup> grade at Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School (MLK), located only a few blocks from our house. This exciting transition to middle school placed me back in a neighborhood school where there were a Black principal and assistant principal. Mr. Phillips, the principal, was an older man; he was nice, but nearing retirement. The assistant principal, Mr. Edwards, was more vibrant and vocal, and taught a class for the so-called high-achieving students. I saw him as formal leader and as the teacher of an elective class which really related to leadership. In contrasting Mr. Cross to Mr. Phillips, the former was definitely more vibrant and energetic. However, having Black leaders in the schools still gave me a certain sense of comfort and a feeling of belonging as a student, because I knew they would have confidence in my abilities to achieve (Gooden, 2005). I also remember three influential and caring Black teachers at this school. As Ladson-Billings (2009) also experienced, these were teachers who inspired me and believed in me. While they may have known nothing of culturally relevant pedagogy, these teachers had four qualities: they had an ethic of care, bolstered by high expectations, a belief in me and my potential, and a willingness to fight to save me; they were stern, but delivered their message with love; they knew their content; and they provided structure.

I remember vividly Mr. Webb, because he was my algebra teacher and he was a Black man. That combination really impressed me. Though he was also the football and basketball



## USING NIGRESCENCE TO RECOVER

coach, this side of Mr. Webb turned out to be less influential on my development. Despite my being silly and immature during my middle school years, I was a good student. However, I did make a few bad decisions. Mr. Webb could have easily allowed me to self-destruct or he could have just ignored me. However, he did neither of these; he went the extra mile, and decided to unofficially mentor me. He introduced me to his wife and even invited me to his house, which I remember thinking was really nice. That meant a lot to me because I really needed guidance, as life at home was pretty unstable, to say the least. Though I never told Mr. Webb, I think he sensed it. I suppose it is no coincidence that my first professional job was as a secondary mathematics teacher. Though pairing effective Black male teachers with Black male students would be ideal, recent statistics warn us that this is not likely to occur, as only 1% of teachers are Black and male. Note that I did not have my first Black male teacher until middle school, and when I started working as a middle school teacher in 1994, my students reported similar experiences.

Looking beyond the teachers, I recall that strong principals maintained order in the schools so the teachers could teach and would want to be there. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) have found that leadership in schools influences outcomes by impacting school conditions and teachers' work. Leithwood and Mascall (2008) concluded that "school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning" (p. 27). Leadership is an important factor in student success and without stable leadership, good teachers will not remain at a school. Within the classroom, I needed knowledgeable teachers who cared for me and held high expectations, and within the school, I needed a strong principal to be in place to support those teachers. At a minimum, African American males need these elements to be successful in school.

By the time I started middle school, my mother had gotten married and we had moved to Wells Avenue, four blocks north of our former apartment in Mount Zion Gardens. We were both pleased that I was back in a neighborhood school. My mother really did not seek out schools that were deemed better because of academics. She had an implicit trust of educators within schools and genuinely believed they had my best interest at heart. It was comforting to my mother that there were caring Black teachers and administrators, and that the population of MLK Middle School was composed of mostly Black students, with a small number of White students and even fewer Asian students. At that point, I remember having an awareness of race, recognizing differences, and speaking about them openly. Moreover, as Black students at MLK, we felt more relaxed than we had the year before, because we were no longer in the minority as we had been at Mock Road Elementary School. That is the strange comfort of living in a segregated Southern city.

Even as students, we recognized that Whites and Blacks did not congregate much outside of class, but we regarded that as normal (Smith, 1961). As Tatum (1992) notes, all the Black kids here were sitting together, but our situation was a little different from what she describes, as we constituted the majority of the school population. There were some White students who were comfortable around Black students and in the Black majority. I also recall having some White students in my classes and considering them my friends. My classes, though not part of any gifted curriculum, were part of a tracking system, and I was on the higher track. Still, I did not feel like I was less intelligent as a Black person in these classes. For a brief time I even "dated" a White girl in middle school, but we both concluded it was a better idea to keep this fact mostly to ourselves. As Lillian Smith (1961) explains, we understood that we were in the South and even if

we did not intimately know or understand the history of the region, we implicitly knew that such behavior was taboo.

My mother and her husband separated, we moved again, and I was forced to attend Albany High School, instead of Westover, the feeder school for MLK middle school. This third move was difficult for me socially, and I felt less adaptable. Home life was again unstable. My mother, new sister, and I lived with relatives for a brief period before moving into our own home. I also felt I was losing my middle school friends. Close relatives tried to assure me the resulting move would be a new start and a chance to make new friends.

On my first day at Albany High, I met Mr. Cuthbert, a White guidance counselor, who was supposed to help me create a schedule. But my student records had not yet arrived. He refused to schedule me in geometry because he said there was simply no way I was to suppose to be in that class. He never told me why he was so convinced of this, but it was obvious his conclusion was race based, because he knew nothing about me except what he could perceive at that moment. When I pressed the issue, Mr. Cuthbert reluctantly placed me in the course, probably expecting me to fail.

As I noted earlier, tracking of students was prevalent, and aligned such that most Blacks were in lower tracks (Oakes, 1995). Mr. Cuthbert put me in lower-track geography and English courses (called Level 2 and Level 3), where I noticed more Black students than in my high-track geometry class. Much of the academic content was so elementary and uninteresting that I demanded to be moved after one semester because I was bored. My interaction with Mr. Cuthbert was an unnerving personal event that left me confused and upset. Though I believed his behavior toward me was based on my race, at the time, I did not question what was happening to large number of Black children who were relegated to the lower level classes. Disturbingly, this led me to subtly question those students' motivation and to come to the conclusion that perhaps they were not working as hard as I was to reach their potential. As I reflect on that time in my life, I realize that I was in the pre-encounter stage, even though I did have some awareness of race (Cross, 1991). Recall that during this stage, individuals are open to accepting the dominant society's ideology, and they really want to be part of the larger White society. Though I recognized being Black as part of my identity, I very much wanted to identify with a social identity as a "smart person" who happens to be Black. It was a construction that seemed easier, safer, and one that seemed appropriate given my prior success in school.

Because the goal was to learn and to compete academically with Whites, that meant I had to assimilate into White society. I noticed I was in college preparatory classes and most of my classmates were now White, in contrast to my experiences at MLK middle school. Though I observed this phenomenon, I did not dare question why it was so, as I was one of just a few Black students on the college preparatory track, further solidifying my allegiance to the "smart person" identity. Though I had Black friends outside of class, and attended social events with them, my academic experiences resulted in a physical and social distancing from Black friends, and to some extent Black culture. I remember liking my classes more when there were more Black students or a more balanced mix of students. Academic tracking limited or prevented the kinds of rich mixing that would allow students with different abilities to come together. Recall that the separation from Black culture and embracing of another identity over Black racial identity can cause Blacks in this stage to find a need to use victim-blaming explanations for racial issues and they can even be critical of Black leaders, the Black family, and Black culture. Though my thinking at the time didn't go that far, the events of my life so far had not been enough to shatter my pre-encounter stage (Cross, 1991).

## USING NIGRESCENCE TO RECOVER

But my pre-encounter stage would be broken by a series of events that would teach me a great deal about race and racism at Albany High School, thus ensuring disequilibrium. Being naïve or ignoring racism was not going to be an option. While still in high school, I witnessed a fight that started between a White boy and a Black boy, but which ended up being between the White boy and several other Black boys who were part of a gang. Reactions to this altercation were exacerbated by the different races of the boys involved. Because of the fight, the school went into lockdown mode to prevent a “race riot” and convince the parents (who were mostly White) that Albany High was still a safe school. For a week after this incident, there was a lot of uncertainty about what would happen. Police officers came to campus and remained for about a week, and though there was broad speculation and concern by White students, nothing else—ostensibly—happened. However, if you were Black, you felt like a suspect.

One of my closest friends at the time was a young man named David Luke. David served as a cultural anchor for me. As young Black men, we shared a love for the hip hop rap group Public Enemy, and their accompanying camouflage-donning stage performers, the Security of the First World (S1W). In fact, we observed that we were in the middle of a cultural war, and within the halls of the school we referred to ourselves as S1Ws. During my high school years, I was able to maintain two sets of friends; either I was good at it, or folks were nicer then. Either way, people like David Luke did not describe me as “acting White” for striving to do well academically. As a result of the disturbance, David Luke wore camouflage pants and combat boots the whole week in preparation for the race riot. David and I worked at a grocery store together, and I recognized many times that he was quick-witted and wise beyond his years. However, his vocal ability and courage to speak up and speak out worked against him many times in school. I remember that he was suspended more than a few times. He was not welcomed at school. If Albany High had been more flexible, then perhaps the school and the curriculum could have accommodated both of us. However, as Noguera (2003, 2009) finds in his research, schools do much to push out those Black males who do not conform to institutional standards early on.

Other events continued to raise my awareness at AHS. I saw a Black classmate, Brian, win the student body president election by simple majority, only to learn later that a runoff vote was now being required, even though the simple majority had been good enough in years past. As Black students, we were outraged. Predictably and sadly, the end result was that his White opponent, Scott, was elected student body president. None of the White students in my college preparatory courses said one word about how unfair this was, though ironically few of them celebrated Scott’s victory in our presence. The Black teachers were unhappy with the decision, and we were easily able to discern this, but they never said a word to us about it because we were students. Ladson-Billings (2009) reminds us that students of color have an awareness of injustices in their communities and schools and that these should be part of a culturally relevant approach to pedagogy. If we had discussed this racial injustice and the racial inequities in the South that we all knew about, I could have processed this situation better (Smith, 1961).

In a particularly hurtful event, during my junior year I was winning a challenging tennis match against Bruce Wilson, a White teammate and the number 1 player on the team. I was up 3-0 in the first set and would have been ranked number 1 on the team if I had beaten Bruce in that match. Suddenly, Bruce screamed out perhaps the most noxious term in the American lexicon—“Nigger!” He ridiculously claimed the racial slur was not directed at me. I did not believe him and quickly concluded he needed to be taught a lesson anyway. Coach Dixon, the tennis coach and P.E. teacher, elected not to discipline Bruce in any way, but instead told me that I should

“kick Bruce’s a\*\*!” I continued my course toward Bruce with my racquet in hand and then I thought for a moment. *What did Dixon say?* Dixon’s option was not an option at all. If I had hit Bruce I would have been confirmed as the aggressive Black male and unlike Bruce, I certainly would have been punished. After coming to this unsettling conclusion, I quickly lost the match as well as a lot of respect for Coach Dixon and his ability, as a White teacher, to handle a racially charged situation or serve as an ally.

Before this incident, Dixon, like many well-meaning educators, likely assumed that he was color blind, a notion that seems humane on the surface (Milner, 2010). An understanding of how to proceed from that point really was beyond Coach Dixon’s knowledge base. Therefore, he recommended and endorsed a response that called on me as the student to take matters into my own hands. Racism is a cultural and societal issue that operates as a cycle of socialization, and it will continue unless there is a process of unlearning and a conscious decision to disrupt status quo thinking (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). I was the target of pointed racism that day because an otherwise reasonably effective teacher had not interrogated race and had not learned how to address the issue when it blatantly appeared in his class.

Interrogating race is a difficult process for Whites as well as for people of color, and if not handled carefully can really alienate people. However, without it, teachers will never be able to support students as they address the more subtle situations that limit their potential. When attempting to recognize inherent privilege built into educational and other systems, research reveals that Whites tend to have more trouble because they regard their position as normal. Though beyond the scope of this article, numerous studies on White racism and critical Whiteness studies document the actual challenges associated with “presence” and the invisibility of Whiteness (Applebaum, 2008; Cochran-Smith, 2000; Fine, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993, 1997; Marx, 2004; McIntosh, 1990; McIntyre, 1997; Roediger, 1991, 1994; Sheurich & Young, 1998; Sleeter, 1994, 2001; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Tatum, 1992).

In my exchange with Bruce, I felt alone and very confused and off-balance. This disequilibrium was the opposite of my experience at MLK middle school. Gone was the Black principal at the helm. A White principal was in charge, and I felt no connection was there for me as a Black student, at least not one strong enough to bring up this situation. These and other events led me to conclude that we had many unresolved, quietly brewing racial issues at Albany High; the likable kid I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade was quickly disappearing and the veil of innocence was melting away from my new eyes. My experiences in high school came together to push me into the *encounter* stage (Cross, 1991).

### **Act III-Talking Back in College and Graduate School College**

Albany State College (now University) is one of many historically Black College and Universities (HBCU) and it was there that I expanded my knowledge about the contributions of African Americans in this country, although ironically, we did not really have a Black Studies program. In college I was introduced to the works of Carter G. Woodson (1933/1990), the father of Black History Month, though not through my coursework. Fittingly, the university would become the place where I would enter the first phase of the third stage of the nigrescence model, or Immersion into Black culture. I came to understand more about my potential and power to achieve, which could be expressed through learning. It was during this time that I developed a new level of self-confidence and unabashed Black pride. As a college student, I engendered and nurtured a belief that I could neutralize the inimical effects of White racist “demons” by

## USING NIGRESCENCE TO RECOVER

becoming an educated Black man. I was wrong and I would later learn that racism was a cagey beast that had many faces and many tools. Nevertheless, I was proud to see so many Black professors at the college and I felt protected, mentored, and cared for. I was learning a great deal and getting the guidance I so desperately needed. For example, professors like Dr. Velma Fudge Grant turned me on to research, while her husband, Dean Cornelius Grant, Vice-President of Student Affairs, extolled the virtues of good leaders. I read books that really helped me understand more about racism in America and its concomitant conditions and mindsets. During that time I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, and G.M. James's *Stolen Legacy*. I developed an even greater appreciation for "conscious rappers" such as Public Enemy, The Jungle Brothers, and a Tribe Called Quest. As a student leader, I advocated for exposing students to the teachings of The Honorable Elijah Muhammad, and invited a minister of the Nation of Islam (AKA Black Muslims) to campus. During this time, I considered joining the Nation of Islam, and I even decided to stop eating pork because Muslims did not engage in this behavior. In the South, this was taken to be an odd practice by my friends and family. Politically, I was drifting toward a Black Nationalist or Black Separatist stance and I felt empowered and extremely proud to be Black. As I noted earlier, this phase can be described as Pro-Black blindness and I was about to learn why.

My racial awareness was greater than it had ever been, and I was developing a narrative of resistance to the dominant White culture and was highly critical of it. At least, that is what I thought. I thought I had ready responses to White racist views and actions, but actual interactions would indicate I needed work here. For example, after applying for an auto loan at my bank I was turned down. When I asked the loan officer, who was a White woman in her fifties, why I was denied, she looked surprised that I wanted to know, or even had the audacity to ask. Perhaps it was due to the brazen attitude I projected in even asking the question. She said it was because I did not really have a credit history or enough collateral to cover the loan, but she thought the loan would be approved if I got a co-signer. I asked my granduncle who was retired but owned a house and two vehicles, enough collateral to cover a \$2800 loan. Though I was not certain how much, I knew my uncle also had a substantial amount of money in his savings. He co-signed and the loan officer denied the loan again. I suspected this lady was racist and I immediately took steps to take my funds out of this bank and close the account. On a day of feeling pretty resolute in my decision, I arrived at the bank to withdraw my money, but the White teller asked if I had time to speak with Mr. Cloutier, a vice-president at the bank, before finalizing my decision. I was angry and frustrated and wanted to say, I have had enough with White people. But I did not. Cloutier, who was also White, quickly reviewed my application and said I had a remarkably strong credit history for a 19-year-old and that it was better than he had ever seen for someone my age. After that he said I should have gotten the loan from the start.

What? Were these White people playing a game with me? Was the loan officer racist? Cloutier approved the loan immediately and I was confused but quite relieved, as I really needed the money to buy a better, more reliable car. However, in retrospect, I realize now that Cloutier did not confirm in any way that the loan officer should or would be held accountable for her inexcusable racist behavior. He never even asked the name of the person who denied my loan twice. Even though I was now convinced she was a racist, I did not offer her name. Would she go unpunished just like my tennis mate Bruce Wilson, who had blatantly called me a nigger? I proffered no information to Cloutier of how many Black people I knew who were without bank accounts and who had been consequently forced to rely on high-interest lending institutions because of insensitive and racist loan officers like the one I encountered. When Cloutier asked if

I needed anything else, I paused. In retrospect, I should have said something. However, I replied no, and gladly took the check and left. Taking that check and reflecting about the situation caused some uneasiness about the entire matter. As radical as I thought I was at that time in my life, I made no statement to that bank vice-president about how often this unfortunate scenario plays out for Black people, who typically walk away without my happy ending. I wondered, did I sell out for the loan check? Or was I just unwilling and unskilled enough to have a conversation about racism and its effect on so many others like me? Now I can say it was the latter.

**Graduate school.** In 1994, I finished my masters and entered the teaching profession as an eighth-grade algebra and pre-algebra teacher at Southmoor Middle School, which was predominantly Black. I was proud to work under an African American principal. I was puzzled, however, by the fact that I was the only certified Black male teacher in the building. Many of my 8<sup>th</sup> grade students consistently remarked that I was their first Black teacher. Though this was indeed disturbing if true, it really seemed to increase my social capital with the students and parents. I do not know if I fully realized my power, as a Black man, to influence the children at Southmoor at that time. It was as though, by merely being at the school in my position as a mathematics teacher, I was an instant role model. This responsibility put pressure on me to set a positive example, and serving there became a huge point of pride for me.

Parents were generally delighted I was there and genuinely held me in high esteem. Yet, many did not attend parent-teacher conferences, were not available when I called, or just seemed non-responsive. During my first year, I struggled to understand why this was the case. Admittedly, my masters program had taught me very little about culture, and I was too new and naïve to step beyond the established way of attempting to engage parents. I wish I had figured out more ways to captivate the parents, as is recommended by scholars like López (2001). No class on culturally responsive teaching was required in my masters program, and I had not taken one. While I may have been at an Immersion stage before, I felt like I was working hard to turn my students into copies of me. I explained to them that mathematics was the gatekeeper. Not having mathematical skills could prevent them from getting ahead; with them, they could make some real, legitimate money.

I worked hard to get them to engage with the content. I tutored during lunch and homeroom. Additionally, fellow teachers sent “misbehaving” Black males to me during my planning period because I was *the* “Black male teacher” and I gladly accepted the request to counsel these young men, even though doing so left me no time to plan as a teacher. In time I realized spending every minute with students during the day was taking a toll on me physically and emotionally, thus interfering with ability to remain focused on all of teaching duties. Although my first-year reviewer and my principal, and even other teachers, told me I was a doing well as a new teacher, I was conflicted as I felt that there were too many of my students who were not academically successful, and I felt personally responsible. I wondered what more could I do or how I could change my practices to be more effective. When I lamented to a Black veteran teacher about this, she simply said, “you do what you can, but some of them just don’t want to learn. After all, you cannot save them all.” I abhorred this response. Having grown up in the South, I believed racism still existed and I held some understanding of the complexity of racism and had witnessed instances of its power to limit students’ potential. At the time though, I was limited by own understanding of how to effectively address the powerful, oftentimes invisible, mechanism called institutional racism.

However, at the Immersion stage of nigrescence, I was unable to translate my knowledge and pride in Black culture into culturally relevant pedagogy that could further benefit my

## USING NIGRESCENCE TO RECOVER

students. I was worn out from using methods that failed to reach the students. I was ill-prepared to respond intelligently to this Black teacher, though I strongly disagreed with her contention that my students did not value education. The race of this teacher, whom I otherwise respected before, made the comment more bewildering. I could not articulate it then, but the interpretation of my veteran Black colleague is consistent with Woodson's (1933/1990) description of a mis-educated black teacher:

Taught from books of the same bias, trained by Caucasians of the same prejudices or by Negroes of enslaved minds, one generation of Negro teachers after another have served no higher purpose than to do what they are told to do. (p. 23)

In other words, a racially (un)conscious Black teacher, who does not include the relevance of culture when instructing Black children, is tantamount to a White teacher who devalues the contributions of Blacks. Black students can still be harmed by their practice, even though (un)conscious Black teachers may have more sympathy and interest in them. Though I cared for my students, I was not as admittedly effective as I could have been. By the time I transferred to work at the high school, I had encountered several White teachers and some Black teachers who embodied this same kind of thinking. By this time I had experienced a number of events that started to develop a recycled encounter stage in me, relative to education. These eye-opening episodes dislodged me from my pre-encounter stage.

According to Cross (1991), during the first part of the third stage, *immersion-emersion*, the person immerses him or herself in the world of Blackness by attending Black-centered cultural meetings and political events, and by joining organizations that focus on Black issues. For me, several such behaviors anchored my recycled homecoming to Immersion when I returned to graduate school to pursue a doctorate at . In a way that was similar to the extracurricular involvement of my undergraduate days, I joined the Black Graduate and Professional Student Caucus (BGPSC), and championed the mission of Black solidarity as a way of building a support network for survival at The Ohio State University, which we called the *belly of the beast*. Our motto was that our being there was not enough, and we encouraged more Black students to get involved, because we needed them and they needed us. We quietly questioned the level of racial consciousness of those graduate students who said they were too busy to get involved. I also attended Black Man Think Tank conferences and Mother to Son conferences and continued my connection to the Ohio Commission on African American Males, an organization for which I taught during my first year as a teacher. Black was again all good and powerful and I worked to free myself from White bondage. However, unlike my undergraduate days, this time I was more sophisticated in my approach to Black issues within higher education and beyond.

During the second phase of this stage, *emersion*, the person emerges from the high degree of emotionality and “dead-end, either/or, racist, and oversimplified ideologies of the immersion experience” (Cross, 1991, p. 207). The person finds balance after the intense emotional stage and levels off, noticing that “one’s first impressions of Blackness were romantic and symbolic, not substantive, textured, and complex” (p.207). For me, this manifested in my pulling away from the organization and in some ways giving in to personally-centered goals. For example, despite influential people telling me I should run for president of the BGPSC after having been vice-president for a year, I reluctantly declined and noted I had to fulfill my personal goal of finishing my Ph.D. in three years. It appeared that I had become more like the

graduate students that we had quietly criticized. I knew I still needed the support of the BGPSC and I still attended meetings. I rationalized my decision by arguing that focusing on finishing was a more realistic goal for me and one that had broader implications for the community. After all, I would be adding another Black scholar to the struggle if I finished my terminal degree within my established deadline.

#### **Act IV-Taking Action in the Academe**

Recall that in stage four, *internalization*, the new identity is internalized in the naturalistic ways of the person. Cross (1991) importantly notes that from a psychodynamic perspective, the new identity seems to perform three functions:

- (1) To defend and protect the person from psychological insults that stem from having to live in a racist society; (2) to provide a sense of belonging and social anchorage; and (3) to provide a foundation or point of departure for carrying out transactions with people, cultures, and situations beyond the world of Blackness. (p. 210)

Finally, in the fifth stage, *internalization-commitment*, the person is a social activist; this means that action follows the beliefs that have been developed throughout the stages. The person can devote “an extended period, if not a lifetime, to finding ways to translate their personal sense of Blackness into a plan of action or a general sense of commitment” (Cross, 1991, p. 220). Cross notes that current theory suggests there are few psychological differences between Blacks in stages four and five, though more research is needed. Derman-Sparks and Phillips (1997) wisely note that these two stages are consonant with their anti-racist identity. Tatum (1992) also adds to this discussion by pointing out that movement through all of the stages of nigrescence is not necessarily linear.

Consistent with the cyclical refinement of nigrescence theory, I have progressed through Cross’s stages of nigrescence in a somewhat cyclical manner. The theory supports that a person may revisit another stage of identity following a new encounter, and the new experience may be different from the former. Parham’s (1989) related work about recycling through the stages of nigrescence multiple times throughout life accurately captures my experiences. I believe this has made me stronger, calmer, and more focused, able to be more effective at defending against both subtle and direct personal racist insults. Microaggressions occur more frequently than the blatant insults, but are just as damaging, as they tend to tear away incrementally at the confidence of the Black scholar (Pierce, 1995; Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2008). In fact, if not checked, microaggressions can really increase doubt and lead a scholar to search for approval from the dominant culture, which could lead to self-destructive behavior. Minimally, though, these can cause scholars of color to carry a greater cognitive load resulting from spending more time attempting to respond to or work against these racist stereotypes (Steele, 2011).

Though insults still hurt, I am strong enough now to demand that the work I do in academe be rooted in activist, anti-racist leadership and scholarship, regardless of meeting the disapproval and questioning glances of Whites and even some Blacks. As a result of cycling through the stages and arriving at the internalization stage, I can better interact with other cultures and not consider Black culture as having less value than other cultures, as it is often depicted. I am more inspired to continue to learn and be prepared to defend Blacks and our culture. It is important for African American males to understand how these last two stages



operate. Internalization is the foundation for being established in one's Blackness and comfortable in naturally resisting racist rhetoric. For example, internalization can help one feel proud and strong enough to learn and respond when the Black male's intellectual ability is questioned. This does not mark a completed journey though, as I have discovered that the struggle seems to have no end. To be clear, there are times when I have to fight against my mind's doubtful wondering and questioning the legitimacy of my success, even after earning four post-secondary degrees and working for over a decade as a professor at research universities with high research activity I do not know if this is normal, but it is my reality. If a Black man increases his racial awareness, and further refines it through a study of the nigrescence model, and understands the need for continued support of others, he can be strengthened greatly to address the intractable issues of racism. The final stage of the model is similar psychologically for many African Americans, according to Cross (1991). I see this stage as the point where the person is ready to take steps as an anti-racist leader, meaning they are willing to take action to dismantle institutional racism. For some, this is talking back, but for others like me, it will likely result in action plans within one's sphere of influence that support others who struggle with racism and its effects on society.

### **Conclusions and Considerations**

Well now I've been trying to look through myself and there's a risk in it. I was never more hated than when I tried to be honest... On the other hand, I've never been more loved and appreciated than when I tried to "justify" and affirm someone's mistaken beliefs; or when I have tried to give my friends the incorrect, absurd answers they wish to hear. In my presence they could talk and agree with themselves, the world was nailed down, and they loved it. They received a feeling of security...Too often, in order to justify them, I had to take myself by the throat and choke myself until my eyes bulged and my tongue hung out and wagged like the door of an empty house...It made them happy and it made me sick (Ellison, 1947, pp. 559-60).

At one point in my early adulthood life I would boldly claim that as a Black man I had overcome racism with excellence, and that every other Black man had an equal chance to do the same. I now know that is not accurate. In fact, strong, caring, and capable teachers and leaders have anchored my educational experiences. It is also because of those people and my strong need to serve that I chose education. Using the nigrescence framework helped me explore the development of my racial consciousness through the assistance of my mother, my first teacher, and other educators along the way. My mother's teaching helped me investigate my world, yet remain critical enough to seek changes where they were needed. She did her best to expose me to positive Black male role models. I encountered powerful teachers at all levels of my educational odyssey, but especially starting at the middle school level. Those teachers greatly expanded my understanding of the importance of being educated in a culturally relevant way and they treated me like a young scholar, which bolstered my confidence. I further developed self-assurance in my ability and some healthy resilience to race-based deficit thinking in middle school, and that helped sustain me for the race-based challenges I would face in a more racially diverse high school. Still, high school was difficult as it flatly assailed whatever protective emotional barricades I had developed over the years. If it were not for Black teachers like Mrs. Judy Thomas coming to my rescue, I would have taken a very different path. Instead, those teachers, led by Mrs. Thomas, impressed upon me that I could and should attend college, despite the fact that my family was not able to save money for me to attend. Contrary to what I believed at the

time, there was a place for me in college. As Black males, we must cut our path and strive to improve academically, regardless of the messages we receive. We must have a strong, deep foundation that will truly support us in tough times of doubt. My narrative reflection reveals that for me, that broad foundation of support has been family members, teachers, professors, friends, fellow students, mentors, colleagues, administrators, and many others. Indeed, at the most opportune times in my life, these individuals have demonstrated confidence in my ability, compassion regarding my situation, and the commitment to stay in the fight for someone like me (Gooden, 2005). Having a support system or foundation as I have described here becomes critically important when the dominant culture sends confusing messages to Black males about their career aspirations and abilities.

On a personal level, I have learned that if I bring up race in conversations with White colleagues and friends, there is a high likelihood that I may be questioned or worse, accused of playing the race card and/or being divisive; or I may just be politely ignored. I have also discovered that if I do *not* interrogate race, I am more likable and some people I associate with (including some of color) will feel more comfortable around me, much like when I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. I did not interrogate race then because I did not have the tools. However, taking this latter path of making others feel comfortable leaves me feeling as though I have betrayed something that is part of me. In fact, it makes feel as if I have disappointed those who worked so hard on this journey to help me get to where I am today. Embracing the route of least resistance would mean taking a privileged position rather than speaking my truth, which can psychologically help other African Americans males as well as myself. However, there are burdensome consequences if I speak. Still, avoiding race does not get us closer to addressing inequities in education. We have to go to this place if we are going to address the serious race-based opportunity gaps that exist. Though the struggle is tough, real, and urgent, I say to Black males, we must find friends and allies of several races (including Black, White, and other) who agree that we should continue this struggle because it is the right thing to do for kids in schools and for society as a whole. By engaging in the fight against inequities with the support of others, we increase the resistance to oppressive structures, and we not only change ourselves but we change our world.

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## USING NIGRESCENCE TO RECOVER

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## USING NIGRESCENCE TO RECOVER

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### Note

1. The terms African American and Black will be used interchangeably throughout this article.