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

Southern Post-integration Sensibilities in a Post-racial Educational Context

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In this manuscript, I explore historical literature and the contemporary educational environment in which young African American males exist to assess the veracity of post-racial sentiments that have been espoused with increasing regularity since the Obama presidency in 2008. I will utilize critical race theory and a critical autoethnography methodology to illuminate the salience of race in episodes from my personal life, and how race has and continues to frame the educational discourse around African American males despite arguments to the contrary. Specifically, this manuscript considers the following research questions: How have post-integration racial sensibilities of the South shaped my personal and educational experiences? Second, how are these post-integration sensibilities evidenced in my own professional agenda? Finally, how can critical race scholarship produce an unbiased and pragmatic counternarrative to the post-racial educational discourse associated with African American male youth especially in the midst of Obama's second term as President?

A profound paradigm shift has occurred within the education literature vis-à-vis the learning experiences of African American male students. With increasing regularity, the practice of exploring the variables believed to precipitate Black[1] males' academic performance through positivist research is being supplanted by scholarship utilizing post-modern and critical research epistemologies (e.g., Harper, 2009; Howard, 2008). This manner of research serves the important purpose of elucidating the impact that systemic and institutional forms of injustice have on the social lives and K-12 academic experiences of African American males (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, 2006; Lynn & Jennings, 2009). Insofar as the previous predominant positivist research paradigm and grounding epistemology were seen as limited in scope, this shift represents a much needed development. In keeping with this emerging research tradition, a critical reflexive approach will serve as the framework for this autoethnography manuscript.

Before beginning, it is essential that I be forthright about my intentions by disclosing the three concomitant presuppositions which serve as the foundation of this paper. First, it is my assertion that much of the current educational dialogue, whether explicitly or tacitly, overwhelmingly depicts African American male students' educational performance as severely

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lacking and ascribes this performance to the group's own cultural flaws and deficiencies (Baratz & Baratz, 1970; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Wright, 2009). Operating from this logic African American males should be able to reverse their current educational trajectory through the American ethos of hard work and individual uplift. Unfortunately, by maintaining staunch faith in the ameliorative potential of the American ethos, proponents of this logic ignore the realization that, as Noguera (2008) articulates, African American male students' "range of choices is profoundly constrained and shaped by external forces" (p. 26). Indeed, these external forces are systemic (e.g., student expenditures on students; limited certified teachers, etc.), institutional (e.g., teacher education practices; an educational curriculum with limited cultural relevance, etc.) and multifaceted in nature. These multifaceted forces, therefore, necessitate practical strategies and interventions derived from a more comprehensive understanding of African American male youths' personal, social and academic lives.

The second assumption, a natural derivation of the first, holds that despite its seeming rationality, the premise of hard work and individual uplift demands a pervasive stereotypical image of African American male nihilism and underachievement against which it is juxtaposed. As a consequence of this dualism, the episodic social inequality (e.g., racial discrimination, educational segregation, school to prison pipeline, mass incarceration, etc.) which has proven detrimental to so many African American male students, particularly urban students, go uncritiqued and remain virtually intact. To compound matters, the historical academic and social project which has been the *othering* of the African American male through this stereotypical image has served to instigate apathy and a disinclination by members of the academic community and general public to intervene on this group's behalf (Duncan, 2005).

Decolonizing social science research with respect to the historical framing of the cultural *other* is a prerequisite if a more liberatory praxis with the cultural *other* is to occur. Social scientists, especially social scientists of color who intend to be an active participant in this praxis must critically interrogate everything including, for instance, their indoctrination about traditional social science methodology (e.g., empirical data derived through objective methods) as the superior means of scientific inquiry and how this methodology has oriented them towards the cultural *other*. This imperative serves as the final guiding presupposition of this paper.

In the following paragraphs I discuss my decision to implement the critical autoethnography methodology utilized in this paper. Secondly, I will discuss how critical race theory has reframed the larger racial discourse and why it serves as an effective framework for analyzing incidents from my distant and immediate past; these are incidents that have greatly impacted perceptions of myself first as a learner and later as a counselor educator, education in general, and the education of young African American males.

Methodology

Critical Autoethnography

As a means inquiry, critical autoethnography represents a synergy between methodical self-assessment and poetic narrative that is employed to expose how social inequality operates and reverberates existentially (Jones, 2005). Critical autoethnography is used routinely to construct a phenomenological narrative and reflexive discussion of a particular incident or sequence of incidents and how it/they resonate within the life of the author and others who experience it (Alexander, 2005). The critical autoethnographer operates as a social critic; the

goal is to critically unpack and analyze in detail the incidents under consideration and to then utilize the existential knowledge derived from this process to disrupt and advance extant literature with respect to the incident.

Disrupting the narrative about African American males that is replete with cultural deficiency and pathological jargon requires research epistemologies that facilitate a more comprehensive and refined understanding of African American males socially and academically (Fultz & Brown, 2008; Noguera, 2008). It is essential for this understanding to entail a critique of historical and contemporary forms of racialized injustice that privilege some and marginalize others, particularly as it pertains to the administration of K-12 education in this country (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). One approach to achieving this is by placing the narratives of African American males at the center of exploration and then subjecting those experiences to critical analysis for the expressed purpose of engendering educational equity and social justice.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory

The social marker *race* has been one of the most controversial and intensely debated statues/concepts of this or any other time. Indivisible from the sordid historical origins of race is its purported immutable biological basis which validated the implementation of inhumane and dehumanizing practices during periods of European colonization in America and abroad (e.g., the genocide of thousands of Indigenous Americans; the mass enslavement of Africans; the legalized practice of racial segregation in schools and residential communities; Guthrie, 1997; Hirschman, 2004; Winant, 2001). Despite the realization that race has been firmly rooted in this biological essentialism (e.g., race as a biological construct), there is a consensus among several researchers from various disciplines that race is, and always has been, a social construct with profound political and social implications for all members of society, but especially so for racial and ethnic minorities (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). For this reason, it is crucial to examine race and manifestations of racism in a way that theorizes race not simply as a social construct but also a category that has legitimate social and political repercussions. Therefore, critical race theory (CRT) served as the theoretical framework for this paper.

Critical race theory is an outgrowth of the groundbreaking work of seminal legal scholars of the 1960s that asserts the fundamental significance of race and racism in this country especially for people of color. Critical race theory's primary tenets are: (1) the belief racism has historically been integral ideologically in the composition, configuration, and reconstruction of various sociopolitical institutions (e.g., education, economic, etc.); (2) a belief that the racial hierarchy created through racism reverberates materially (e.g., housing and job discrimination, etc.) and psychologically (e.g., anger, depressions, etc.) in the lives of all people especially racial and ethnic minorities; (3) race is constructed (and reconstructed for that matter) in a vortex of relationships between groups of people possessing disparate degrees of power; (4) the intersectionality of human experience and finally; (5) the centering of voices from members of historically marginalized and disempowered groups can serve as a means of contesting racial and cultural hegemony (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Of the many indelible contributions of critical race theory, perhaps none eclipses how it challenges the long held legitimacy of essentialized notions of race. This delegitimization is significant, in part, because essentialized notions of race became part of the academic canon during the formative years of many disciplines (e.g., biology,

anthropology, education, etc.) comprising the liberal arts curriculum, which assisted in the reification of a racial hierarchy with Whites firmly positioned at the summit as standard-bearers against which all others are measured (Baker, 1998; Carruthers, 1999).

Although the emergence of critical race theory as a framework for analyzing how race and racism are used to acquire, demonstrate, and then recycle power began some 40 years ago, the ideology and worldview undergirding critical race theory are much older. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) place critical race theory in historical context by connecting it to the scholarship of antiracist and antisexists scholars from the early 20th century. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) attribute much of critical race theory to the contributions of Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B Dubois. Adherents of critical race theory do not take solace in merely unpacking the significance of race, but rather extend the work from the early 20th century by articulating a vision for radically altering the existing social structure to produce a more socially just and democratic society (Delgado & Sefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Jennings, 2009).

These tenets and characteristics of CRT are interdependent and enable a purview of race's instrumentality in the composition of various sociopolitical (e.g., education, economic, etc.) institutions; because of this, CRT anchors the discussion of my academic and social development and burgeoning racial consciousness as an African American male learner and counselor educator in the post-integration South. Again, the purpose of these disclosures is to contribute alternate explanations and insights through which a counternarrative about African American males in education can be composed. Before elaborating on the content of these post-integration sentiments, I discuss the social milieu that first necessitated these sentiments.

Why The Need for Southern Post-Integration Sentiments?

> *Shorties get the game with no instructions to assemble it,*
> *eyes bright, it seems like the fight is dimmin em*
> *call my man cuzzo like I'm kin to him*
> *he tryin to stay straight, the streets is bendin him* (Common, 2005, track 8)

For the uninitiated, Common's (2005) lyrical content may resemble precisely the communication style believed to be the primary impediment to so many African American males' ability to achieve academic success. Unfortunately, this summarily dismisses what can be construed as Common's hypothesis for the current status of many African American males, particularly in urban settings. Common states that *shorties* have their inherent light dimmed by a *game* they are ill-prepared to win due to insufficient *instruction*. Colloquially, the *game* refers to the lives we live and our repeated attempts to win, whatever that winning may entail. The fundamental suggestion I infer from Common, an artist who consistently positions himself politically and symbollically alongside minority urban dwellers through his music[2], is that African American males are entitled to have the game of life deciphered; this sense of entitlement, which is devoid of the arrogance and pretentiousness the term usually connotes, reflects an earnest expectation that those individuals responsible for African American males will provide the necessary prerequisites for success. Does it seem illogical or counterintuitive for African American males to expect from those to whom they have been entrusted an unwavering commitment to prioritize their safety, security and optimum development? I doubt few would argue the legitimacy of such an expectation.

If we revisit Common's (2005) words, we can see that this *legitimate entitlement* does not only include the provision of food, water and shelter but also facilitating the ability to view and respond to the world in a way that is personally and socially advantageous to the perceiver. In other words, satisfying this sense of *legitimate entitlement* requires the provision of applicable instructions and other pearls of wisdom about how to navigate and excel as an African American male in a society that, despite its progress, remains economically, educationally, and socially stratified along racial and class lines. This sociohistorical consciousness is conceptualized as a valuable asset, especially as it pertains to the heightening of oppressed (e.g., class oppression, racial oppression, etc.) people's ability to make wise and well-informed life decisions that are self-affirming rather than self-negating (Freire, 2000). Much like the symbolic individuals to whom Common refers in *The Food*, my own sense of *legitimate entitlement* encompassed a forthright retelling of history that firmly situated me within the sociohistorical context of this country and the post-integration South where I would be reared, educated, and presumably reside as an adult.

Post-Integration Sensibilities

My *post-integration sensibilities* are informed by profound emotional and cognitive responses to highly racialized incidents which unfolded a few hours in any direction from my place of birth. These locations and the Southern region in general, quite literally served as epicenters for sweeping social changes that altered this country. For instance, Briggs v. Elliot one of five legal cases that precipitated the monumental *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) school desegregation legislation, unfolded in Summerton, South Carolina approximately an hour and 20 minute drive southeast from where I was born. The attempts to desegregate a local bowling alley that escalated into the senseless death of three African American males which came to be known as the tragic Orangeburg Massacre of 1968 transpired an hour and nine minutes from my childhood home. The public debate, subsequent marches and financial boycott to have the Confederate Battle flag removed from atop the State House dome ensued 21 minutes from my doorstep.

These events were a part of my reality and what it meant to be a resident of the state for many members of the African American community. Far from peripheral, these events constituted central points of conversation for my mother and father, conversations to which I would be privy as a child. In hindsight it seems my parents did everything they could to expose and not avert my attention from the implications of these significant events that happened "right up the way" or "a couple minutes from here." So, the Confederate Battle flag was more than a benign piece of cloth; for many African American South Carolinians the Confederate Battle flag is an artifact of the not too distant past where racial oppression and acts of domestic terrorism were condoned and endorsed to intimidate and deny African Americans' access and opportunity for social mobility. Thus, for countless African Americans residing in South Carolina, the flag's presence on the State House dome was utterly insensitive and ahistorical with respect to the state's reprehensible racial past. These incidents demonstrated how inexorably intertwined race, racism, and segregation were, why it was safe to assume race and racism would remain a salient part of the post-integration south, and how education had been integral in stimulating change.

Post-Integration Sensibilities, Educational Attainment and the Ethic of Concern

Operating from the lived experiences that forged their post-integration sensibilities, my parents engaged in a manner of racial socialization that reinforced messages of ethnic identity and racial pride. Nothing typifies this socialization more than my active participation in the youth council NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). From about my 6th birthday until I left for my undergraduate college experience, I was immersed in activities—marches, conventions, food/clothing drives—and dialogue about how culturally-oriented forms of social activism could address the status of people of African ancestry in this country and throughout the Diaspora. Whether it was assisting in the mobilization of voter registration efforts or gathering articles of clothing that no longer fit to donate for food and clothing drives during the Christmas holidays, involvement was always emphasized.

Another vivid memory I have are my attempts to empathize with the plight of Black South Africans resisting the sanctioned practice of racial apartheid. I observed as my parents expressed disapproval for South Africa's treatment of Black South Africans through their attire (e.g., t-shirts), financial resources (e.g., donations), and decals on their vehicle bumpers. The post-integration sensibilities that ultimately became my own were a continuation of my parents' passion and concern for the welfare of "our people" here and abroad. The premise that the welfare of our people was important constituted the bedrock of what was my parents' ethic of concern.

As it pertains to education, my parents seized every moment to articulate how maximizing my educational opportunities could serve as avenue to demonstrate an ethic of concern for others, especially for marginalized groups. I was challenged to always connect my education with a posture of active engagement in the process of democracy, humanization, and collective uplift. Rather than view my educational attainment selfishly as an individual pursuit, I saw educational attainment as a mechanism to advance the collective interests of the racial group to which I belonged. My successes and failures were not only of monumental importance personally, but for my immediate and extended families as well.

The philosophical perspectives and personal narratives of influential African and African American thinkers buttressed my parents' assertion that education was the most effective and compelling means to accomplish the ethic of concern. Nelson Mandela's fortitude in the face of persecution; Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Dubois and their debates around The Atlanta Compromise; Dubois' groundbreaking sociological research; Harriet Tubman and The Underground Railroad; the non-violence espoused by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the platform of nationalism expressed by Malcom X and the Black Panther Party were all held in high regard in my home. None of these figures, however, was more revered, especially by my father, than Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Thus Dr. King provided an example to emulate and my parents took every measure to familiarize me with his story.

A metaphysical and spiritual element was present in my parents' deliberate referencing of the narratives of heroes and heroines from the past. Exposing me to these historical figures helped to preserve their perspectives without isolating them from their contemporaries or the injustices of racial inequality they worked diligently to eradicate. The dilemma I faced then, and frankly now on occasions, is trying to reconcile the realization that, contrary to popular belief about American democracy and the rights bestowed by God to all America's citizens, there are myriad examples of racial inequality which have and continue to obstruct the path of progress for Black Americans. This not only reinforced what I'd already been taught, but also provided a

greater sense of clarity about power, historical and contemporary disparities in power between groups, and how these power differentials produced stark contrasts in groups' lived experiences.

The Ethic of Concern and My General Observations From Childhood

As a child during the mid-late 1980s the public image of African Americans, especially the working poor was one of socially pathology and deviance (Fultz & Brown, 2008). Inherent to this image was the not so subtle notion that African Americans' disproportionate representation among the most negative social statistics was attributable to an absence of a strong work ethic and a deterioration of the African American family. My childhood, however, provided an opportunity to assess anecdotally the legitimacy of these claims. I didn't have to venture far to engage in a form of ethnographic research on the lived experiences of African Americans in economically oppressed communities.

My maternal grandmother lived approximately four city blocks from two of the most policed housing communities in Columbia, South Carolina during the early 1980s. Celia Saxon Homes and Allen Benedict Court (ABC) were some of the toughest neighborhoods in the Midlands. After school, my father would drop my sister and I off at my grandmother's house until my mother could pick us up after leaving her job. On many occasions I would depart from my grandmother's house to walk to the local grocery store for various treats or to run errands for my grandmother, aunt or other relatives. When I wasn't going to Baxley's for bologna or some other item, I was getting my hair cut at Moses' Barbershop. I spent my summers at Bethlehem Community Center engaging in various activities with youths from the surrounding area, including Allen Benedict and Saxon Homes. Several times a week we would visit Drew Park to swim, play basketball, bumper pool, ping-pong or just chill. The overwhelming majority of people I knew from ABC and Saxon Homes were good folks. Not only did this apply to my peers but to the numerous adults with whom I had come in contact because of the frequency of my visits to my grandmother's home.

Overwhelmingly, I could not reconcile the dominant inflexible narrative that poor African American males, did not work hard, lacked values or deemphasized education in favor of a defiant masculine posture. Moreover, manifestations of African American familyhood I witnessed, while occasionally expressed differently from the traditional American formulation of familyhood comprising a mother, father and child was still effective in supporting childhood aspirations. I congregated and socialized with my peers without reservation or hesitation; my proximity to "the hood" and the kids who resided "in the hood" provided ample opportunities to evaluate the legitimacy of the belief that poor people were in their predicament because they had chosen not to maximize the opportunities America had afforded them.

Traversing The African American Male Stereotype/Educated African American Male Binary

Integrating and operating from what my parents had taught proved relatively easy in my childhood. I operated from the vision they'd instilled and relied on what they'd taught. None of the interactions I had as a child dissuaded me from what they had endorsed. I read voraciously to acquire more information about African history and held that knowledge in high regard. However, maintaining this level of integration and enthusiasm became a more daunting proposition during my transition to adolescence in middle and high school.

Beginning in elementary school, I was a participant in AAP (Academically Advanced Program). Truthfully, I do not recall how this determination—that I was talented academically—had been made nor do I remember consenting to participate. Ostensibly, my parents concluded that participation in AAP was an opportunity that could pay immediate and future dividends. It is impossible for me to discern and articulate any qualitative differences between the AAP classroom and mainstream classroom from which I was removed. Furthermore, after being enrolled in AAP in elementary school I do not recall being physically segregated within the school from the mainstream students. From my perspective, although the student population was visibly diverse with respect to gender, we all appeared similar in every other fashion. In fact, one of my best friends from childhood was in mainstream classes. We did everything together; we played sports, visited one another's home throughout my elementary school experience. Thus, despite this special designation of academic giftedness, I still sensed a connection and solidarity with my peers. While my elementary school years were uneventful and generally nondescript, things changed drastically in middle and high school.

Middle School

My childhood interest and preoccupation with education as a medium for racial uplift was supplanted by a desire to be perceived as cool. This desire was accelerated and reinforced by what I saw as an absence of African American male intellectuals who also embodied coolness; there was a conspicuous absence of a person or group of individuals who, by their very presence, proclaimed coolness did not have to be sacrificed to exhibit intellectual adeptness. Additionally, this binary—the socially awkward, academically gifted Black male as antithetical to the cool, socially accepted, academically underachieving Black male—was an interrelationship depicted repeatedly on television during my adolescence. As an adolescent, Family Matters and The Cosby Show were popular television shows in terms of visibility and viewership. The cool v. educated binary was an essential component of Family Matters—the socially inept, yet brilliant Steven Urkel in stark contrast to the popular and intellectually dense Eddie Winslow—and reinforced my growing belief that coolness and intellectualism were somehow mutually exclusive.

Entering my seventh grade year, signifying and projecting what I considered a cool Black persona began to take precedence over excelling in the classroom. The impetus for this transformation was an encounter I had during the aforementioned summer camp I attended. The camp attendees who had been well-behaved during the summer were rewarded with a trip to Disney World. The morning we were scheduled to leave was full of anticipation and I arrived at the departure site ready to leave. As we waited for the charter bus to arrive, without provocation a fellow camper mocked me incessantly for wearing what he considered an uncool pair of sneakers. After witnessing the pair of *Cuga* sneakers I was wearing, he whimsically offered the acronym *C*ouldn't *U G*et *Adidas*!?! I experienced a range of enmeshed emotions; I was embarrassed initially but anger soon replaced that sense of embarrassment. I was confused about why this person had assigned such significance to articles of clothing, and why he felt the need to make such disparaging remarks. I felt vulnerable and incapable of defending myself from the verbal barbs. I was perplexed about why my peers were so entertained by what they were witnessing and why no one intervened. Insignificant as it may seem to some, I vowed to never experience that degree of shame and embarrassment again. At that moment, a new part of my

identity began to crystalize; I made a cognitive and emotive association between attire, and the cachet it generated, with coolness and popularity.

From that point forward, I remember expressing to my mother—who was primarily responsible for purchasing my clothing—a desire to wear more popular attire and a flattop haircut. Attire and hairstyle were identifiers demarcating boundaries between popularity and social ostracism; students who possessed and adopted these identifiers were granted unencumbered access to what were essentially the velvet ropes of V.I.P within school. Moreover, these items were part of the quintessential hip hop package/uniform which began to burgeon on cable television during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Kitwana, 2002; Ogbar, 2007). Symbolically, possessing these garments communicated status, prestige and power the likes of which I'd yet to achieve but yearned desperately to obtain. Unfortunately, from my vantage point, aligning with this peer group and the status they accrued meant underemphasizing or relinquishing altogether my previously stable interests in achieving inside the classroom to advance the platform of racial uplift.

Hip Hop Identity, Late Adolescence and Secondary Education

In middle school my conception of an authentic identity was greatly informed by dominant tropes of African American males and hip hop culture. These dominant tropes were antithetical to the African American male student who was lauded for his intellectual prowess. My reaction to this schism was a gradual process that had genuine implications on my immediate and long-term educational performance and aspirations.

As a participant and consumer of hip hop culture, I was inundated with images, themes, and an ethos which, seemingly ran counter to the mores, beliefs, and values espoused by society in general and my parents in particular a majority of the time. Excursions to relatives' houses often allowed uninhibited exposure to cable television programming not yet available in my neighborhood. It was during this time when I truly began to eschew what I had been taught by my parents in favor of what I thought popular hip hop artists (e.g., LL Cool J, etc.) deemed important (e.g., money, power, style, women, etc.). Rather than blatant disrespect, immersion into hip hop culture was my attempt at autonomy and what I thought was a self-determined personal and social identity. Rarely did I critically examine the messages being transmitted or how they shaped my evaluations of self, others, and the world. I felt compelled to ignore the representations of African American males in hip hop that were overwhelmingly socially deviant and seemingly criminally predisposed. At play were essentialized and cultural deprivation conceptualizations of maleness and Blackness where Blackness and maleness become synonymous with numerous distasteful characteristics, not the least of which are criminality and ineducability (Giroux, 1996; hooks, 2004; Prier & Beachum, 2008).

This distorted what was my desire to construct an identity which synthesized my previous racial awareness with this burgeoning cultural artform and worldview—hip hop—in a cohesive manner. Eventually, though, I gradually began to see hip hop culture as the most authentic conduit for socially, economically and politically oppressed members of American society, especially poor and working-class racial and ethnic minorities in large deteriorating post-industrial urban cities, to express their collective outrage (Kitwana, 2002; Prier & Beachum, 2008). Although my material condition was qualitatively different from those experienced by an overwhelming number of hip hop's progenitors and hip hop's initial primary target audience, it

provided me an opportunity to congregate in solidarity with those from whom I may have been alienated otherwise.

In late adolescence, I began to see that, hip hop culture could be an exercise in resistance against repression and the social and political practices which literally robbed the most vulnerable members of this society of their humanity. Hip hop, to my astonishment, was reminiscent to the sensibilities that were such a part of my childhood and adolescence. Ironically, many of the heroes and heroines my parents lauded were often points of reference in the lyrics and imagery of artists I later came to appreciate. For instance, KRS O.N.E[3] (2008), one of hip hop's most transcendent artists, paid homage to Malcom X by naming his second album *By All Means Necessary* and mimicking the iconic photograph of the former Nation of Islam leader at the window wielding a gun to defend his home. Unfortunately, my inability to articulate my interest in a more socially conscious hip hop, combined with a highly publicized and pervasive aversion of hip hop impeded my parents' ability to see aspects of hip hop that were consonant with anti-oppression sentiments and movements.

Post-Integration Southern Sentiments and My Immersion into The Professorate

With this more keen awareness of the similarities between socially conscious hip hop artists and the southern post-integration sentiments that framed my childhood, I was able to think more critically about how these things could be integrated into my professional endeavors and identity. This began in earnest as I entered graduate school; however, my ideas began to truly crystalize through my doctoral studies and subsequent entry into the professorate.

As a thirty-seven year old, African American male counselor educator, I often reflect on the influential people who have contributed to my professional accomplishments and endeavors. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge those who nurtured me. Their sensibilities have been foundational[4] and undergird the work that I currently do with young and adolescent African American males. By taking this position I consciously engage in the practice outlined by Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2005):

> All scholars of color must know the intellectual antecedents of their cultural, ethnic, or racial group. This is important for combating the persistent ideology of White supremacy that denigrates the intellectual contributions of others. All scholars of color must look to the epistemological underpinnings and legitimacy of their cultures and cultural ways of knowing. (p. 292)

As a doctoral student at a large, research one institution in the Midwest, one of the first things I learned was the importance of integrating scholarship, teaching, and service, and why integrating these three duties/expectations was of primary importance to becoming a viable member of the counselor education profession. I was strongly encouraged to identify my passion, research it exhaustively, and then incorporate that data/information into my teaching and social activism. This was a welcomed imploration given the southern post-integration sensibilities to which I had been exposed. Whether as the author or co-author of a manuscript, guest lecturer or presenter, I sought to connect the essence of every academic and professional expectation in some way to the status and plight of African American males vis-à-vis their psychosocial functional and educational performance.

In the contemporary environment, though, the task of articulating this plight and then encouraging advocacy on behalf of African American males is tricky given the vigor with which the post-racial discourse has been rejuvenated. In this environment there is a refusal to utilize race as a category for making inferences and determinations about a myriad of relevant social issues (e.g., rates of incarceration, rates of employment and unemployment, college admission, etc.). If advocates of social and educational equity are to be taken seriously however, the post-racial discourse must be effectively contested.

The Post-Racial Discourse

> *I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.* (Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1963/1992)

On a historic day in Washington D.C., Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963/1992) delivered a most compelling speech which continues to captivate audiences to this day. Dr. King eloquently synthesized his analysis of America's reprehensible racial past with an optimism that America could achieve the ideals it espoused but so infrequently manifested. Perhaps no statement more succinctly captures King's optimism of racial equality than his description of an America in which his children, and all people of color for that matter, do not have life opportunities foreclosed by racism, racial prejudice and discrimination. For King, the elimination of racial prejudice and discrimination was a fundamental precondition if America was to argue with any degree of conviction it had achieved its democratic ideal.

Since the historic election of Senator Barack Obama as President of the United States in 2008, the post-racial discourse has, for obvious reasons, reached a noticeable crescendo (Howard & Flennaugh, 2011). For many, including President Obama, his election marked a long awaited chapter in American history where the racism and racial atrocities of the past could be rendered irrelevant to the functioning of the contemporary American society (Wise, 2010). The election of the country's first African American president, according to the principles of post-racialism, served as the most airtight and unassailable piece of evidence to confirm that the day of a post-racial America had indeed arrived.

However, the persisting educational barriers which befall scores of African American male students (e.g., overrepresentation in special education, the propensity to be diagnosed as emotionally disabled, disproportionate rates of suspensions and expulsions, etc.) belie the fundamental positions of the post-racial discourse and seriously undermines the eagerness of those who desperately seek to endorse it. For these reason, tactics and strategies which specifically target African American male students and the adults who educate them must be devised and implemented (Howard & Flennaugh, 2011).

Confronting Post-Racial Beliefs as a Doctoral Student

During my school counseling practicum and internship I specifically requested to work with alongside elementary and secondary school counselors. Because of the lack of racial diversity in the communities surrounding my university and the increasing number of African American students entering these school districts, dialogues about diversity, multicultural competence and student performance happened frequently. I entered these practicum and

internship educational settings seeking to learn as much as I could about the lived experiences of these students especially considering the fact that many of these students had often come from urban and working class backgrounds in cities like Chicago Illinois and Milwaukee Wisconsin that differed drastically from my own.

As a doctoral student, I not only had the opportunity to instruct master's level school counselors-in-training, but also undergraduate teacher education students. I taught a Human Relations course to teacher education students to explicitly address issues of status and identity and how there confluence within the K-12 classroom impacts students. As instructor I gained insight into the tremendous uneasiness many of my White students exhibited when asked to consider the salience of race in their lives and the lives of racial and ethnic minority students. Unwilling to demonstrate any modicum of commitment or honesty to consider the utility of racial analyses, many of these students were all too eager to ponder why class analyses were not only more effective but also less divisive. Not surprisingly, when expressing this conviction, students would invariably rely on the message of racial transcendence expressed by President Barack Obama.

Unfortunately, the sublime utopian ideal of racial transcendence in America does not equate with the continued disparities in power, education, wealth, health and employment between African Americans and Whites (Howard & Flennaugh, 2011; Wise, 2010). Thus, to insist the removal of race from consideration in our empirical analyses of social progress is advantageous to the country, much less African American males, seems disingenuous at best. Operating from this position, then, it seems logical that achieving educational social justice for African American males requires analyses of race and racism that are straightforward.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from my own personal life and matriculation and may have transferability to the lives of other adolescent and young adult African American males. In keeping with the critical race theoretical perspective found throughout this paper, these recommendations will focus, although not exclusively, on how the social construction of race manifests in the educational experiences of African American male students.

Recommendations for parents/guardians and teachers:

- African American parents/guardians must determine whether they wish to engage in some manner of racial socialization with their young boys and when and how this will occur. There is an abundance of conceptual educational literature and empirical research data on the subject of racial socialization and the diverse ways in which this can be executed (Hamm, 2001; Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Stevenson, 1994; Thompson, 1994). It is safe to assume, though, that even without parents' intervention some form of racial and ethnic socialization is occurring by way of the various forms of popular culture and social media to which young people are subjected (Dimitriadis, 2011; Giroux, 1996).
- Teachers should create more critical thinking learning environments that challenge and empower African American males to view education as a practice with sociopolitical power for themselves and their communities (Freire, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). This approach to education stands in stark contrast to the banking model of education criticized by Freire (2000). The major distinction between the critical and banking classrooms is that the former facilitates sociopolitical astuteness by presenting information to students in a far less

compartmentalized fashion; by doing so students become empowered to see their lives as malleable and able to be transformed for the better.

Recommendations for African American males:

- African American males should seize every opportunity to consider how race has shaped the existence of racial and ethnic minorities in this country. African American males must realize, for instance, despite the accomplishments of large numbers of African American males, the popular images of African American males and black masculinity remain virtually unchanged. This group has to consider how the appropriation of African American forms of cultural expression, especially hip hop, can be used to further entrench or contest biased representations of African American males.
- Ongoing conversation surrounding what African American males consider an *authentic* black male persona and the points of convergence and divergence this persona has with educational excellence must be prompted whenever possible.

Limitations

No manner of research methodology, whether it is quantitative or in this case critical autoethnography, is without some limitations. The most glaring limitation of this reflexive essay is the fact that I am the sole source of data. In no way can my experiences, or the inferences derived from them, be generically applied to similarly aged African American male populations. The reader should use sound judgment when attempting to assess the applicability of my experiences and if, when and how my experiences can be implemented. Secondly, the salience I attach to race may be relatively unimportant to other African American males; therefore, the import of racial socialization by parents, guardians and significant others may also be perceived as insignificant.

Conclusion

Promoting the academic success of African American males entails a number of interrelated variables and contributions from various players in African American males' social and educational lives. It is an educational and social imperative to be taken up by those who possess the ability to consider how these factors and variables converge and impact African American males socially and educationally. Thus, comprehensive frameworks and subsequent interventions that emphasize the interplay of personal and social/systemic variables can have longevity and prove efficacious. These frameworks cannot, though, be devoid of a serious analysis of how race and racial politics operate in the lives of African American males, particularly during the formative adolescent years of their lives.

Without question, essentialized notions of race and the racial hierarchy it spawned helped create an imbalanced social system that was and still is to the detriment of non-White citizens. This system assisted in the creation of an archetypal pathological African American male image that conjured fear and disdain in the imagination of many. The archetypal African American male personality, first seen as a function of biological inferiority has, within the relatively recent past, been ascribed to an unwillingness to work hard and an absence of requisite cultural capital. If, as a country, we are to divert from this deficit narrative and provide legitimate educational opportunities to African American male students, we must not employ a post-racial doctrine that seeks to mute the significance race continues to play in the lives of racial and ethnic minority

students. Since the deliberate utilization of race was instrumental in the construction of societal imbalances and injustices, the notion of abruptly rendering race mute and removing it from consideration when attempting to achieve social equality seems illogical and suspiciously convenient. My development as a person, student and educator convinces me that utilizing race as an analytical tool can be beneficial for African American male students.

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Notes

1. Throughout this manuscript, African American and Black will be used interchangeably. The author understands the former is typically used to refer to ethnicity while the latter usually refers to racial status.

2. Lonnie Lynn a.k.a Common is a native of the Southside of Chicago. He has long been praised for his socially conscious lyrical content which examines issues of class, race and how more conscientious material can be used to inspire oppressed people to raise their voice to demand social equity and equality. Moreover, the visual accompaniment of his music is often filmed in the urban settings where he was raised and from where he derives much of his identity.

3. KRS O.N.E. is the stage name of hip hop artist Lawrence Krisna Parker. KRS O.N.E stands for Knowledge Reign Supreme Over Nearly Everyone.

4. I must acknowledge my wife Marta N. Mack-Washington, parents, Gloria and Eugene Washington, sister Kiona Thomas, maternal grandmother Sarah Barnett, paternal grandparents Edith and James Washington, countless aunts and uncles, spiritual mentors at KRST Universal Temple.