Shades of gray: an autoethnographic study of race in the academy

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The study is an autoethnographic case study of one Black man's experiences, both within and outside academe. Two strands of vignettes – one personal, the other professional – run throughout the paper. The two strands are presented in a format similar to parallel editing used in film editing. The overarching goal of the piece is to offer a view of the author's experiences involving race in higher education. The study uses reflexive writing as a method of revisiting and interrogating the author's experience and illustrating how this process of reflexivity impacts on his own in notions of race. The result of these writings ranges from reinforcing relatively simplistic views of race to disrupting his preconceived ideas. While some themes that arise from this piece may resemble previous works on race, racial identity and racial politics, there are unique perspectives and interpretations presented in this paper that are attributable in no small measure to the fact that the author is a Black man who was raised by a white family in white America. Since the author did not have the cultural experience of being Black until he went to college, a white cultural lens largely informs his understandings of his own experiences. However, the act of writing uncovers inconsistencies within the author's own interpretations and theories of race. In fact, it appears that the author has competing theories of race that present dilemmas for his thinking and dealings with race in higher education. The study concludes that writing can be used as an effective method for reflecting, interrogating and modifying one's own perspective to arrive at more nuanced and complex understandings, which reinforce the conclusion that race plays out in messy and complicated ways.

Introduction

I am 39, Black, male, and was an assistant professor for 10 years. My career as an academic has included positions at three relatively prominent, predominantly white universities in the United States. This is a case study of my encounters with issues of race in higher education. My life as a graduate student and tenure track assistant professor has been wonderfully challenging. Over the past 16 years I have had the pleasure of having friends and colleagues who have been invaluable in my own growth as an academic. However, along the way, I also have been the observer and/or the subject of daily 'goings on' related to race in higher education, incidents that have not always been positive. These experiences have provided a backdrop for my life in academe and have, in large part, defined my experience as an academic.

The purpose of the study is to add to the discourse on race in the academy. Often, race is perceived in relatively simplistic terms. In my experience, I have found that race is frequently dichotomized. People, me included, tend to talk – and think – in Black and white, both literally and metaphorically. Even though much of my experience suggests that race is much more complex and messy than the binary ways of thinking, I have found that I often

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retreat to simplistic ways of understanding my experience. This study does not attempt to engage in formalized theory building or comment on specific literature regarding race. Rather it is meant to trouble and provoke my own sensibilities with regard to race and demonstrate – in highly concrete ways – how issues of race are often played out in complicated ways.

This study presents two series of vignettes that highlight my attempts to make sense of how issues of race get played out in subtle and unexpected ways. Two strands of vignettes – personal and professional – run throughout the study. I juxtapose my personal and professional experiences in a way that resembles a double helix. A double helix is a structure used to model DNA. The double helix of DNA identifies two strands of information that are linked at various points along their corkscrew yet linear paths. Depending on one's vantage point, the strands appear separate and distinct at some points along the chain, yet intertwined and blurred at other points. The double helix is useful to characterize the way in which the personal and professional components of my life overlap, mutually influence, mutually inform and are inextricably tied. The intended result is a richly woven discourse among my interpretations of experiences regarding race from my personal and academic lives.

If taken separately, the personal and professional strands are mostly arranged chronologically in order to illustrate the development of my understandings and interpretations over time. Like the double helix, there are linkages between the two strands. At some points the linkages are clear and at other points less so. The purpose of presenting the paper in this fashion is to unfold two stories simultaneously. The first deals with my experience and interpretations of race while growing up, while the second focuses on my experiences in academe. The juxtaposition of these two storylines reveals some similarity in the trajectories of my coming to complex understandings of race, and how my personal and professional experiences mutually inform one another.

Methodological overview

Given the purpose of the study, no formal a priori theoretical framework guided the examination of race, other than anthropologists' notions of (a) the significance of the emic (or insider's) perspective, (b) the importance of life-history research as a means of understanding culture, (c) the constructivist nature of personal narrative, (d) and the usefulness of autoethnography as a tool to conduct life-history research. This study of race, in short, is grounded in my constructed experiences and reflects my emergent understandings that have resulted from writing about and analyzing these experiences. So, from this standpoint, the study's approach to understanding race is informed by anthropological and constructivist perspectives.

Although I intentionally avoid the use of an explicit a priori theoretical framework for understanding race, the study does use theory to inform the methodology and my own constructed understandings of race. The methodological approach is grounded in theoretical elements of autoethnography, narrative and writing as a method of inquiry. Autoethnography allows for rich and detailed data and interpretations, which has the potential of providing a 'first person-like' view of the world. My decision to engage in this form of research was inspired by the work of Alex Wilson (1996), Sophia Villenas (1996) and Lisa Delpit (1995).

According to Mitchell and Rosiek (2002):

> Autoethnography seeks to preserve the virtues of immersion in and detailed description of a community being studied that characterizes traditional ethnography. It avoids the totalizing

hubris of ethnography's colonialist roots by including autobiographical reflections of the author in the analysis. (4)

Given the nature of the piece, the intent of the study is not to reach generalizable conclusions, nor is the intent to presume that my interpretations are objective. Rather, the intent is to represent my own constructed perspectives of my experience as an African-American male in hopes of shedding light on the nuanced complexities of how race is played out in these personal and professional contexts.

Mitchell and Rosiek also suggest that:

> The best autoethnographies highlight the cultural conflicts experienced by ethnographers when they attempt to represent marginalized communities, often marginalized communities of which the author is a member. (4)

So, as an African-American man teaching in predominantly white universities, an autoethnographic approach allows me not only to reflect on my own experiences but to represent my situatedness as an ethnic and racial minority in the wide array of roles and social contexts (Denzin 2000; Lincoln and Denzin 2000; Maines 1993, 2001).

The use of narrative for this study recognizes the importance of stories in the process of developing and representing people's constructions of the world around them. From a narrative perspective, stories are said to define our experience; that is, our own narratives help to create a coherent, yet subjective, understanding of our life experiences; i.e. sense-making and meaning-making (Mancuso and Sarbin 1983; Sarbin 1986; Scheibe 1986; Polkinghorne 1988, 1991). According to a narrative psychology, stories provide people with somewhat stable understandings of themselves and how they relate to the world; in addition, through plots, stories help people to cohere experiences by providing people with temporal and spatial arrangements of events that yield understandings such as cause and effect. By placing this case within the context of narrative, it is hoped that the stories serve to present my understandings of my encounters with race and yield rich and unique interpretations.

I employ writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson 2000). I use writing as a tool for presenting and analyzing the data (i.e. my stories). According to Richardson (2000), writing can be used as a method of inquiry that engages the researcher in a cycle of reflection that can result in deeper 'knowing.'

Richardson states that:

> [writing is] a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic. Although we usually think about writing as a mode of 'telling' about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of 'knowing' – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable. (923)

Therefore, I use writing not only to convey my stories, but also as a dialogical method of engaging in a process of reflexivity; that is, reflecting and interrogating my storied understandings of my experiences as a Black man in higher education. Through these acts of reflexive writing, I hope to further my own sense-making.

The methodology of this study places me in the roles of both researcher and subject; these roles are intertwined and complex. The double helix is, again, a useful metaphor for describing the dynamic interaction between these two roles. As the subject, I attempt to richly describe and recount my experiences. In the role of researcher, I am interpreting and analyzing incidents regarding race in my personal and academic lives. There are times when

these roles are quite distinct and other times when they converge and overlap. The polyphony and dialogism described by Bakhtin's writing on literary criticism seems particularly relevant to and exemplified by the resulting shifts in narrative and analytical voices that emerge in this study (Vice 1997).

Though the stories reflect my biased and subjective constructed views of the world, I believe I can create a sense of authenticity by writing in an open and reflective manner. Given that the study is grounded in a constructivist view, the rigor of this piece does not come from my ability to approach objectivity. Instead, the rigor of the work should be judged based on my ability to create rich, authentic and meaningful contexts for my interpretations so that the reader may get an intimate view of how I arrived at my own constructions. Thus, my goal is to get you, the reader, to see through my eyes. Ultimately, however, it is up to you, the reader, to judge the verity and usefulness of this research.

When is it an issue of race? Choosing what stories to tell

Before proceeding, it seems important to comment on one other issue. When it comes to defining an issue as being 'racial,' I recognize that every issue or event is constructed from a unique perspective. So, if I code an event as having to do with race, I understand that another person might not agree. In my view, the only I criteria I use in considering whether an incident is about race is that either a participant or an observer codes the incident as racial. Since race is a subjective construct, it only makes sense to rely on the subjectivity of people to define incidents as involving race. In my role as a researcher, I am solely responsible for determining whether and which stories are presented. I have found that there is not always consensus as to what does or does not constitute an issue of race. This lack of agreement is part and parcel of the conflict of perspective and plays out in my own reflections. At times, readers may find themselves interpreting an experience as having to do with something other than race. In my view this is a phenomenon worth exploring but it is beyond the scope and intent of this study.

Storied experiences and reflections

Me and my luggage

I am Black. I am really a racial mutt, but as far back as I can remember my family and I always used the term 'Black' to describe my racial self. In fact, I didn't officially learn that I was bi-racial until I was in college. But let me go back to a much earlier period in my life. In 1968 I was a year old; I was adopted into a 'white,'[1] German-Irish family in Omaha, Nebraska. About 14 years earlier, my adoptive parents had met while attending Creighton University. They would later marry in 1955. In the following years, my mother taught grade school, while my father attended Creighton Law School. They were a young married couple and soon started a family. Michele was born in 1960, and Matt came along in 1962. The Miller family adopted me in 1968 – I was a year old at the time. In the Fall of '69, Jenny, my younger sister, was born. My siblings, Michele, Matt and Jenny, are the biological offspring of my parents. I was the only adopted member of this relatively typical White family – well as typical as an upper-class, White family that featured a father who would soon become a prominent litigation attorney and local politician, and a mother who was a supportive, creative homemaker, and an academic in her own right. While not particularly radical, my parents were liberal relative to their conservative surroundings in Omaha.

In the mid-1950s, while my Dad was attending college, he came to know Fr. Markoe, a White Jesuit priest who taught mathematics and physics at Creighton University. Though Fr Markoe was a professor, he was far more recognized as a social activist. Fr Markoe created the DePorres Club at Creighton. The club was an interracial student organization that went out into the community to advocate for social justice for Blacks. Prior to his arrival in Omaha, Fr Markoe and his brother William, also a Jesuit priest, were run out of St Louis due to their radical belief that Blacks should have the same rights as Whites. Fr Markoe is somewhat of a civil rights legend in Omaha, Nebraska. He was community organizing and staging sit-in civil rights protests to advocate for Blacks in the 1940s and '50s, well before the more visible protests in the 1960s. Omaha, like most cities in the United States, has its own history of racial oppression, torture and lynching.[2] My parents were so inspired by Fr Markoe that they memorialized their hero by giving me his surname as a middle name. Even though my mother denies it, I always imagined that my adoption was an expression of my parents' commitment to pushing themselves and others forward in race relations and civil rights. Mom always said that they weren't looking for a non-White child. I was simply the one they wanted. My childhood, steeped in an upper class, White, privileged, suburban world, was confusing at best. I always had a sense of being different, but the complexity of this difference would continually challenge my understanding of how race played out in the context of my personal and professional lives.

When I was two or three years old, my parents gave me a six-inch tall statuette of a little boy and a dog for Christmas. The statuette was unpainted and made from a milk-chocolaty hard plastic. The base of the statuette read 'Black is Beautiful.' I kept it prominently displayed over the years of my youth. I saw myself in it. As a child the statuette was more than merely a symbol of me; it *was* me. I would talk to it – to myself. I also remember hiding it, cursing at it, hitting it, and throwing it when being 'Black' and different was especially difficult. So, I had become conscious of my being different at a very early age.

Michael Jordan eat your heart out

In 1993 I was in the third year of my graduate studies at Cornell. I thought it would be a good idea to present a paper at a conference as a part of my graduate school experience. I had a paper accepted for presentation at the annual meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA); it was in Houston that year. I scrambled a few days prior to get a coherent draft of my dissertation proposal together for the presentation. I wasn't sure if I had the substance of a good proposal and presentation; nevertheless, the presentation went fairly well. I got ahead of myself a few times, but my voice didn't crack and I guess it all made sense.

After my presentation, I went to a reception and began talking to some well-known scholars in my field. At first I hadn't really noticed the attention I was getting. I was talking excitedly about how I had given my first academic presentation and how relieved I was to be nearing the completion of my dissertation. The attention started as a nice pat on the back from a friend who had attended my presentation, but soon the reception turned into something that must have resembled a scene from *Six Degrees of Separation*. I was introduced, and sometimes reintroduced, to no less than a dozen full professors and deans from prestigious universities all over the country. Typical of me in social settings, I was glib and gregarious. What started as me sipping a nervous glass of wine and standing awkwardly along on the periphery had turned into a night of fame that made me feel like Michael Jordan – I could do no wrong. I was backslapping and laughing alongside people whom I would later be fortunate enough to call my mentors, colleagues and friends.

Before that night of exchanging business cards in Houston, I had planned on landing a job as an administrator in the State Department of Education in Nebraska, as a central office administrator in a local school district, or as an assistant principal in a high school. However, after that night, I had five or six leads on tenure track openings at Research I universities. This was the first time it had *ever* occurred to me that I might find a career in higher education. Until that evening, I had never entertained the idea of working in higher education. Thinking of myself as an academic was almost ridiculous to me. Not that I didn't think I could do it, but the thought had truly never crossed my mind.

At some point during the 'Cinderella at the ball' evening, I began to silently question what was going on around me. I began to wonder why these people would be interested in having me apply for a job as an assistant professor without them having any substantive knowledge of my background or credentials. I began to figure out that a young Black man who was about to earn a doctorate was a rare event. Though the question of why I was so popular that evening was raised in my mind, I certainly didn't let my ambivalence inhibit me from making my way round the room and enjoying the rest of the evening. By that time in my life, I had already learned that any leg-up my skin may provide me would easily be nullified by the downsides of being Black.

Ahh to be six again

When I was six I knew that I was different, but I didn't have the sort of cultural and historical understanding that would have allowed me to conceptualize my difference in a broader way. It would take years before I would develop an understanding of how, let alone why, the color of my skin could manifest itself in the minds of others.

My schooling on race began one day when I was seven years old; I was playing in the dirt with my best friend, Pete.

'My mom is prejudice,' he announced.
Unwittingly, I would be undoing my bliss by asking, 'What's that mean?'
In a helpful tone, Pete clarified, 'She doesn't like Black people; she calls them niggers.'
My syllogistic mind engaged,

If A, I am Black;
if B, she doesn't like Black people;
if C, She calls them niggers;
then, D she doesn't like me, and
E, I am a nigger.

Over the course of the next days, I struggled to make sense of this conversation.

I had been in Pete's house countless times.
I had taken care of his family's dog while they were away on vacation.
His mom could be loud and unrefined at times, but she was oh so sweet
with her southern accent and polite salutations.

There is something very wrong here; there is a problem.
She is a grown-up; she is pretty; she is well-liked, she is my best friend's mom.

She is White. It can't be her.
It's me. I am the problem. I am a nigger.

She is nice. She is good to me, in spite of my deficit. She is good.
I am bad. I am the problem. I am a nigger.

That day began an internal dialogue that would preoccupy a great deal of my psychological time and space for years to come. For much of my life, Black and White racial categories were at odds with each other. While I knew I was Black in almost everyone's eyes, most people did not see that I was also culturally White and, to some extent, racially White.

Imposter: Cinderella is not Black

Three years after my night of *fame* in Houston, I was attending a reception hosted by a prestigious school at the annual meeting of the American Educational research Association. I was mixing with faculty, students and academics. Two years earlier I had landed a job as an assistant professor at NYU. I was in my glib, social mixing mode that I had developed early on in life. That night, I received an envelope from the Dean who was hosting the reception. In the letter was an offer for a position. The school had been courting me for the past year. Everyone was congratulating me for receiving the offer. I was Cinderella at the ball. I was into the moment and feeling proud and self-assured; that is, until I was introduced to one of my future colleagues. His first words to me were, 'What are your credentials?' I was set back a bit. I thought to myself, 'Credentials? What is he talking about?' I had a doctorate like most every other academic. I didn't interpret this question as typical cocktail-party conversation. He hadn't asked me about my area of teaching or research. I immediately coded his question as, 'What are you doing here?' I felt defensive and was unsure how to respond. I concluded that his question was code for, 'Blacks are suspect in their abilities, and I suspect your abilities.' I felt like I had to prove my worth to him.

Rather than turning away from him, or deflecting the perceived racist attack, I spent the next 15 minutes trying to convince him that I had what it takes to fit in. I had internalized what I had believed to be his racist view and accommodated it by positioning myself in a place of having to justify my presence among Whites. In a sense, I think I was attempting to prove that I was not Black, or more accurately, I was attempting to prove that I was White. I fell into the simplistic trap of viewing my race as being binary. There was a struggle going on between how I was being perceived and the view I had of myself. While I felt very comfortable among Whites, in my mind I believed that I was a curiosity to him.

In retrospect, I don't believe there was malice in his inquiry. Nevertheless, I still believe there seemed to be a racist element to his question. Regardless, the question raised my own issues of being different. By this time in my life, I had numerous experiences of patronizing kindness. It's that subtle form of 'benevolent' racism that often would push me into a mode of defending myself and attempting to fit in. Like anyone, I wanted to be legitimate and taken seriously. But, instead, I began to operate within – what I had interpreted to be – his belief that Blacks are 'less than'. Perhaps the descriptions and portrayal of Blacks from my childhood exposures to newscasts, movies and Pete's mom were more potent than the positive messages I had received from my family and close friends.

My reaction to this incident flies in the face of my reaction to the overly positive attention that I received earlier in my academic life when I had felt like Michael Jordan. During that incident, I was concerned that people were not all that interested in what I brought in terms of credentials. In that case, I believed that people were fawning over me because I was Black and finishing my dissertation. However, in this other context, I interpreted the questioning of my credentials as racist. In both cases, I was unable to interpret behaviors outside of a racial context, regardless of whether or not the behaviors left me

feeling supported or belittled. I hate to think that I constantly navigate social contexts with race on my mind. I had been taught that race doesn't matter. However, I guess I shouldn't be surprised by my sensitivity to being different, since I stuck out like a sore thumb in every setting in my youth, even at home.

May I touch your hair? An exotic curiosity

I learned early in life that I was odd and peculiar to those who encountered me in their White world. I arrived at this understanding when I started to see how others reacted to me and learned that being Black meant being bad, peculiar, exotic, weak, helpless and/or deviant. In the beginning, I had very little context within which to understand these messages. Other than the label of 'Black,' I had no connection with Black people that were represented in the media and in the short ventures out of the world of White suburbia. All I saw were representations of Black people without any explanation for why they were considered undesirable in the eyes of people like Pete's mom.

At that time in my life, the majority of real-world experiences I had with people of color involved my family's weekly journeys from the wealthy suburbs of Omaha to the near North side of downtown. This is where we attended Holy Family Catholic Church. This neighborhood was the only place where our family would routinely encounter racial minorities, the poor and the mentally ill. The parish had a social justice agenda based on liberal spirituality and politics. The parishioners were mostly White but were drawn to this inner-city church by a charismatic pastor who made religion relevant to social inequity and the obligation of people to live a life that addressed moral issues of justice on a daily basis. Unlike the members of the congregation, the community that surrounded the church was populated by people to whom the inner city belonged … the dispossessed, the mentally ill, the homeless families and opportunity-deprived ethnic minorities. As a child from the wealthy suburbs, I was fearful of these people. I had a limited capacity or context with which to process *these* people and make sense of their world or how they fit into mine. In fact, they didn't fit into my everyday world.

In retrospect, it seems that a cultural pedagogy had initialized an internal discourse. I began to learn and reinforce negative images of 'Blackness' through my developing racialized view of the world. Encounters with ethnic minorities, poverty and otherwise 'ab-normative' people were rare, yet, when they occurred, these encounters were powerfully uncomfortable. Seeing these non-White, poor or otherwise marginalized people made me acutely self-aware and painfully self-conscious of my own difference and hinted to me that I was, perhaps, like *them*. The role *these* people played in my mind was to remind me and reinforce my own sense of being different in my otherwise White world. It also served to reinforce my whiteness, that is, my White cultural lens.

This pedagogy of racial difference continued throughout my childhood. During the summer of 1979, I was between sixth and seventh grade. I was 12 years old. My family moved to a farm three miles outside of Blair, Nebraska, a small agricultural town about 30 miles from Omaha. My world went from running around neighborhoods and shopping malls to standing in the middle of an 80-acre farm wondering to myself, 'How did I get here?' and 'Will I survive?' I reluctantly joined 4-H and Future Farmers of America and learned the cultural ways of a White rural farming community. Though there was a great deal of adaptation on my part, what remained the same was the fact that I was still different, still that 'colored boy.' So, whether I was in my White world at home watching Roots, in school learning about slavery, in shopping malls filled with images of Whiteness, or more rarely in the inner city in the presence of Blacks, I wanted to be invisible, at least in terms of race.

Reinforcing my racial difference were the frequent requests by adults and children alike, 'May I touch your hair?' In fact, sometimes without asking, people would reach toward my head to feel the strange textures on my head. Most times I refused or lurched away from extending touches. The 'petting' only reinforced my role as deviant, freakish and subordinate. As a racial mutt (African, German and Irish), my hair has a full range of color and textures. While most people hadn't seen anything other than nappy, kinky, brown hair, upon closer inspection I had a full spectrum of colors and textures on my head: browns, blacks, reds, blondes, kinks, curls, waves and straights. I learned to loathe my hair and what it represented. While there was little I could do to actually become racially invisible, I did have control over one powerful symbol of my racial self: my hair. At the age of 23 I began to erase my racial self once a week with hair clippers.

As a kid, I remember thinking that, 'if people only knew me, they would see that I was no different than they were, and then they would like me.' However, I now have to consider that my motives may have also been informed by an unconscious desire to create distance between who I was and the negative stereotypes of Blacks that I believed people were projecting onto me. In spite of the many positive messages that I received from family and friends, I was well aware of negative representations of Blacks through my encounters with people, TV and other negative representations of Blacks that permeated my childhood. So, upon deeper inspection, I see that, in addition to wanting people to get to know me for 'who I am', I also think that I believed on some level that if people knew that I was not like *other* Blacks, they would like me. It is hard for me to acknowledge this but, in all honesty, I think that I believed that my fitting in my White world depended on my ability to convey to others, and feel for myself, a sense of 'sameness.'

My hair served as a robust metaphor for my identity and how I interpreted my situatedness in terms of race. From a distance, my hair and I appeared Black, but upon closer inspection people would see that my hair and I are complex, messy and blurred. I can now see that I had unwittingly denied myself and others of my own complexity. Ironically, my attempt to erase my race may have simply reinforced a narrow interpretation of who I was – who I am.

Lessons of my own embedded whiteness

In keeping with the external source of pedagogies of racial difference in my youth, most of my involvements in matters of race in higher education had been initiated externally; this is to say that, typically, I was approached and drawn into most of my dealings with race in higher education. However, I do recall a couple of incidents early in my career when I encountered a situation and injected myself into discordant racial discourses, but most times I hadn't consciously initiated racial discourse on my own. Don't get me wrong, race was central to my experience and understanding as a human being but, most times, I processed more day-to-day issues of race silently and negotiated my way through social contexts without articulating my interpretations. Again, wanting to be invisible.

While I had a sense of my own difference and how it might play out in the minds of others, I hadn't always grasped how my perceptions of sameness and difference vis-à-vis other people's perceptions could interact in very unexpected ways. I have learned a great deal about, what I refer to as, my *embedded whiteness*[3] through my interactions with people of various ethnic and racial identities. The following story illustrates how surface understandings of sameness and difference are not always consistent and are often based on less than obvious definitions of difference.

Bill: slings and arrows

A student I never met before stormed into my office and accused me of racial discrimination. I was a bit stunned given the fact that he, like me, was African-American. I was the chair of the certification program for educational administration at Ohio State. The student had phoned prior to his unexpected visit. He was upset that I wouldn't allow him to substitute an elective course for a required course. His situation was typical; the schedule of course offerings conflicted with the schedule of students' lives. However, there had been a history of inappropriate course substitutions in the program several years before I took the post of chair. I was charged by the educational administration faculty to uphold the integrity of the certification program and limit the willy-nilly substitutions for required courses.

My only interaction with this young man, prior to his bursting into my office, had been a phone call I received a few days earlier. I had never met this man before in my life. When I reflect back on the phone conversation, I do not recall interpreting him as manifesting any particular racial or ethnic identity. In fact, I would say that, from my own embedded whiteness, he sounded 'normal' (Maher and Tetreault 1997), normal, from the standpoint that I interpreted him as being typical and usual. However, when he abruptly entered my office I saw a young man who was in fact a lot like me, young, brown skinned, multiracial, and who spoke with my own, unremarkable, White, suburban accent. He ranted that the only reason why he was being denied his request was because he was Black. In a raised voice, he accused me of denying him equal treatment. I was stunned, disoriented and confused.

My defensive response to him was firm but subdued. I recalled for him that we had never met and that my handling of his request was not based on race. I continued by reiterating that the policy on substituting courses would not permit his request. He left my office as quickly as he had entered. A day later, I received a long letter from the student asking me to accept his apology and to understand his frustration with the bureaucracy at Ohio State. He explained that in his work as a teacher he instilled in his students 'of minority backgrounds, the importance of not using race as an excuse in not being successful.' He acknowledged having done the same thing that he so strongly advocated against. I was still stinging from his accusation and didn't reply to his letter, something I regret to this day. I understood his frustration with the institution, but remained puzzled and upset by the experience. This was the first time that I had been accused of being a racist.

Implicit in Bill's reaction to his treatment was an allegation that the organization was treating him poorly and that this treatment was linked to him being Black. I easily deflected his charge of me being racist since I had never met Bill before. Aiding my minimized response to his charge was the fact that I was African-American too. These facts gave me a psychological out. I was able to characterize his charge as absurd. Nevertheless, I was impacted by his charge and it stuck with me. On some level it challenged my understanding of who I was racially and what I represented.

Looking back on it, I believe that I had been linked to institutional racism. Though, at that time, I didn't see it that way. I saw Bill's behavior as outlandish, inappropriate and inaccurate, and having nothing to do with me. I saw it as Bill's insecurities about himself surfacing. I saw Bill as playing the race card as leverage against an unwieldy bureaucracy. However, after unpacking Bill's behavior, I have a more complex view of what might have been going on. Bill certainly had a life full of experience as minority, which taught him that fairness was something that was not expected, especially for Blacks. It makes sense that he would project his prior experience with the university onto an agent of the institution: me. On the surface, the accusation seemed illogical and manipulative to me: however, my reaction could indicate my own unsurfaced issues that prevented me from seeing the world

through Bill's eyes. I didn't ask Bill why he thought he was being treated unfairly. I didn't probe deeper into his willingness to blame me for his frustrating experience. I didn't seek to identify with him. I didn't legitimize his experience, let alone become an advocate for him. Rather, my response was informed by defending myself against the charge of racism and his letter vindicated me. What would have happened if I had not defended the charges of racism and interpreted them as expressions of frustration? I believe I could have been a better advisor by focusing on his needs and less on my own need to be free from guilt.

Double agent

My childhood placed me in a variety of contexts where I was uncertain of how I would be received. What I came to believe was that if I gave people the opportunity to get to know me, they would generally like me. Being around White people is an intimately familiar experience for me. Like me, many people of 'difference' are facile in negotiating their way throughout the United States' countless and varied White cultures. I had scarcely experienced anything other than Whiteness in my childhood. Therefore, when I arrived in the academy and encountered mainstream White American culture, I had no *newcomer* syndrome, no surprise or sense-making that Louis speaks of in his work on the process of enculturation of new members (1980).

I viewed myself as a double agent for race relations and class. Given that I was uniquely situated as a minority whose experience was embedded in White culture, I was able to move within White America with great facility. I have had friends who lived in squalor, both urban and rural. I am well acquainted with the workings of the socioeconomic 'elite.' I am equally comfortable shooting a game of pool with farmers in a small town bar, talking about farm implements and putting up hay as I am mixing with socialites at a black-tie fundraiser discussing economic trends. I believed that my unique background allowed me to see and identify with both sides of competing narratives regarding race.

Having this unique perspective gave me the sense that I understood the dynamics of racial conflict and that I was able to see through walls that other, more entrenched, more polarized views obstructed. However, I have come to believe that I adopted a somewhat naive perspective that, while useful in negotiating my way through racial conflict in a relatively cursory and harmonious way, may simply have reflected and reinforced my own embedded whiteness. This approach glossed over my unique experiences and perspectives that accompany being a racial minority. It not only ignored the complexities and differences that are central to my experience and identity but allowed me to overlook the complexities and experiences of others who were similarly situated; that is, those who represented something other than mainstream whiteness.

As a self-described double agent, I believed that if people knew me as a person, they would realize that I was no different than they were. I didn't know it at the time, but I was learning one of the most powerful lessons I would ever learn. I was learning about the power of relationships. I learned that by establishing relationships, people gain understanding, which can lead to compassion and acceptance. When we connect with people, we are able to walk for a bit in their shoes. Early in my life, I used this understanding as a means of survival – a means to negotiate and navigate through my White world. But now I understand the powerful application of sharing oneself with others and how it can help people move beyond narrow views of the world and toward more complex understandings of individuals, as opposed to cursory generalizations.

However, this self-assured, even arrogant belief that I had a handle on race was deeply flawed. My understanding would be challenged and prove limited in its capacity to help me

deal with my own embedded views. When I fancied myself a double agent, I didn't see my behaviors as a denial of race as an issue or identity, but rather as an attempt to move beyond the issue. However, after having interrogated my own thoughts and feelings in juxtaposition to my behavior, I often went well beyond seeking understanding and pursuing common ground. I often sought acceptance through self-subordination. I believe I sought legitimacy by displaying my whiteness.

Sarah: can you deal with him?

In spite of my efforts to create distance between myself and racial politics, the politics often found me. My desire to avoid race was not due to a lack of interest on my part, because privately I was very concerned about issues of race. On some level I was like a toddler who thinks he/she is invisible to others when he/she closes his/her eyes. I failed to see that people would interpret and position me regardless of whether I acknowledged race publicly. So simply opting out of racial politics didn't necessarily make race go away.

The scarcity of African-American professors made me a magnet for students, faculty and administrators dealing with racial politics. I found myself amid complaints, official grievances, rumors and speculation regarding race. These events forced me to deal with race in a way that challenged my own understandings. Unknown to me, I had two embedded perspectives that were operating simultaneously. Being forced into racial politics resulted in the clash between my White, liberal, politically correct, Pollyannaish views and my deeply held, yet nonpublic, view that I was different and my skin color was the source of this difference.

One incident stands out as an example of learning about my own embedded whiteness vis-à-vis other people's projections of blackness onto me. I was in my fourth year as an assistant professor when a colleague, Sarah, approached me. She asked me to help a young, male, African-American graduate student who, in her words, 'seems to have a problem dealing with White women in positions of authority.' Sarah was a fifty-something senior professor in my department. She wanted me to talk to Jeff to see if I could get him to engage in the classroom activities and encourage him to complete course assignments in a timely manner. Without hesitation, I met with the student and had several subsequent conversations. My role in the first meeting with Jeff had a big brother/little brother feel to it. I was the 'good cop.' I tried to get a sense of where he was coming from, and offered my empathy and advice. He acknowledged that he sat in the back of Sarah's class and felt detached and uninterested. He also admitted to sleeping during her class on occasion. I suggested that he move to the front and be more attentive. I lectured him on how being a conscientious student would be rewarded in higher education. He seemed agreeable and said he would follow my advice.

I met with Jeff a second time. During the meeting he expressed increased anger and frustration with the situation in Sarah's class. He said that, from the start, Sarah was unfair to him and treated him differently because he was Black. I could see the anger and pain in his eyes. I knew he believed that racism was a factor and I silently knew that he was probably right. While agreeing with Jeff that the 'dynamic' was most likely not entirely his fault, I gave him clichéd advice. 'You need to get through the class in order to be successful in the program.' I continued, 'There will be instructors who you will not like and who may not like you, but you need to deal with them and get through the class.' I attempted to give him a sense of his own authority in terms of how he could influence the dynamic; at least that's what I thought I was doing.

There was no doubt in my mind that tension existed on both sides. My colleague was very upset and visibly unnerved when she and I talked about the situation. Jeff was rough

around the edges and would glare directly into your eyes if angered or offended. Sarah was in unfamiliar territory; she conveyed fear. I knew she was having trouble seeing this guy as a student, rather than a thug. I had seen the same look of fear on the face of others and heard the same language Sarah had used to describe her dilemma. Sometimes I had seen and heard these things in regard to the behavior of other young Black men, but many times, I had experienced it with respect to how other, non-Blacks, interpreted my own behavior.

A few weeks later in a corridor conversation, which included Sarah, me and another faculty member, Sarah announced that she needed to have a meeting with Jeff, but that there was 'no way' she would meet with him alone. She whispered fearfully, 'I have no idea what he might do. If he gets violent, I can't defend myself against him.' Sarah's expression of fear raised the eyebrows of my other colleague and turned my stomach. Sarah was a verbalizing the fear that I routinely encounter when I walk to my car after teaching a night class. White women, young and old, scurrying past me, occasionally glancing up with anticipatory terror in their eyes. Clutching themselves, their belongings, their hearts … their humanity. What these women never know, and cannot know, is that I am no threat to their well-being. But rather, under almost any circumstance, I would act to protect them against any threat.

Jeff was unsuccessful in negotiating Sarah's class. He later enrolled in two of my courses but did not regularly attend. When he was there, he rarely participated. He failed one of my courses and ended up dropping out of the program. I felt sick about it. But due to my embedded perspective, I was unable to see my role in Jeff's departure.

After writing about the incident, I have come to see that I had asked Jeff to accommodate Sarah's behavior, but I hadn't asked her to accommodate his. In some ways it would be comforting to attribute my differential treatment of the two parties to the fact that I was an untenured professor and Sarah was a senior professor. At least in that scenario, I would be able to provide some political rationale for my accommodating her whiteness. But that wasn't the case. I didn't fear political reprisal from confronting Sarah. After reflecting on this incident, I began to see where I had fallen prey to my own race habits, my own embedded whiteness. On an unconscious level I had learned that when dealing with issues of racial intolerance, it was up to me and other racial minorities to accommodate Whites.

There are several troubling aspects of my behavior in this scenario. My actions validated Sarah's perspective, invalidated Jeff's, and demonstrated my own racist worldview. In Sarah's case, I perceived her as fragile, naïve and ill-equipped to deal with Jeff as a person. In doing so, I cheated her of an opportunity to grow by not raising the troubling aspects of the situation. With respect to Jeff, though I nodded and understood the situation as he explained it to me, I told him that it was up to him to make the situation better. I had left it up to a 22-year-old kid who had just started his master's program. I put the responsibility of reshaping Sarah's scared, yet sacred, White woman perspective in his hands. I communicated that he needed to change, but that the successful, middle-aged professor was the one who needed to be protected and coddled.

My need to be needed, by both Sarah and Jeff, allowed me to participate in the drama without questioning, let alone noticing, the larger racial context and how my participation would reinforce the status quo of racial politics. Sarah coming to me, a Black man, was a not-so-subtle statement that she perceived her situation as being a problem of race and that she needed to find someone who 'understood' the student and would help him be a 'good boy.' Even if I hadn't subjugated Jeff, my agreeing to 'help' Sarah legitimized and reinforced the racist pedagogy of difference for everyone involved. By far the most troubling part of the story followed Jeff's departure from the program. He wrote me a letter about two months after he had left the program. In the letter, he accepted responsibility for his lack of success. Even though he played a part in this theater, Sarah and I played potent roles that

probably made it especially difficult for him to survive. In this Orwellian twist, he loved Big Brother. I had colonized Jeff.

First day of class: ninth grade

It was the first day of class, 1981. I was in the 9th grade at Blair High School. All ninth-graders were required to take American Government Today. The students were settling in and talking with each other before the teacher, Mr Neff, began his lecture. He calmed the students and focused our attention toward the front of the room. He began the course with an introduction that characterized the United States as a groundbreaking nation that wrested itself from a monarchy and developed a form of government that was based on the ideal that all people are created equal and should have a voice in the governance of the newly established country. Not 10 minutes into this ideological preamble, Mr Neff redirected his attention and looked directly into the eyes of several students as if to speak more directly to all of us in the classroom. To underscore the democratic ideals of the United States of American, he solemnly stated, 'anyone of you can become the President of the United States.' In the first seconds following this declaration students were quiet, seemingly reflecting in awe of the possibility that they, indeed, could become a future leader of our country.

Shattering that sacred moment, my hand shot up into the air waiting to be called on. When Mr Neff saw my arm enthusiastically waving, a look of exasperation came over his face. Mr Neff and I knew each other. Though I had never had him as a teacher prior to that first day of class, he coached junior high football and track, sports I had been involved in. He knew how I thought and he knew what I was about to contribute to the discussion. He called on me with a timbre of reluctance, 'Mister Miller….' I adroitly announced, 'There is no way that I will ever become the President of the United States!' Everyone in the class, including Mr Neff, seemed immediately and implicitly to know where I was going with this. I didn't, nor did I need to, explain that I was referring to race as an attribute that excluded me from the possibility of becoming the President. Heads nodded, including Mr Neff's. Jenny Major, an outspoken girl from the wrong side of the tracks, added, 'and there ain't gonna to be no woman President neither.' Fiore Venezini, the daughter of a local retailer, agreed with a tentative, 'Yeah?' as if to ask Mr Neff for an explanation. The remainder of the class discussion, which was supposed to be focused on American government, was redirected toward issues of race and gender and denied opportunities and access to political power based on what people are as opposed to who people are.

The lessons so often proclaimed in public were called into question. Black people don't become President. People can't be what they want to be. Merit doesn't trump physical characteristics. Girls can't be strong and vocal. Men can't be soft and sensitive. Poor people can't lift themselves out of poverty. For me, egalitarianism and merit-based achievement were idealist visions that were routinely so contradicted by the more mundane and subtle curriculum of my everyday life.

Struggling with projected blackness
Just another day at work

Today I got home around 7 p.m. and started rehashing the day's events with my partner. I told him about the program faculty meeting and how I reacted to my colleagues when they questioned a course that I proposed to offer during the upcoming summer term. There were

a large number of doctoral students who had not been sufficiently prepared to commence dissertation research. So, in response to numerous requests for independent studies, I decided to offer a course to meet their needs. Prior to the faculty meeting, I had sent a memo and a course proposal to my colleagues. The course proposal was on the agenda for today's meeting. When the meeting turned to the course I had proposed, it happened. Instead of talking about the course, its rationale and the students' need, my colleagues directed the discussion toward me and whether or not it was a good idea for me to teach the course. My colleagues wanted me to think through the commitment of time and my personal motives for proposing a research seminar. The feedback immediately focused on whether or not Dan was making a good decision. 'Huh?' I was expecting feedback on the substance and content of the proposed course. It felt like I was like being asked, 'What are your credentials?'

While masking my feelings of anger and smallness, I attempted to shift the discussion back to the merits of the course: I reiterated the rationale presented in the course proposal. 'We have students who need help. We need to find ways to help them. I can't conduct five independent studies this summer to provide remediation for each of these students separately.' Privately, I was pissed. In my mind I was like, 'What the fuck?! Read the fucking proposal! What other reasons do you want me to give you for teaching the course? Should I tell you that I am doing it for the money? Do you want me to tell you that I need a new roof, or that my partner is on a fixed income and that money is tight? I want to teach this course because it makes my life easier.' While these personal concerns factored into my decision to propose the course, these factors were none of my colleagues' damn business.

After I had briefly redirected the discussion back to the substance of the proposal, one colleague refused to let go of what felt like a professional inquisition. Reminiscent of the dubious gentility of Pete's mom, a colleague said, 'Are you using this as an excuse for not doing what you need to do?' She was implying that I should be writing during the summer. Whoa!! That cut to the quick. Especially coming from her. Thoughts raced through my mind. 'She didn't have a single publication! She'd never chaired a single dissertation committee! She was untenured! She was appointed above me in rank! She was privileged to the point of celebrity without much of anything substantive to show for it.' I later concluded that her act of continuing to focus on my performance was a tactic I had seen before. It seemed to be an attempt to deflect attention away from her own issues and other me to the point of denying her own privilege. It seemed like that same ole 'pick yourself by your own bootstraps like I did' crap that people born into wealth say to the poor.

Her tactic, intentional or not, worked. I was in an impossible situation. I wanted to lash out and point the finger back at her, but my senior colleagues were buying into her sleight of hand and at some level I knew I would look foolish and risk affirming their beliefs if I became defensive. By that time I was really hurting inside. I felt powerless and defeated; I felt coddled, protected and belittled. Neither of the other two untenured professors in my department faced this sort of public undressing.

This wasn't the first or the last time that colleagues would reframe my ideas, proposals and contributions by redirecting attention to my person, rather than the substance of my work. In my professional life as an academic, I routinely experienced 'protective' acts, projected deficits, assumed lack of ability and outright subjugation. Most, if not all, of these acts were intended to 'help.' Instead, these acts felt belittling and reduced me. Again, my response was to continue to fight against the notion that I was different. I desperately wanted to be treated like my colleagues, all of whom were White.

No watermelon for me, thanks just the same

I remember an experience in high school when I psychologically distanced myself from 'blackness.' I went to a virtually all-White school in a virtually all-White community of agrarians. I was a junior and Troy Apple was a sophomore. Troy's skin was Black, I mean really Black. He was also an adoptee. He, his sister and I were the only Blacks in the school. Troy and I were both on the football team. Before the school year actually starts, most high schools hold 'two-a-day' practices. 'Two-a-day' means just that; there are two practices each day, one practice at 6 a.m. and another at 1 p.m. These are boot-campish conditioning sessions that occur in the worst part of the summer in Nebraska … August. The weather in Nebraska is mostly unbearable. In the winter, the cold makes organic life-forms brittle, and in the summer, the heat, humidity, bugs and pollens make Dante's inferno look more like the inviting limbo of purgatory, rather than hell.

On the last day of two-a-day practices the coaches brought the team a treat. It was customary and the players always looked forward to this day. I, however, for the past three years, did not care about the event. While the end of the practices was comforting, the treat was always disconcerting. It was watermelon…. I loved watermelon. I grew up on it, but somewhere along the way I had learned about the stigma attached to Blacks eating watermelon. So I grew to hate watermelon and what it represented. I learned to never eat watermelon in any public places, including church picnics, restaurants and the last day of two-a-days. I got to the point where I wouldn't even indulge in the privacy of the family farm. Watermelon became forbidden fruit. It represented evil.

To my horror, after the last day of two-a-day practices in 1984, Troy Apple began to eat the poisonous treat that was mercifully offered by the coaches. He and the other players devoured the sweet melon with the voracity of someone who, while lost in the desert, happens upon an oasis and with the same naivety that both Snow White and Adam must have enjoyed before meeting their unfortunate encounters with fruit. I was standing off to the side, not eating, not looking, but looking. I saw how much Troy was enjoying his treat. I looked at him with disgust and disdain. On some level I knew he was innocent – but on another I was angered by his ignorance. He was somehow betraying me.

As if my own disdain and contempt weren't enough, a coach made a remark about Troy eating the poisonous fruit, 'Look at him go!' This reinforced my fear of the emerging racist interpretations. A couple of other coaches and players caught on and added their own commentary. This simply fed Troy's hunger and my sense of shame. Troy was a good kid, a happy kid and the attention was not unfamiliar to him. People loved Troy but, that day, Troy was the subject of a cruel racist joke. He would unwittingly laugh with others without knowing they were laughing at him. His ramping up the pace of eating would only fuel the imagery of savagery that accompanied the view of the onlookers. The growing cheers were clandestine jeers – hidden from those who had no idea that a Black man enjoying some fruit was an occasion for a racist joke.

I believe that my avoidant behavior in terms of studying, teaching and conducting research on issues of race was an attempt to distance myself from my own blackness, or maybe how others perceived my blackness. I didn't want to eat the poisonous fruit that would affirm the racist narratives, the 'less-thanness,' the savagery in other people's minds, and probably in my own mind. However, over time, I, like Troy, would be seduced by the sweetness of the fruit and would indulge in my own 'blackness' – like when Sarah asked me to deal with Jeff. I was, in those moments, blackened by higher education.

Feeling hunted

Eventually, in 1999, I would unwittingly play a professional role that was ascribed to me. I bit into the seductive fruit. I became a bona fide token. During an interview for a position I eventually held, the Provost indicated that the university needed me to 'help out with diversity.' I guess that should have raised a red flag, but those kinds of comments were not new to me. I interpreted the comment as a welcoming statement that attempted to convey where the university was headed in these matters. What followed, I hadn't expected or experienced before. At this institution, I would routinely serve as a token Black/minority. I found myself serving on diversity committees and executive committees; I taught the only course on diversity in my program; I took on dislocated and marginalized students who sought me out; and, in my role as a member of the faculty senate, I began to advocate for those without voice. The lack of faculty of color left a huge hole for the few minorities on campus to fill.

At the time, the University Senate did not include representatives of staff or students. Additionally, there were no Black people and only two identifiable Latinos on the panel of faculty and administrators. After having been 'invited' into Senate conversations and proceedings related to diversity, I began to sense a subtle change in the way I was being treated by the university administration. One example involved the Senate's move to add 'sexual orientation and religion' to its non-discrimination policy. My advocacy in that context paralleled the beginning of hostile acts toward me. I was implicitly and explicitly asked to comment on the numerous versions of the policy. Being a somewhat closeted gay man, and obviously a racial minority, I was asked and I assumed responsibility for ensuring that the policy was more than a symbolic attempt to placate growing restlessness among faculty, staff and students who had been witnessing a startling increase in hate crimes and discrimination on campus against people of color, people from various religious traditions and those who were not heterosexual.

In an attempt to qualify and limit the protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and religion, the university added language that qualified the protection of every legally protected group. In effect, it was illegally winding back the hands of time about 40 years. I raised the issue of the illegal nature of this newly proposed policy, which resulted in a different conversation; i.e. how 'equally' should the university protect non-heterosexuals and those from 'other religious traditions' from discrimination. The Provost and others in the administrative ranks made clear that they did not want to see equal protection under the new policy. It soon became obvious to me that, after publicly communicating my position, I had become marginal in the eyes of the administration. My work on the 'diversity' committee's non-discrimination policies, teaching diversity classes and conducting studies on diversity on campus were all acts that reinforced my role as a token. I was provided the role and I played it. As I played the role, I think it became easier to situate me as 'other.'

I was acutely aware and equally certain of the shift in the affect of the administration; my knowledge was based on an accumulation of sensing, intuition and subtle behaviors. My previously 'close' relationship with the Provost became more distant. It felt as if all the hope and trust that he had placed in me during my recruitment and hiring had gone. I guess he expected me to be more 'White,' more 'straight' or more agreeable.

Adding to this marginalization was a growing awareness that my Dean was working to get rid of me. Apparently, shortly after I had begun working at the university, the Dean began a campaign to terminate me. Early on, I did notice that in the eyes of the Dean I could do nothing right or well. From the outset, the Dean denied opportunities and minimized my

contributions. I watched as people around me were promoted, consulted and praised. The Dean didn't ignore me. In fact, the Dean and I spoke frequently. However, in those conversations, the Dean served up hefty portions of patronization with heaps of faux gentility. I'd seen it before. Pete's Mom was an expert at it. She was polite to a science, while secretly readying her carving knife for the surprise main course.

When I first began feeling threatened by my surroundings, I communicated to my close colleagues that I felt that I was being targeted. My colleagues are all White. Some didn't see what I was seeing, others did; all gave me the benefit of the doubt and advised me to keep my head down and not confront these feelings of being marginalized until I was tenured. I uncomfortably agreed to this strategy, even though I realized that I would lose ground in the public relations battle of image management. At the outset, my thoughts were that the differential treatment and deceitful duplicity were largely based on feelings rather than explicitly articulated comments by the Provost or Dean. It wasn't until several years later that I would get a more explicit view of what had been going on behind the scenes.

The 'feeling' that led me to conclude that I was the subject of hidden racism is difficult for me to explain. It is often described as intuition, but I have come to know it as more than that. While the subtlety of hidden racism and other forms of prejudice might lead some people to believe that those who experience it are overly sensitive, I have come to believe that my 'feelings' are really conclusions based on subtle, nevertheless concrete experiences, and that these experiences are not as ethereal as some might think.[4] I recall an incident when an African-American student complained to the President of the university. He was concerned about hate crimes that included assaults and dorm room break-ins complete with racist graffiti and destroyed belongings. The President responded to the student by assuring him that, 'These things happen,' and 'You people shouldn't be so sensitive,' suggesting that the student was not seeing what he was seeing and that he had somehow misinterpreted these 'minor' incidents as being a big deal.

In addition to my intuition, I had some basis for knowing that something wasn't right. I began to hear that the Dean had embarked on a whisper campaign against me, using students, faculty and university administrators as conduits for the messages. I continued to lay low. I knew that my silence allowed the narrative of 'my incompetence' to grow. The Dean's campaign went publicly unchallenged. My silence began to eat at me; it was a choice that suppressed a core aspect of my personality – my desire to confront issues as they arise, to talk about the elephants in the living room, to work through problems. The absence of advocacy for me began to create anxiety and depression in me. I felt like a treed coon: vulnerable, isolated and helpless.

Prior to my experience of being 'hunted,' I had rarely sensed that someone was pursuing a particular racist agenda to bring harm to another individual in academe – at least on the basis of race. Rather, my exposure to prior conflicts relative to race seemed to stem from a lack of understanding. These subtle forms of racism seemed to allow people in power (myself included) to proceed comfortably with their own understandings of the world without confronting how institutional practices and their own embedded racialized views were often manifest in their actions. Until the campaign to discredit and oust me from the university became overt, I used to believe that the most harm that could arise from preserving an oppressive racialized status quo was that it could provide psychological comfort for those in power, allowing the continued devaluation of racialized 'others.' However, through my experience, I learned that embedded racist narratives could morph into powerful scripts and provide a rationale for malice and intentional harm.

In many respects, I found myself in a dynamic similar to that contained in my story of Jeff and Sarah. However, instead of my being complicit in upholding the status quo of

whiteness, I found myself trying to work against it. Ultimately, I had to speak up. I had to surface the issues of differential treatment and the growing hostility I felt surrounding me. This took the form of discreet meetings with my Dean and the Provost. Then everything changed, and not for the better. What began as a behind-the-scenes effort became hostile and overt. When I began to counter the prevailing narrative, the hunt was on.

The long bus ride to school

Knowing that the hunt was on, and that I was the prey, brought me psychologically back to the time when I was in junior high. I was routinely verbally and physically assaulted by three high school boys on the 45-minute bus ride to and from school. In seventh grade I had gone to the 'trailer court' after school to basketball with Frank Summers. We liked to play HORSE and imagined ourselves as Dr J. We were walking past his house to the basketball court when we passed in front of Mike Junior's house. He and his brother were two of the high-schoolers who physically beat me. Mike's father came from under his trailer with a huge monkey wrench; he was dirty and wiping the wrench clean from the plumbing work he had been doing to the home. Mike's father was a big man, not a fat man, but an imposing six foot four inches tall. He looked up and saw Frank and me walking closer past their home. He stepped out into the street in front of us and, using his right hand, raised the wrench above his head. He slapped the wrench into his left hand and began screaming. 'GET OUT OF HERE NIGGER BOY! YOU ARE NOT WELCOME HERE! I'LL BEAT YOU IF I SEE YOU AGAIN!' Anyone who was within a four-block radius would have heard him. I froze in my tracks. Frank tried to get me to move on, but I was stuck in place by terror. I was like cornered prey, yet unable to access the basic behaviors of fight-or-flight responses that are associated with extreme fear. Here was an adult who legitimized the reign of terror on the bus.

If you have never been hunted, you may never understand the feelings that accompany the experience. The emotional toll is crippling. On those bus rides, I was unable to fight back. I didn't have numbers on my side, nor did I have a sense of voice. The farm girl next door was my only protection from physical and verbal assaults. She was big-boned and farm toughened. However, this protection depended on me being in close proximity to her. That meant that if she was sitting with her friends distracted in conversation, or home with the flu, I was on my own. The day she began driving to school was a sad day for me. It meant that my only source of advocacy and protection was gone. The terror of not knowing what would be in store for that day's journey to and from school was seared into my being.

While the assaults did not occur daily, the terror and anxiety was constant. It preoccupied my existence. Adding to the terror was helplessness. After all, the hunt had been sanctioned by Mike's dad and the other adults (including the bus driver) who witnessed the assaults. I couldn't confront the circumstance on my own. I felt totally powerless. I was trapped. I thought that if I sought help from adults, the kids would know I was scared and that their reign of terror was working. If I allowed the status quo to persist, I would have to endure the ever-present terror and anxiety of being preyed upon. I chose to suffer the cruelty. I was unable to seek out advocacy, let alone act as my own advocate.

When I watch films with scenes of escaped slaves being hunted, I immediately feel the adrenaline rush and a breathless pain in my chest of a panic attack. I feel the paranoia and anxiety of the prey. I am taken back to those terrifying bus rides to school. This is the feeling I endured throughout the last five years of working in a hostile environment where the Dean, the Provost and the President targeted me.

Back at work

At work I continued to 'ride the bus', awaiting the next assault. As I rode, I continued to lose my humanity, my sense of self. My identity was lashed, my ego was tied and, eventually, I was professionally lynched for all to see. My decision to speak out was difficult. I had initially heeded the advice from my colleagues to keep my head down, but I had always wanted to fight back. I always wanted to be the Dan who fights, who advocates, who protects. I knew that fighting back would most probably entrench their understandings of who I was. I knew that this tactic could, in fact, increase the power of the racist narrative that had already begun to spread among the rest of the faculty, administrators and students; but I couldn't ride the bus in silence any more. I had to take a stand and I did; however, not without reservations.

The dilemma for me was that, regardless of what course of action I chose, I believed that I would occupy one of the dichotomous positions often assigned to Blacks, especially Black men. I would either be cast(e) into the role of a passive, agreeable house nigger and be ousted from my job, or be seen as an uppity, disagreeable troublemaker simply by fighting for my professional survival. I now have a greater sense of how Jeff might have felt and why he withdrew from the hopeless battle of racial politics. I was correct in my fear of being cast as a villain in this theater of race. Subsequent to my meetings with the Dean and the Provost, the Dean referred to me as a bully and, like Sarah, the Dean seemed to her/himself as the victim. It is hard for me to see the Dean as a victim. The Dean is still the Dean, and I was run out of town.

Reflections on racial filters and politics

Am I racist?

'Am I racist?' I don't believe that most people fully appreciate the depth of this question, and I assume that most people do not view themselves as being racist. Surely white supremacists and the like are able to self-identify and embrace being racist. However, I don't believe most people feel the hatred or malice that is often associated with extreme forms of racism. On the other hand, I do believe that most of us think that since we don't have hostile feelings toward racial others, we are not racist. In my experience, racism is not always about hatred or the desire to dominate, marginalize, brutalize or eliminate other people. Sometimes it is about how we view other people's capabilities. This form of racism seems benevolent and manifests itself in paternalistic behavior, a sort of *noblesse oblige*. This is the form of racism that I see dominating academe and society in general.

Years ago, I would never have concluded that most people are racist, and I would *never* have counted myself as being racist. In the past I separated people who were benevolent from those who were hateful. So, I would never have used the term 'racist' to characterize those who engaged in charity, tolerance and other seemingly non-threatening behaviors that displayed underlying stereotyping or prejudice. To me, these folks, myself included, were either naive or simply products of their environments. However, I believe that it is precisely this sort of thinking and behaving that promotes, sustains and reproduces embedded and institutionalized racism. I have seen both forms of racism, subtle and overt, result in harm and destruction. Additionally, I have seen, by my own example, that racism can take the form of self-subordination. This topic is messy and confusing to me. I can no longer describe racism as one side of a fence, where people with good intentions sit on the other side. It occurs to me that instead of asking myself if I am racist, I may do better to ask myself, 'In what ways am I racist?'

I am struggling to get a better look at my own meta-view of the world. I want to find out how my own prejudice manifests itself in my thoughts, beliefs, interpretations and behaviors. Do I have thoughts, feelings and behaviors governed or influenced by how I view myself and others with regard to race? You bet I do! I can see where I filter and construct my experience through a racialized lens. I can't help but see the world around me in terms of race. I have been hyperconscious of the issue since that time when I was seven and Pete taught me that being Black was not a 'good thing.' I don't believe that I have particular malice toward any given racial group, but I am keenly aware that I frequently interpret the actions of others and myself vis-à-vis race.

Now that I understand that I filter experience through a racialized lens, I find myself interrogating my own reactive thoughts and feelings when I meet people. It is an internal audit of sorts, an interrogation of my initial attitudes and responses and how they might be traced to my own experience and generalized understandings of the world around me. It is an ongoing, real-time, deductive audit. I find myself looking for associations between my past and present constructions in an attempt to understand how my constructions are informed by my experience. In truth, it is difficult to interrogate attitudes in real time. So rather than being masters of our intentions, I guess we are more often in service to our embedded views. So, the question remains, 'Am I racist?' I am. I am unwillingly complicit, but I am. And so, I continually learn about my embedded views of the world. It's not Black and White. It is complicated, messy, and dynamic – a vague, amorphous, moving target.

The disempowering nature of the academy complicated by race

I have seen how higher education can have a disempowering impact on untenured faculty. From my view, the cultural, political and structural elements encountered by junior faculty often take an otherwise adult professional and strip away status, influence and full participation in the workplace. The impact of this socialization is nearly inescapable. Though socialization is an important process by which any organization orients and shapes its new members, in higher education these mechanisms often mute the voice and full participation of junior faculty (Tierney 1997). In each of my academic appointments I have been encouraged, by well-meaning colleagues, to 'Keep your head down,' 'Don't make waves,' and 'Don't jeopardize your future.' This runs counter to a fundamental principle of academe. That is, being forthcoming with ideas and engaging in the free exchange of ideas.

It is known by all untenured faculty that making political enemies can be dangerous; however, when colleagues who are friends, confidants and supporters advise you to be passive and quiet, the damage on the psyches of junior faculty can be greater than having overt adversaries. In my view, the damage occurs on two fronts. First, it constrains junior faculty by not allowing a sense of comfort in expressing who they are and their ideas. Second, it deprives the institution of the full commitments and contributions of its people, people who are arguably in the best position to inject innovation and creativity into the organization.

This phenomenon is exacerbated when dimensions of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, etc. intersect with the low status that accompanies untenured faculty. Though this 'quieting' often appears alongside reassurances of what is best for junior faculty, it is difficult for me not to construct these acts as attempts to maintain the status quo of power in higher education. Even so, the advice from colleagues to lay low is good advice. It's politically savvy because it recognizes a political reality. My problem, however, is that this advice is destructive to my ability to be who I am. To be relegated to low status due to merit, rank and tenure is one thing; however, it is not always possible to disentangle the effects of

low status of professional position from low status due to race. So, even in circumstances where I am quieted like others, I might experience it differently than my White counterparts.

The impact of lying low creates a distance between who I am and what I want others to see. That is, having others see me as equal. The impact on my interior is crushing. At some point in my professional life, this pain became unbearable. As I became more conscious of my own embedded whiteness and how others situated me in their White worlds, the price became too high for me to 'keep still.' In isolation, these acts of quieting resulted in hurt or anger; however, as time passed, there was the cumulative effect of what Quinn (1996) refers to as slow death – a death of confidence, esteem and place.

Discussion

While not intentional, the study could be considered a layered account (Ronai 1995) in that it presents retrospection, introspection, emotional experience and abstract theorizing. This study operates on many levels, and it occurs to me that there are seemingly endless ways to interpret the data to yield nuanced understandings. However, two important themes have surfaced from this piece. One involves the substance of my understandings with regard to race and how race plays out in my life. The second involves displaying the process of the construction and reconstruction of my understandings through engaging in a form of inquiry that surfaced my views that were previously hidden from me, disrupted my previously held views and prompted reconstructions of my experience.

When I step back from the stories and look across the vignettes, I see themes that are not readily apparent within the stories themselves. These themes display ongoing reconstructions of my understandings of race. From this altitude I see that, due to my experience as a Black man who was raised in a White environment, I have acquired dual lenses that compete for prominence in my thinking. For example, at times I indicate that I want to fit in without regard to race, yet at other times I am unable to ignore race as a filter for my experience.

Related to my desire to fit in, it is apparent that I often struggle with the dilemma of being passive or active when I have an encounter that I perceive to be racist. The stories seem to indicate that I perceive there is a choice of being *active* or *passive*, and I realize that either choice can be equally problematic. If I decide to act then I become more visible and heard. However, in my experience, when I speak up, I believe that I invite overt racial politics and racial othering. On the flip side, if I decide to be passive, which might be politically savvy in the short term, I see that the status quo goes unchecked. When presented to me, these choices are confounding in that both have the very real potential to reinforce constructions of race that marginalize.

One of my greatest fears, as illustrated by some of the stories, is that I will somehow become complicit in the act of reinforcing oppressive dynamics. Whether I am unwittingly teaching Jeff and Bill to accommodate institutional racism, or more consciously avoiding being seen as Black (e.g. No Watermelon for Me), I find myself wanting to figure out how I am *supposed* to behave when confronted with racist dynamics, so that my personhood can be authentically preserved, while I simultaneously confront injustice. I want to be able to advocate and maintain my voice without becoming an object of racial politics. In thinking through this conundrum, I also realize that in my past I had frequently relied on the intervention of Whites to confront racism or advocate for me. This dependency on White advocacy is fraught with problems as well since it reinforces the powerlessness of the marginalized and oppressed and places the power to seek justice in the province of Whites, thus reproducing power difference along racial lines.

At this point in my life, I frequently choose to address issues of race, rather than try to fit in. While I am not always conscious of the decision, I believe that I have internalized a racial identity of a Black man who is no longer passive. Unfortunately, this seems to reinforce racist narratives that seem to persist. That is, he is playing the race card; he is hypersensitive; he is angry; or he is self-serving. I have come to a point in my life where I believe that I am trying to accept that I have very little control over how people perceive and situate me. This realization is not easy for me to accept. In fact, it is painful. In some ways it is an admission of defeat and powerlessness. It is an admission that the idealized vision of the world that my parents and so many people have put forth is an ideal with little hope of coming to fruition. I find myself cynical and feeling tired. Tired of fighting so hard to push a just view of the world onto others when, in fact, I have often been complicit in reproducing the very injustice I wish to confront.

Basic to my understanding of race is that it is a social construct that is often dichotomized. When I view race from this perspective, Black and White racial and cultural categories occupy opposing positions. In my case, however, nature (race) and nurture (culture) sit pronouncedly on opposites sides of this continuum. That is to say that my skin color identifies me as Black, while my cultural upbringing was White. Thus, I am, like all people, complex. While the dichotomy of blackness and whiteness is overly simplistic and doesn't represent the complexity of people's experience, it seems to be a particularly robust and persistent framework from which to view the world, in spite of its fallacious nature.

This study may be unique in that it looks at race, while holding culture constant. My experience, though different than that of most Whites, is embedded in a White view of the world. My behaviors and attitudes are shaped by upbringing, my cultural whiteness. Some of the literature and conventional wisdom focus much of the discourse regarding race on cultural differences. Frequently, views on race suggest that the source of racial conflict in our society is due to cultural relativism (Boyd 1996). For example, in the K–12 urban education literature there is often talk about the problem of White teachers who live in the suburbs coming into the inner city and not being able to understand or interpret culturally appropriate behaviors of the inner-city kids. My case, however, calls into question this rationale since, culturally, I am White.

My experience of being Black has nothing to do with being culturally different from White America. Thus, I have come to the conclusion that when culture is held constant, at least in my case, race still matters. Given this, it seems important that perspectives need continuously to be interrogated and mediated in order to more fully represent and reform our embedded understandings of race and how these understandings play out in our lives. Even though dualistic ways of thinking about race fly in the face of my own cultural and racial realities, they remain central to my conscious attempts to navigate the racial landscapes of academe, and society in general.

Conclusion

Looking at the impact of writing as a method of inquiry, I have noticed the dialogical nature of my stories. My use of the double helix as a structure for telling my stories was intended to bring context to my stories. However, the structure of the piece yielded more than I had intended. The double helix seemed to allow for, or perhaps prompt, a dialogical narrative to emerge. At times the personal informs the professional and vice versa. So that, while I am writing about past experiences, both personal and professional, there is also the appearance of active discourse, construction and reconstruction among the multiple voices throughout the study. Both storylines illustrate a trajectory of understanding. I see the trajectories of

both storylines as representing not only my attitudes but also learning curves. The curves move upward yet, like a helix, revisit old ground. To me the spirals are like Kegan's model of moral development (1982). The stories advance, yet they revisit salient themes.

Uncovering dialectics embedded within my stories

Upon closer inspection of my stories, I have uncovered three dialectics that help me to understand how race inhabits my experience, or, maybe more precisely, how I inhabit race. These dialectics describe my worldview, my reactive responses and my decisions when I am confronted with race (see Figure 1).

In the beginning of my storied experiences it is evident that I have competing worldviews informing my experience: *colorblind* vs. *colorful*. Both of these views were instilled in me early in life. While my parents taught me that skin color doesn't matter, they simultaneously taught me that I was different. The statuette given to me by my parents that read 'Black is Beautiful' represented a pedagogy of difference. Throughout my stories, these conflicting worldviews persist in constant tension between idealized and pragmatic perspectives on race, particularly in terms of how I experience race.

The second, yet related dialectic involves my acts of *hiding* or *displaying* my race. These acts seem to reflect which of the two worldviews (i.e. colorblind or colorful) was dominant during a given experience. For instance, in the stories *First day of class* and *Feeling hunted*, I readily act in acknowledgement of my race. On the flip side, in the stories *No watermelon for me* and *The long bus ride to school*, it is evident that my preference was to hide my racial self. In trying to understand under what circumstances I display or hide my race, I believe I rely heavily on context. I don't recall ever consciously choosing to hide or display my race; rather I see the two as tacit responses used to navigate my perceptions of a given social context. In looking back over my experience, it appears that when I believe that race is projected onto me in ways that reinforce my separateness from others in a way that is personally demeaning I want to hide that aspect of myself in order to mitigate the perception of less than-ness that attacks my sense of self. On the other hand, I see the act of displaying my race as an affirmation of my self. Even in the case where I declare that I cannot become President in *First day of class*, there is a sense of righteousness that I am able to claim by pointing out the deficiencies of society as opposed to internalizing deficiencies.
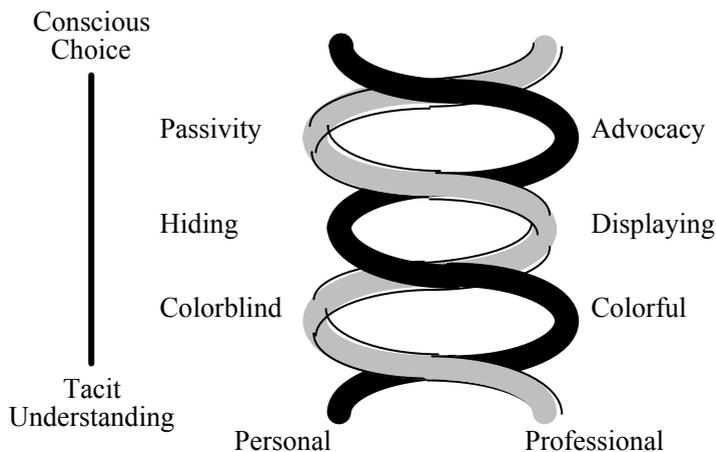

Figure 1.   Dialectics embedded in the storied constructions of race.

The final dialectic that I detect in my stories involves *passivity* versus *advocacy*. This dialectic, like hiding versus displaying, seems very closely related to the situational world-view of colorblind versus colorful. Passivity versus advocacy seems to be less tacit than the other dialects. Given the more conscious nature of this dialectic, the acts of passivity and advocacy seem more like a choice, rather than a reactive response to hide or display. It seems that I choose to be passive when I believe that I am outnumbered or when I perceive that the social dynamics will not be supportive of self-advocacy. I am not quite certain how I assess the usefulness of acting passive versus advocating. For certain I have miscalculated the political effectiveness of one over the other. And at times, either choice seems equally ineffectual in addressing, let alone resolving, racial politics.

Personally, writing this autoethnography has facilitated a deeper and more complex understanding of my own thinking. This understanding has emerged from a process of writing and reflection motivated by my desire to arrive at new understandings with regard to race and how it has impacted on my experiences and identity. I have found that, through this process of writing and reflection, I have been able to interrogate my own assumptions and behaviors. For example, before I began working on this project, I believed that the path to solving the problems associated with race would come from people sharing each other's perspectives with one another. However, I have come to conclude that simply sharing is not enough. There must be a willingness to challenge, interrogate and modify one's own views. This is no small effort since the core of our understanding is embedded in tacit assumptions, areas that are not readily accessible to our conscious thought. Thus, to modify these ways of knowing, we must operate on the premise that our ways of knowing and our worldviews are flawed. In spite of any good or bad intentions, our knowing is produced by our imperfect ability to sense and interpret *reality*. In essence, we have to begin by hoping to find out how we err in our understanding of the world. I have found that this process has become a lesson in humility. This piece has been a journey sparked by a true desire to seek my blind spots and struggle with sometimes uncomfortable and unfavorable views of myself. I have not fully unpacked how race plays out in my life, and may never grasp the many nuanced, complex and confounding psychosocial manifestations. However, I believe that I am closer to understanding how I construct my own experience. Perhaps this will yield further depth to my tacit understandings, thoughts and behaviors when the issue of my race presents itself.

I imagine that the experiences of many people, including me, routinely confound cultural and racial boundaries. Given the opportunity to interrogate our own ways of knowing, perhaps we might be able move a little closer to truly understanding that we are all, indeed, shades of gray. For those who are growing up today, I am hopeful that there are fewer lessons that make distinctions along racial lines. However, I suspect that the legacy of racist social constructions will continue to inform the psyches and actions of individuals and society. Again, it is to be hoped to a lesser extent as time passes along.

Notes

1. In common, Standard English, why is 'Black' capitalized and 'white' not? Given the nature of this piece, from now on I am going to capitalize both regardless of using the terms as adjectives or pronouns. That is, unless I am quoting others – 'not the most subtle political statement, right?'
2. I'll never forget the first time I saw the picture of the charred remains of Willie Brown; he was lynched by a mob in 1919, in Omaha, Nebraska.
3. Embedded whiteness is a term that I use to describe my tacit understandings of racial difference that subordinate non-whites in social arrangements such as power, status and desirability. The term whiteness is not intended to identify the racial category of people who hold these

views. Rather, I think that these views run deeply among all people regardless of racial back-ground. Instead, whiteness refers to the dominant racial preference manifest in this embedded worldview.
4. A few years later, I gained access to written correspondence between the Dean, the Provost, the President and a few of my colleagues, and was able to confirm that my 'feelings' of being targeted were in fact accurate.

Notes on contributor

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