JAAME
Journal of African American Males in Education
Fall 2014- Vol. 5 Issue 2

Is This How it Was Meant to Be? Autoethnography as Counterstory in the Education of an African-American Male

Michael E. Jennings
University of Texas at San Antonio

This paper utilizes autoethnography as a method to analyze the life experiences of a tenured African-American male faculty member who works as an administrator in a college of education at a large research oriented university. Specifically, the narrative being explored constructs a counterstory to the master narrative regarding African-American males in the American educational system. This narrative counterstory goes beyond the recollection of life history and instead utilizes critical race theory (CRT) as a lens used to analyze the role of race in one individual's experience and contextualizes this experience within the larger historical context of American educational institutions.

> *At the time, I did not understand the size or seriousness of the school system's assault on Black people. I knew only that I constantly felt uncomfortable and ashamed of being Black. This feeling followed me everywhere, without letup. It was a result of the implicit understanding in the system that Whites were "smart" and Blacks were "stupid." Anything presented as good was always "White…"* (Newton, 1995, p. 19)

Despite admonitions about the rise of a "post-racial" society, race still plays a central role in the education of African-American males in U.S. society (Howard & Flennaugh, 2011). To explore this idea, this paper utilizes autoethnography as a method for exploring the intersection of race and masculinity in the "school life" of an individual African-American male professional. In doing so, this essay offers a critique of deficit ideologies and notions of "oppositional identity" that shape teacher and faculty beliefs about African-American male students (Cokely, 2003; Lundy, 2003). Autoethnography is chosen as a method because of its ability to connect personal narrative with wider issues of race, culture, identity and the socio-political meanings that undergird these constructs. Although all of these interconnected areas are important, race takes center stage in this autoethnography. With this in mind, a more nuanced understanding of the narrative presented could be better understood as a *critical race counterstory*. The power of counterstory lies in it's ability to offer a strong critique of society from the margins, something

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Michael E. Jennings. Email: michael.jennings@utsa.edu
© 2014 Jennings

that is often difficult for marginalized peoples who may not have access to discourses of power. For this reason, autoethnography and the counterstories that emerge from them can be considered the "ultimate multicultural act" (Adiele, 2010).

This paper begins with a discussion of critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical lens, which frames the autoethnography that is presented as heart of this research. Next is a discussion of autoethnography and its use as a counterstory to challenge master narratives about African-American male students. Following this is an autoethnographic description of my experiences as a student in both elementary school and in middle school. The concluding section discusses my autoethnography and its role as a counterstory that connects to larger constructs of race, identity and education in American society.

Critical Race Theory as Theoretical Lens

In developing the autoethnography presented in this paper, I utilize critical race theory (CRT) as my primary theoretical lens. CRT has evolved over the past 15 years as an important construct in the study of education because of its strong focus on *centering* the concept of race in education as a socio-cultural context that challenges dominant discourses (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Additionally, CRT has become an important component of the critical analysis of race in education because of its development and use of critical research methodologies. These methodologies are of importance because they challenge mainstream ideas regarding the *subjectivity vs. objectivity* binary that structures a great deal of educational research (Bernal, 2002; Parker & Lynn, 2002).

In the mid-1990s, researchers in the area of education began making extensive use of CRT in their analysis of the American educational system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Dixson, 2006). Lynn & Parker (2006) have attempted to historicize CRT by asserting that these early scholars in the field of education (and those that preceded them) established several key features of CRT related to the basic nature of race in society.

First, they viewed the racism that exists in the U.S. as "a normal fact of daily life in U.S. society" (Taylor, 2009, p. 5). Supporting this idea are the ideologies and assumptions of White supremacy which are ingrained in the political, legal and educational structures in ways that make them almost unrecognizable (Delgado, 1995, as cited in Taylor, 2009). Second, they viewed the structure of White supremacy as having a profound effect on the world and representing an "all-encompassing and omnipresent" (Taylor, 2009, p. 4) system of privilege, power and opportunities that are often invisible to its own beneficiaries. Third, they advocated a strong critique of liberalism as a supporting ideology for a just and equal society. CRT offers a sustained critique of the belief that traditional government institutions can create an equitable and just society. CRT advocates are skeptical that the current paradigms utilized by government institutions can be catalysts for social change given the emphasis on incrementalism that is ingrained in these institutions (Ladson-Billings, 1999). CRT adherents also reject the idea that government institutions such as courts and schools have the ability to function as "neutral" entities in a society where constructs like race, class, gender and sexual orientation remain powerful paradigms for oppression (Marx, 2008).

Solòrzano & Yasso (2002) further expanded these key concepts by discussing several important ideas that helped delineate the use of CRT as a lens for the study of inequality in education. These ideas included the following: (1) developing critiques that address multiple discourses on race, gender, and class while emphasizing how these forms of subordination

intersect in complex ways; (2) challenging dominant ideologies that support deficit theorizing in educational and social science discourses; (3) focusing on the experiences of students and communities of color with oppression; (4) emphasizing work that advocates social justice in education as part of a larger effort to challenge all forms of subordination in society; and (5) utilizing the knowledge base of interdisciplinary academic disciplines such as ethnic studies, women's studies and law to better understand the experiences of students and communities of color (Solòrzano & Yasso, 2002).

Narrative as Counterstory

Although the tenants and ideas discussed provide a very brief summary of the ideas that frame CRT, it is important to understand the primary method utilized in structuring my autoethnography and its connection to CRT. Central to CRT is the use of narrative and storytelling to challenge prevailing ideas and assumptions held by the status quo. In further delineating these stories, Solòrzano and Yasso (2002) discuss the work of Delgado (1989) while further defining counterstorytelling

> as both a method of telling the story of those experiences that have not been told (i.e., those on the margins of society) and as a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse. (p. 155)

These stories represent an important *counternarrative* that challenges the racist ideology that is used to create, maintain and justify the use of master narratives in storytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Given that the concept of race is a central focus in the dilemmas facing African-American males, it is necessary to utilize a theoretical lens (CRT) and a complimentary methodology (counterstorytelling) that fully comprehend these dilemmas while offering guidance towards the development of a viable solution.

Counterstorytelling has always been an important component of the written and oral expressions of the African-American community. One of the most important manifestations of this expression has traditionally been the writing of autobiography (Fisch, 2007; Franklin, 1995; Stepto, 1991). The nature of the African-American experience has been relegated to "the margins" of society while still binge allowed limited access to society's *mainstream* workings. This phenomenon has created an *outsider/insider* paradox (Collins, 1991) that has forced people of color to accept the role of being *subdued ethnographers*. That is, the role of being a *subordinate other* in American society has placed people of color in the position of becoming *native* ethnographers who observe and analyze the cultural norms and behaviors of whites as a means of survival. In reflecting upon our own experiences, communities of color have codified this ethnographic experience in several ways. One of the most important ways is through the use of autoethnography as counternarrative. This effort has occupied an important place in the African-American experience because of its emphasis on the intersection of personal experience and collective identity.

Today, as in the past, the writing of autobiography gives African-Americans a chance to challenge and resist the degradation and racism that is prevalent in American society (Stover, 2003). The evolution of autoethnographic writings and its connection to CRT provides a written account of the evolving struggle between the *self* and society that permeates the African-American existence. Thus autoethnography and the experiences that it explores are of prime

© 2014 Jennings

importance to educational researchers who are researching the experiences of marginalized peoples in the American educational system.

Racialized Space in the Urban School Context

Some of my earliest memories as a child are related to the time I spent in school. I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1969 and grew up in a section of the city known as Mt. Airy. I started my education as a Pre-K student in a Catholic school located in an upscale section of the city. Most of my peers went to the local public elementary school; however, my mother did not feel that the elementary school in our neighborhood would provide me with an adequate education. My mother held a strong belief that obtaining a high quality education was the best thing that African-Americans could do to help themselves advance within a racialized society where structural inequality was the norm. She lamented the fact that our local elementary school had declined in quality since her time as a student in the same school. However, she was determined not to let this stand in the way of her child's education.

Paying for this education did not come easy for my mother. She had married my father at the age of 18 and was divorced a few short years later. Without a college education my mother knew that her opportunities were limited. Despite this, she was determined to provide me with the best educational opportunities possible. My father had moved to another state and did not provide consistent financial support to help with my upbringing much less to help pay school tuition. Fortunately, my mother maintained an excellent relationship with my paternal grandparents and they offered to help pay the tuition for my schooling. This made attending private school a possibility for me despite coming from a family with limited income.

My earliest understandings of the private/public school dichotomy reflected my comprehension of adult conversations between family members that consisted of largely negative talk about the city public school system. This was strongly reinforced by the local news media that demonized the school system and its largely black and brown student body. Conversely, my family assured me that I was getting a superior education in the Catholic school that I attended. It didn't take long for me to learn that public education in Philadelphia was equated with low performance and negativity, while private schools run mostly by religious organizations were equated with academic excellence and superior facilities. This segregation of schooling (public vs. private) reflected a larger discourse on race and class in the city. This discourse reflected notions of racialized urban space that located the school I attended in a traditionally wealthy section of the city known for its exclusivity. The area around my school was seen as clean, safe, beautiful, and a generally wonderful place to live and raise a family. This stood in stark contrast to the African-American working class community that I called home. My neighborhood was seen as gritty, unsafe, less than desirable, and overly crowded. In short, although my school was only about a 15-minute drive from the working class Black neighborhood where I grew up, it might as well have been 100 miles away.

This reflected the heavy racial and economic segregation that still continues in the city of Philadelphia. Unlike most Catholic schools in Philadelphia, the one I attended was not a part of a particular Catholic parish (i.e., church) and therefore was not overseen by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Schools run by the Archdiocese (at least those located inside the city limits) tended to have strong connections to White working class and middle class neighborhoods. Although these schools were seen as superior to the cities public schools, they still were not considered elite by the standards of the city's upper middle class and wealthy power brokers. The school I

attended was different as it was run by an order of Catholic nuns called the Sisters of St. Joseph. The school itself was far more expensive than the local parish schools and it served mostly White upper-middle class Catholic families who lived in upscale suburban areas around Philadelphia. This assured that the school not only reinforced existing patterns of racial segregation but that it also reflected existing patterns of economic stratification separating working class Whites from their middle and upper class counterparts in the city.

Pre-Kindergarten and the Effects of a "Troublesome Word"

I entered the school's montessori pre-school program in the early 1970s and matriculated there until I graduated from the 8th grade in 1984. Despite the differences that existed between my fellow students and I, the memories I had of those early school years were mostly positive. I liked my teachers and I had several friends that I played with regularly. However, I remember one particular instance that I can't easily forget. This incident occurred while I was in the school's Montessori pre-kindergarten program. Although I don't recall all of the circumstances surrounding the event, I do remember the outcome: one of my classmates called me a nigger. Although I was very young, I knew that this was considered the ultimate insult for a Black person to endure. Hearing that word upset me deeply but I was too embarrassed or confused to tell anyone.

After all, I was a popular kid with great grades Do you mean grades?—how could anyone treat me like that? Was I really that different? I talked like the other kids, I liked the same books, ate the same food, listened to the same music and played the same games. I fit in perfectly—didn't I? I felt like I had been *outed* as inferior. It hurt so much that I eventually told my mother about what was said and she was understandably upset. She immediately requested a meeting with the principal and explained to her the gravity of the situation. The principal promised to talk to the boy's parents. I don't remember if there were any immediate repercussions, but I do know that at some point during that year the boy did not return to the school. Things seemed to return to normal but in some ways I don't think I ever felt the same. However, deep inside I would never feel safe again in school. Although his absence was a blessing, my racial innocence was lost. For better or worse, my experiences with race as a young child had provided me with insight into the White supremacist context of early childhood education (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001).

As I have reflected on this episode, I have come realize that my understanding of the slur that was directed at me was not only shaped by my experience of its use by Whites, but also by my observation of its use in my own community. I had heard this same word used several times by African-Americans in a different, yet still extremely negative context. In this particular context, I remember the word being used as a marker to identify African-Americans who embodied uncouth behaviors and attitudes that were seen as an embarrassment to the more *respectable* African-American community. In summary, the commonality of both uses of this same word was uniformly negative. Not only did I feel demeaned when the little boy in my class referred to me as a nigger, but I also knew that I was now publicly marked as an outsider: as an *other* amongst my classmates and possibly in my own community.

This *troublesome word* (Kennedy, 2002) thus became important as a marker of difference or disdain by the White community, but also as a demarcation within my own community that highlighted *good* African-Americans and separated them from other African-Americans who were deemed to be *bad*. This distinction stayed with me for the rest of my years in school, which

seemed to be very happy and uneventful. However, it must be said that this time period was one of confusion regarding my own identity and my place in a world where whiteness was valued and blackness was degraded. It was a world that I could never seem to fully escape, no matter how much I tried.

Adolescence and the Growth of Racial Literacy

As I matriculated through elementary school, my constant support came through my involvement with literacy. In many ways, reading represented an escape: a place of refuge from the complexities of my pre-adolescent life. I was encouraged from a very young age to read as much as possible. I remember reading a variety of literature that included everything from non-fiction books about castles and nature to historical fiction that discussed the lives of historical figures in African-American history. I read several brief vignettes and short books describing the lives of prominent African-Americans throughout history. Although intriguing, none of this literature truly captured my imagination. I preferred the adventure and fantasy that come with the *Chronicles of Narnia* series or the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Perhaps my disinterest in African-American autobiographical writing was due to a belief that most of this literature did not speak to my own personal experiences. For all of their greatness, the lives of these accomplished individuals meant little to an elementary school child facing the complexities of being Black in a world that valued whiteness while espousing a color blind ideal.

I was convinced that no one else shared or understood the frustrations I faced. I was experiencing a growing dissonance between my home culture and the school culture that I was immersed in. It became clear that I was navigating the difficult terrain of both school and community in ways that illuminated issues of race, culture and class. This maneuvering fed a growing angst and confusion in my mind that compelled me to make a conscious choice of school culture over home culture. This decision seemed necessary because I felt as though I didn't have the skill set to operate well in both worlds, therefore it became necessary to make a choice. Frankly, the choice seemed to be an easy one: I simply chose the culture where I felt most comfortable. I had been immersed in the upper middle class White culture of my school for so long that it simply seemed *normal*. Assimilating into the culture of the school, which mirrored the dominant culture of society, allowed me to seemingly be accepted by my school peers. However, the cost that I paid was that I felt very alienated from my neighborhood peers who believed that I had become increasingly *different* over the years. I rarely had contact with friends in my neighborhood whom I had known since I was very young. Instead of playing outside and mixing with my neighborhood friends, I stayed inside reading books, sometimes for 12 hours in a day. The result was that the more I isolated myself from my home community, the more invested I became in my school community. Soon, the friendships that I had in my neighborhood faded away and I found that my only friends were the White students that I went to school with.

This isolation existed for most of my elementary and middle school years. After graduating from 8th grade, I went on to a Catholic high school that was nearly identical in terms of demographics and school culture to the school that I had attended for my pre K-8 education. As I moved through my first year at this high school there was a noticeable shift in how I viewed my racial identity. I'm not sure exactly what precipitated this shift, but I knew that I was beginning to recognize more acutely how truly different I was from my classmates. I found myself seeking answers regarding who I was as an African-American in an overwhelmingly

White environment. Perhaps more importantly, I wanted to find out about the history and development of African Americans in a world that seemed steeped in White supremacy. In pursuing this interest, I returned to reading the biographies and autobiographies of African-Americans. Although this genre had meant little to me in past years, I was somehow instinctively drawn to the stories that they told.

I read several books during this time including: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Angelou, 1970); *Manchild in the Promised Land* (Brown, 1965); *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Haley,1966) and others. I enjoyed all of them, but once I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1966) my understanding of things around me was never again the same. Simply put, in Malcolm X's story I was able to see echoes of myself. Many of the experiences that I had as an African-American male growing up in Philadelphia seemed to suddenly make sense in light of Malcolm X's experiences, even though they had occurred a generation earlier.

It was during this time (9th grade) that I decided to transfer from the Catholic high school I attended to a large public high school in the heart of the city. This high school had a reputation as being the best public high school in the city and perhaps the entire state. Unlike most other public high schools in Philadelphia it had a selective admissions process and a longstanding reputation for sending its graduates to prestigious colleges. Of greatest importance to me, however, was the fact that this high school was very racially and economically diverse. I reveled in this diversity and enjoyed the experience of being in a school environment where there were significant numbers of other students whose experiences were similar to my own.

While attending this new school for tenth grade, I embraced the idea of further exploring my racial identity as an African-American male who, at times, felt distant from his African-American peers. However, in exploring this identity I still faced what I felt was an uncertain reception from other African-Americans adolescents. Having spent so many years in a cultural space that seemed worlds apart from my own urban working African-American community, I felt alienated from other African-American males who lived in my neighborhood. Although I couldn't see it at the time, I craved acceptance from my neighborhood peers. Perhaps to meet this need, I started hanging out with a small group of African-American males whom I had met while playing on a local youth football team during my first year in high school. They were a tough group of guys who prided themselves on sticking together and striking what Majors and Billson (1992) refer to as the *cool pose*. I began spending most of my time hanging out on the streets of our neighborhood with my newfound friends. We didn't do much, but we were especially vigilant in our efforts to ensure that males from other neighborhoods respected our *turf* and didn't harass us. Despite our tough stance (or maybe because of it) we had confrontations with teens from other neighborhoods, and were harassed by the police. After getting involved in one physical altercation, I realized that hanging with the tough crowd wasn't something that I could keep doing if I wanted to realize my dreams of going to college and pursuing a professional career.

Even as I moved away from this particular group, I felt as though I still needed a group of African-American male peers to hang out with on a regular basis. This time I sought out a friend from my high school who also lived in the same neighborhood and who seemed to stay out of trouble despite being socially popular at school. He introduced me to another boy from the neighborhood who he had been friends with for many years and eventually the three of us became inseparable. We spent a great deal of time together and shared many of the same goals and aspirations. All of us sought to get good grades in high school with the goal of attending college and becoming well-paid professionals. Along the way, we hoped to date the prettiest girls

and gain the respect of our parents and teachers as well as other adolescents. I enjoyed the fact that we didn't seek to protect a defined territory or engage in confrontations with other groups of teens. Looking back, my move from one set of friends to another was influenced by class dynamics as well as race. My previous peer group was comprised of boys from working class families whose primary activity seemed to be upholding a code of conduct that centered on preparation for and participation in violent confrontation with other African-American males (Canada, 1995).

Future aspirations were rarely discussed and most activities we participated in were related either to playing sports or dealing with potential threats from similar groups of youth from outside of our neighborhood. This was in stark contrast to the peer group that I eventually affiliated with. This group spent a great deal of time talking about future aspirations and goals. There was constant discussion about career aspiration, applying to college, and the dynamics (both social and academic) of our high schools. I have no doubt that this was part of a class dynamic that made clear distinctions between African American students who were working class and those who were more middle class. Just as I had previously been forced to choose between worlds that were Black and White, I now chose between a world that was solidly middle class and one that was a mix of working class and poor. The difference this time was that both of the worlds I was choosing from were explicitly African-American in their orientations. Again, I chose the world where I felt most comfortable so I chose the middle class.

Even as I dealt with these intergroup dynamics, I found that I was moving towards a greater sense of racial self-understanding. Some of this was undoubtedly tied to being in the more diverse and multicultural environments that existed in the public high school that I attended. However, my move to this high school during the mid-1980s also coincided with a larger socio-political shift in society. This shift involved a reaction to the conservative policies of the Reagan era and was reflected in an increased political militancy that swept the African-American community (Ogbar, 2004). This militancy was characterized by a radical critique of American society, and embracing an Afrocentric worldview that supported revisionist history and racial unity.

Of particular note was how this philosophy was shaped by the rise of hip-hop culture. This cultural milieu included artists such as *Public Enemy*, *Xclan* and *KRS1*, all of whom emphasized revolutionary critique of the status quo through militant leftist politics and Black pride (Martinez, 1997). I was captivated by their music, which greatly encouraged me to consume radical literature such as *Afrocentricity* by Molefi Asante (1988), *Stolen Legacy* by George G.M. James (1954), *The Destruction of Black Civilization* by Chancellor Williams (1987), and *They Came Before Columbus* by Ivan Van Sertima (1976). As I absorbed this literature and listened with rapt attention to the political messages coming from hip hop music, I began to question many of the beliefs and ideas I had about blackness, manhood and the role of race in society.

As my intellectual understanding grew, I became angrier at what I perceived to be the racial injustices that categorized American society. My understandings were fueled by my desire to examine the complexities of the Black experience both in America and around the world. As a result of this research, my identification with learning (Osborne, 1999) remained high, but my dis-identification (Steele & Aronson, 1997) with the curriculum of the school system increased. Although this dichotomy may seem contradictory on the surface, researchers such as Shujaa (1994) assert that schooling and education are two different (but related) constructs. Schooling can be constructed as an institution designed to establish and maintain the unequal power

relationships that exist in society, while education is used to primarily transmit knowledge in a way that encourages cultural uniqueness and challenges the oppressive structures in society (Shujaa, 1994). It was obvious to me that I had received excellent schooling throughout my life but that I had not been well educated. This led me to understand that education was something that I would have to take responsibility for and attain on my own.

In retrospect, I had few positive African-American male role models throughout most of my schooling. My beliefs about being African American and male within a hostile school culture reflected a model of *coolness* (Majors & Billson, 1992) that seemed to eschew school knowledge in favor of street smarts. With the new peer group I acquired in my second year of high school I found access to a network of African-American male students who embodied achievement through the acquisition of school knowledge. At the same time, it is important to understand that this peer group existed within an urban space defined largely by race and class. Our positionality as working class African-American males led us to cultivate a form of *street consciousness* (Richardson, 2006) that helped navigate the double consciousness that we experienced while struggling to both challenge and fulfill the expectations of a society that devalued our existence. In short, I found a peer network where scholastic achievement and street consciousness took on multidimensional qualities that embraced multiple forms of knowledge in a way that challenged traditionally accepted notions of intellectualism in our society (Carter, 2008).

Conclusion

Within the past twenty-years, there has been a proliferation of literature, both academic (Fashola, 2005; Taylor & Phillips, 2006) and popular (Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Lee, 2005) regarding the poor performance of African American males in U.S. schools. Many explanations have been given for this perceived underachievement. One of the oldest explanations is based on beliefs regarding a lack of inherent intelligence (Gould, 1981; Hernstein & Murray, 1994) on the part of African-Americans. Other theorists, both within the African-American community and outside of it, have dismissed these ideas as racist and looked instead to deficit oriented models that question the culture, identity and work ethic of African-American male students (Milner, 2007). Undergirding these beliefs is the concept of *deficit thinking,* which can be defined in a schooling context as “a mind-set molded by the fusion of ideology and science that blames the victim, rather than holding oppressive and inequitable schooling arrangements culpable” (Valencia & Black, 2002, p. 1).

One of the most prolific proponents of the deficit perspective as it related to African-American students was John Ogbu, a now deceased Anthropologist from the University of California at Berkeley. Ogbu (2003) essentially argued that African-Americans held negative views of schooling and the ability of schooling to enhance opportunity. Specifically, this ideology asserts that African-Americans do not believe that the racial barriers to success that they face in society can be overcome through sustained academic achievement (Carter, 2008). Rather than working towards academic success, Ogbu (2003) argued that in the face of oppression, African-American students developed an “oppositional collective identity” (p. 174) that challenged perceived racism in the language and curriculum of the school.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) extended this thesis by discussing the phenomenon of *acting White* to help explain why academic disengagement seem so high among Black students. Their research theorized that African-American students often disengage from behaviors leading to academic achievement because such behaviors are viewed by their African-American peers as

© 2014 Jennings

acting white (Tyson, Darity, & Castilleno, 2005). However, a number of researchers have challenged this idea and posited that having a strong racial identity actually supports and is associated with academic achievement of African-American students (Cokely, 2003; Carter, 2008; Sellers, Chavous, & Cooke, 1998).

My own experiences in K-12 schooling, as discussed in the preceding autoethnography, reflect the theoretical tension between these two lines of research. As an elementary school and middle school student I adopted a persona that can best be described as an attempt at what Fordham (1988) describes as *racelessness*. I realized that being African American meant being different and being seen as *less than* within the school culture(s) that I had experienced. In short, I recognized that there were tangible rewards to affiliating with whiteness and I wanted to access those benefits just like my White peers. This pursuit seemed to work for the most part in elementary school where I was a well-liked figure in my classes and managed to maintain excellent grades. However, as I got older and moved through middle school, I became more alienated from my White peers. This alienation didn't emanate from a specific incident, but rather it emerged from a perception that my classmates were forming distinct social groupings, while I was somehow excluded. I felt this exclusion in a very deep way and looked forward to finishing out my middle school years and moving on to high school where I felt that things would somehow be much better.

The growth of my self-awareness seemed to mirror the stages of racial identity development that are discussed by both Cross (1995) and Parham (1989). Their theories emphasize various stages of identity development in African Americans and focus on the role of race in shaping personal identity. Parham (1989) describes the identity development of African-Americans as a lifelong process and relates its cycles closely to encounters with racism. Chávez & Florence Guido-DiBrito (1999) note that "this model clearly delineates that when blacks brush up against white culture and negative differential treatment by others, feelings of difference are triggered and subsequently a consciousness of racial identity is as well" (p. 42). As I encountered racism throughout my schooling my reactions changed in ways that were reflective of my racial identity development. During my elementary and middle school years I rarely recognized racism except in its most blatant forms. I was interested in downplaying my race and fitting in with my White peers. During my high school years, my racial consciousness grew and I became more aware of the pervasiveness of racism and its socio-historical development in the world. This made me angry in many ways, but it also pushed me to explore my own identity and confront the complexities and challenges of navigating the culture of my own community.

In analyzing my schooling experiences, it became clear to me that race played a major role in how I experienced schooling. Employing the lens of CRT, I view the structures of schooling in my life (and the lives of my peers) as reflecting the dominance of White supremacy. This White supremacy was rarely recognized by those outside of the communities of color in the city I lived in. When White supremacy was publicly identified in the school system it was met with a forceful reaction from Whites that was often based on anger, denial and blame. This reaction reflected an all-consuming and ever present system of privilege and power that worked against African-Americans and benefited Whites (Taylor, 2009).

My own experiences reflected the reality that access to the privileged world of elite private schooling could not block the effects of racism. At these types of institutions, students of color faced White supremacy in unique and intimate ways that provided outstanding school credentials and skills, while isolating them and attacking their self-esteem and sense of identity (Fordham, 1991; Perry, 1988). With this in mind, it is difficult to believe that educational

institutions (public or private) will ever be able to play a major role in the creation of a just and equitable society. This pessimism is based on the fact that these institutions are strongly ingrained in incrementalism and face little serious pressure to make sweeping changes that would benefit people of color and/or poor Whites In fact, it can be argued that social justice was never the intent of these institutions and that their primary purpose is to maintain paradigms of oppression such as race, class, gender and sexual orientation by supporting and extending these same existing institutional arrangements (Marx, 2008; Spring, 2010).

With this in mind, my autoethnography represents a strong counternarrative to the story that society and schools tell about African-American males. The stories told about African-American males in school and society reflects a master narrative that portrays these students as lazy, incompetent and anti-intellectual individuals who care little about schooling. My counternarrative challenges this portrayal by highlighting personal struggles against racism and framing them in a critical race narrative that reflects larger constructs of White supremacy, and the various elements of Black student agency. Part of this complexity involves the cultivation of an intellectualism that challenges the racialization of American schooling by emphasizing a sort of *guerrilla intellectualism* (Rodney, 1990) that promotes critical education over the hegemony of schooling. This intellectualism does not necessarily reflect traditional notions of intellect, but instead it exists in a liminal space, hidden from the gaze of school authority and a hegemonic society, where it embodies cultural pride, racial uplift, and a radical critique of the status quo.

© 2014 Jennings

References

Angelou, M. (1970). *I know why the caged bird sings*. New York, NY: Random House.

Asante, M. (1988). *Afrocentricity*. Baltimore, MD: Africa World.

Bernal, D. (2002). Critical race theory, LatCrit theory and critical raced-gendered epistemologies: Recognizing students of color as holders and creators of knowledge. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*(1), 105–126.

Brown, C. (1965). *Manchild in the promised land*. New York, NY: McMillan.

Canada, G. (1995). *Fist stick knife gun: A personal history of violence in America*. Boston, MA: Beacon.

Carter, D. (2008). Achievement as resistance: The development of a critical race achievement ideology among Black achievers. *Harvard Educational Review, 78*(3), 466-497.

Chávez, A., & Guido-DiBrito, F. (1999). Racial and ethnic identity and development. In M. C. Clark & R. S. Caffarella (Eds.), *An update on adult development theory: New ways of thinking about the life course* (New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education No. 84, pp. 39-47). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Cokely, K. (2003). What do we know about the motivation of African American students? Challenging the “anti-intellectual” myth. *Harvard Educational Review 73*(4), 524-558.

Collins, P. (1991). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Cross, W. (1995). The psychology of nigrescence: Revising the Cross model. In J. G. Ponterotto, J. M. Casas, L. A. Suzuki, & C. M. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural counseling* (pp. 93–122). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review*, *87*(8), 2411-2441.

Delgado, R. (1995). *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Dixson, A., & Rousseau, C. (Eds.). (2006). *Critical race theory in education: All God’s children got a song*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Fisch, A. (2007). *The Cambridge companion to African American slave narrative.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Fashola, O. (2005). *Educating African American males: Voices from the field*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the burden of ''acting white.'' *The Urban Review, 18*, 176-206.

Fordham, S. (1988). Racelessness as a factor in Black students' school success: Pragmatic strategy or pyrrhic victory? *Harvard Educational Review, 58(*1), 54-84.

Fordham, S. (1991). Racelessness in private schools: Should we deconstruct the racial and cultural identity of African American adolescents? *Teachers College Record*, *22*(3), 470-484.

Gould, S. (1981). *The mismeasure of man*. New York, NY: Norton.

Haley, A. (1966). *The autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York, NY: Grove .

Hernstein, R., & Murray, C. (1994). *The bell curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life*. New York, NY: Free.

Howard, T., & Flennaugh, T. (2011). Research concerns, cautions and considerations on Black males in a 'post-racial' society. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 14*(1), 105-120.

Hrabowski, F. A., III, Maton, K. I., & Greif, G. L. (1998*). Beating the odds: Raising academically successful African American males*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

James, G. (1954). *Stolen legacy*. New York, NY: Philosophical Library.

Kennedy, R. (2002). *Nigger: The strange career of a troublesome word*. New York, NY: Pantheon.

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record, 97*(1), 47-68.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1999). Preparing teachers for diverse student populations: A critical race theory perspective. *Review of Research in Education, 24*, 211-247.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2005). The evolving role of critical race theory in educational scholarship. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, *8*(1), 115-119.

Lee, C. (2005). A reaction to EGAS: An important new approach to African American youth empowerment. *Professional School Counseling*, *8*(5), 393–394.

Lynn, M., & Parker, L. (2006). Critical race studies in education: Examining a decade of research in U.S. schools. *The Urban Review*, *38*, 257-334.

© 2014 Jennings

Lundy, G. (2003). The myths of oppositional culture. *Journal of Black Studies, 33*, 450-67.

Majors, R., & Billison, J. (1992). *Cool pose: The dilemmas of Black manhood in America*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Martinez, T. (1997). Popular culture as oppositional culture: Rap as resistance. *Sociological Perspectives*, *40*(2), 265-286.

Milner, R. (2007). African American males in urban schools: No excuses—teach and empower. *Theory Into Practice*, *46*(3), 239–246.

Marx, S. (2008). Critical race theory. In L. Given (Ed.), *Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (Vol. 2, pp. 163-167). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Newton, H. (1995). *Revolutionary suicide*. New York, NY: Writers and Readers.

Ogbar, J. (2004). *Black power: Radical politics and African American identity*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University.

Osborne, J. (1999). Unraveling underachievement among African American boys from an identification with academics perspective. *Journal of Negro Education, 68*(4), 555-565.

Parham, T. (1989). Cycles of psychological nigrescence. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *17*(2), 187–226.

Parker, L., & Lynn, M. (2002). What's race got to do with it? Critical race theory's conflicts with and connections to qualitative research methodology and epistemology. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*(1), 7–22.

Perry, I. (1988). A Black student's reflection on public and private schools. *Harvard Educational Review, 58*(3), 332-336.

Richardson, E. (2006). *Hiphop literacies*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Rodney, W. (1990). *Walter Rodney speaks: The making of an African intellectual*. Baltimore, MD: Africa World.

Sellers, R., Chavous, T., & Cooke, D. (1998). Racial ideology and racial centrality as predictors of African American college students' academic performance. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *24*(1), 8-27.

Shujaa, M. (1994). *Too much schooling, too little education*. Baltimore, MD: Africa World.

Solòrzano, D., & Yosso, T. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counterstorytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *8*(1), 23–44.

Spring, J. (2010). *The American school, a global context: From the Puritans to the Obama administration* (8th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw Hill.

Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist, 52*(6), 613–629.

Stepto, R. (1991). *From behind the veil: A study of African American narrative* (2nd ed.). Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

Stover J. (2003). *Rhetoric and resistance in Black women's autobiography*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Taylor, E. (1998). A primer on critical race theory: Who are the critical race theorists and what are they saying? *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, *19*, 122–124.

Taylor, E. (2009). The foundations of critical race theory in education: An introduction. In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, and G. Ladson-Billings (Eds.), *Foundations of critical race theory in education* (pp. 1–13). London, UK: Routledge.

Taylor, G., & Phillips, T. (2006). *Improving the quality of education for African-American males: A study of America's urban schools*. Lewiston, ME: Edwin Mellen.

Tyson, K., Darity, W., & Castellino, D. (2005). ''It's not a Black thing'': Understanding the burden of acting white and other dilemmas of high achievement. *American Sociological Review, 70*, 582–605.

Valencia, R., & Black, M. (2002). Mexican Americans don't value education! On the basis of the myth, mythmaking, and debunking. *Journal of Latinos and Education, 2*, 81-103.

Van Ausdale, D., & Feagin, J. (2000). *The first r: How children learn race and racism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Van Sertima, I. (1976). *They came before Columbus: The African presence in ancient America*. New York, NY: Random House.

Williams, C. (1987). *Destruction of Black civilization: Great issues of a race from 4500 B.C to 2000 A.D.* Chicago, IL: Third World.