



**ENTANGLED SOCIAL REALITIES: RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER  
A TRIPLE THREAT TO THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF BLACK FEMALES**

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*It is difficult to be sat on all day, every day, by some other creature, without forming an opinion about them. On the other hand, it is perfectly possible to sit all day, every day, on top of another creature and not have the slightest thought about them whatsoever. (Adams, 1987, p. 4)*

Douglas Adam's statement is illustrative of a complex positional social location in which one (the oppressor) holds down another (the oppressed). Oppression is a cruel form of domination (American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 2000) that weighs heavily on the oppressed.

To conceptualize this type of oppression, I reference Mary Louise Pratt's "Art of the Contact Zone," in which she defines contact zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical power" (Pratt, 2000, p. 575). Pratt characterizes the contact zone as being an unsafe location that is filled with many emotions (i.e., "rage, incomprehension, and pain"), where people are often misunderstood and hurt (p. 586). Because the contact zone can be a location of such emotional turmoil and pain, "groups need places [safe houses] for hearing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world that they can then bring into the contact zone" (Pratt, 2000, p. 587).

Pratt and Anzaldúa (2000) emphasize the need for "safe houses." Safe houses are locations where people can go and not feel threatened. They are sites where people may share their experiences in the contact zone with those who have had similar experiences and can empathize.

**Living at the Margins of Race, Gender, and Class:  
A Shifting Series of Others**

In a well-known literary work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, esteemed scholar W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) alludes to being in the contact zone when he speaks of the dual role that Blacks must play in order to survive in United States society. He states: "One ever feels his twoness—an American, a negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (p. 2).

Similar to the dual role that Black people, in general, feel as though they have to play to survive in a racist society, the African American Women's Voices Project, *Shifting*, revealed that many Black females feel pressure to lead double lives in order to cope with racial and gender discrimination in the United States (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004). And although the Black community strives to teach racial pride, Black females are victims of *double jeopardy* (Berdahl & Moore, 2006), because we live "in two distinct worlds, one black and one white" (Allen-Brown, 1998, p. 175). To survive, it is important that we learn to "shift" between both of these worlds. At times, some Black females "shift" by altering their appearance, behavior, or speech. Many shift *White* when they enter schools and work spaces and *Black* when they get back home (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004). The coincidence of race and poverty, operate simultaneously with gender making it difficult to live in the context of an oppressive society (the contact zone) that has historically devalued people of color, women, and those who are poor. Moreover, "American schooling is representative and simultaneously constitutive of the race, class, and gender disparities illustrative of the larger American society" (Kanpol, 1997, p. IX). These concerns are significant when conceptualizing issues related to Black females as racist, classist, and sexist systems of oppression and inequality shape school experiences and outcomes, and are triple threats to academic achievement. The idea of triple threat implies that Black females inherit three major entangled social realities that are assessed negatively by the larger society—being Black, being female, and being poor.

### Examining Racism, Sexism, and Classism

As a female of African descent born and reared in the United States, I have spent much of my life examining and challenging structures of inequality that characterize United States public schools. Understandably, as one who cares deeply about social justice, my quest for “the cure” for social inequalities continues to have a prevailing influence on my intellectual life.

Racism, sexism, and classism are pervasive systems of advantage that adversely impact those with the “wrong” race, social class, and gender (Rothenberg, 2007). Racism, classism, and sexism can be overt or covert or deliberate and unintentional. Nevertheless, the harmful outcomes are the same. Overt racism, classism, or sexism refers to open or unconcealed attitudes and acts of oppression that subordinate those who fall into the categories of being Black, female, and poor (Ridley, 2005). Notwithstanding the innate differences among people, the categories of race, class, and gender are themselves socially constructed.

Rather than being ‘given’ in nature, they reflect culturally constructed differences that maintain the prevailing distribution of power and privilege in a society, and they change in relation to changes in social, political, and economic life. (Rothenberg, 2007, p. 8)

Many scholars examining the construction of class, gender, and racial inequalities have focused on one or the other of these categories, rarely looking at them as inseparable entangled social realities or “as complex, mutually reinforcing or contradicting processes” (Acker, 2006, p. 442). Likewise, much of feminist scholarship has focused on White-middle class females; disregarding the reality that gender is fundamentally complicated by race, class, and other differences (hooks, 1984). Furthermore, race, class, and gender are not “discrete attributes” that can be precisely categorized, tending to some while disregarding others (Gay, 2000, p. 14). For Black females race, class, and gender “are ... analytic constructs that have the greatest power in interpreting and predicting [our] conditions and existence ... [Moreover] they are fluid systems that

intersect in different ways for different populations at different historical periods” (Mullins, 1997, p. 6).

In this essay, I pay attention to the intersectionality (entanglement) of the three aforementioned central inequities in educational organizations: race, gender, and class status (Acker, 2006). In doing so, I use fragments of personal stories (narratives) replete with selected situations to illuminate my educational struggles so as to liberate myself from the grips of the elusive oppressive creature that imposes its crushing weight, causing great pain—alienation, subordination, and subjugation.

[I]f experience is rooted in reflection and our ultimate goal is human emancipation from forms of oppression, alienation, subordination ... then oppressed peoples [assumed by Paulo Freire’s pedagogy, (1993)] could challenge [our] life form by understanding the structural constraints that originally set [us] up as unequal members of society. (Kanpol, 1997, p. 13)

In writing this essay, my goal is not to complain or rehash painful events of the past. Instead, I hope to present, in autoethnographic reflection, tensions associated with being a *shifting series of others* grappling with the complexities—and prejudices reflected in conventional educational settings at the university level and at other grade levels across the pre-kindergarten to 12th grade spectrum. “One way that critical pedagogists help define struggle is through the understanding of narrative” (Kanpol, 1997, p. 13). And though some art educators are beginning to incorporate personal narratives into their professional academic writing, in my struggles to unpack my social and psychological baggage, I question how my stories will be received and whether my stories about my oppressive inheritance will offend the White culture, and thus risk not being heard. I must admit that I feel extremely vulnerable, and have much angst and trepidation in sharing these selected portions of my life history, my pain. I question whether my stories will inspire other narratives that expose and destabilize pervasive inequities in education. Will my stories cause my colleagues and other art educators to reflect upon their personal histories in a “critical” manner? Or will they critically examine how my schooling experiences and others similarly situated might be comparable

to and different from their own? Will they work for change? Do they even care? Nevertheless, the fragmentary recollection of racist, classist, and sexist stories that follow need to be told. Moreover, they need to be critically reflected upon and understood with hopes that the insights gleaned from them will spur discourse that leads to substantive educational reform by exposing and eradicating oppressive systems and practices that create, maintain, and perpetuate inequities in education.

### **Autoethnographic Understandings and Narrative Inquiry**

Catherine Russell (1999) sees autoethnography as “a vehicle and a strategy for challenging imposed forms of identity” (p. 7). Mary Louise Pratt introduced the term “autoethnography” as an oppositional term: “If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations” (2000, p. 7).

Generally speaking, autoethnography is a genre of qualitative research and writing that locates the self within a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997). More specifically an autoethnography is:

- An analytical/objective personal account
- About the self/writer as part of a group or culture
- Often a description of a conflict of cultures
- Often an analysis of being different or an outsider
- Usually written to an audience not a part of the group
- An attempt to see self as others might
- An opportunity to explain differences from the inside
- Sometimes a traditional essay answering the five Ws
- Sometimes a typical essay with topic sentences and three to five supporting examples
- Always an attempt to explain self to other
- An explanation of how one is “othered”

An autoethnography is not:

- A traditional personal narrative
- A single event, incident, or experience
- Written to the self as the major audience
- A simple description or story

Autoethnographies are usually inroads to narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) characterize narrative inquiry as “a way of understanding experiences ... stories lived and told” (p. 20). Educational scholar, researcher, and practitioner, Geneva Gay, believes that “teaching ... in actual practice is best conveyed through personal stories” (Gay, 2000, p.183). Stories “allow the integration of more types of information and styles of presentation than are customary in more conventional styles of writing and research” (p. 2). Dyson and Genishi (1994, cited in Gay, 2000) indicate that “we all have a basic need for story” (p. 2). Story defined by Dyson and Genishi is a means of “organizing our experiences into important happenings” (p. 2). Bruner (1996) views stories, or narratives, as the means through which individuals attempt to make meaning of their experiences. He states:

We frame the accounts of our cultural origins and our most cherished beliefs in story form, and it is not just the ‘content’ of these stories that grip their narrative artifice. Our immediate experience, what happened yesterday or the day before, is framed in the same storied way. Even more striking we represent our lives (to ourselves as well as to others) in the form of narrative. (p. 40)

Under the rubric of autoethnographic research and writing, I am both the subject and researcher of my inquiry research, narrating autobiographical incidents from my lived experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997). The incidents I describe, that follow, are not happenstance, but have deliberate intentionality. They are intended to have those involved in the business of education reflect upon the implications for practices of inequality and oppression as they relate to the academic achievement of students underserved in U.S. schools and classrooms.

### My Transgressive Educational Journey

I am currently a professor teaching at a predominately White “Research I” university. I hold a Ph.D. in Art Education, a Master’s Degree in Educational Leadership and Supervision and Administration, and a Bachelor’s Degree in Art Education. As one born in the rural segregated South to a father who achieved only a grade school education, and a mother who was a high school dropout, I often reflect upon my educational experiences and my academic achievement in an attempt to gain insight into the phenomenon of transgression (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). How did I get to where I am today? How have I resisted and responded to racism, classism, and sexism? Moreover, how has my race, class, and gender, coupled with my lived experiences, structured my teaching? Further, how might I use my role as teacher to disrupt oppressive racist, sexist, and classist systems that advantage some while disadvantaging others? Can I make a difference?

Black peoples’ struggle for educational parity with Whites has a long history in the United States. Nevertheless, education (still) appears to be the best hope for Blacks and those who are poor and powerless towards reducing the profound disparities in wealth and opportunity that characterize U. S. societies. It is imperative to review Black peoples’ historic quest for equal education opportunities in order to better comprehend how Blacks, “through forced illiteracy,” arrived at this inequitable stage of ... education (Powell, 1998, p. 97).

#### Black, White and Brown: The Integrative Ideal—Yes, No, or Maybe So

The *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* decision of 1954, which sparked historic legislation, should have resulted in equal resources, equal opportunities, and racial justice. In the *Brown* case, the Supreme Court ruled racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, overturning the *Plessy v Ferguson*, 1896 decision which legalized segregation in schools and other public spaces as long as they provided “separate but equal” facilities (U.S. Supreme Court, 1954; U.S. Supreme Court, 1896).

Prior to *Brown*, separate schools for Blacks and Whites in southern states were the norm. My early schooling in segregated schools in the South mirrored that of other Black youth attending such schools. In pre-desegregation days, our Black schools had Black administrators, teachers, and staff. Arguably, student excellence was better served (in the Black community) by those professionals who looked like, cared about, and were committed to preparing Black youth to achieve at high levels. Moreover, “[t]he expectations of the Black community and the shared culture of segregated schools supported the women’s racial identity and encouraged them to achieve” (Allen-Brown, 1998, p. 1975).

If academic achievement and success is ultimately influenced by how one interacts with and is valued by his or her environment, following desegregation, Black youth entered hostile and devaluing environments, where subtle and in most cases overt messages were communicated that we were inferior and not valued human beings. Furthermore, the gifted and talented Black teachers and administrators were disproportionately reassigned to less academically influential positions or transferred to predominately White schools, and were replaced (in many classrooms) with inexperienced White teachers who had no particular affinity for Black students, who were uncomfortable in their new (Black) surroundings, and “who felt deep resentment about being forced into this new arrangement, and who, as time has shown, would act out their resentment and frustration against the very children, the [B]lack children, whom this entire desegregation movement was supposed to help” (Moss, 1992, p. 99).

#### *My Schooling in Pre and Post-Desegregation Days*

Having been born and reared in a somewhat isolated, rural, segregated community in Reidsville, North Carolina (without running water for a portion of my life), I do not recall having to contend with issues of class, race, and gender, until our schools became desegregated. In the pre-desegregation days of my schooling, I had a Black male principal (Mr. “P.”) and Black female teachers who nourished my intellect and valued me as a person. I was considered to be a model student because I made “good” grades and never was subjected to the corporal punishment

that students received who dared to misbehave or defy authority.

When my school (Roosevelt) became desegregated, in 1969, during my 7th grade school year, approximately 15 years after the enforcement of school desegregation regulations in North Carolina, I started to experience the emotional turmoil and feel the discomfort of being in the “contact zone.” At the outset, no White students were bussed to our school; however, we did get a White female teacher, Mrs. Schalanski, who cried upon meeting us and cried everyday thereafter. She lasted only a week before Mr. Bland, a large, bald White male with an enormous black mole on the upper left side of his head, replaced her. I did not like him very much because he grabbed, hit, and shoved misbehaving students, and slammed them into their desks. It didn’t help, I am sure, that corporal punishment was legal in North Carolina, at that time. Moreover, Mr. Bland would yell so loudly that he would turn beet red and the veins in his neck would bulge. Further, he rarely missed the opportunity to let us know how stupid he thought we were by calling us names such as, “brained stripped morons,” “lame brains,” and “knuckle heads.”

Prior to Mr. Bland’s arrival at our school, I was always excited about taking my report card home to my parents as I had always made straight A’s. However; during my 7th grade school year, Mr. Bland shattered my dream of making straight A’s throughout my years of schooling, when he gave me an “A minus.” I questioned why he had given me an “A minus” on my report card, for that grading term, when I had (in deed) made “A’s” and “A plus’s” on all of my assigned work. To my chagrin, Mr. Bland explained that he had GIVEN me an “A minus” because he felt as though I must have found some means to cheat, as “There is no way that [I] can be THAT smart.” I was devastated as I had worked “extra” hard to get all “A’s.” And to me, an “A minus” signified a deficiency, not in my work but within myself.

In growing up, my family and my Black teachers had always reinforced the fact that I was smart, or “apt” as my grandpa, Joe Neal, would say. Moreover, my third grade Black teacher, Mrs. Akan, even entered me, as a third grader, in a spelling bee contest against 8th grade students because she felt as though I was super smart. I was first runner-up in that spelling bee contest.

Mrs. Akan, unlike Mr. Bland, had very high expectations for her

students. At times, it appeared that she had even higher expectations than normal for me. The incessant extra classwork and homework assignments, and my previous example of the spelling bee contest makes my point. Mrs. Akan also required me, and no other member of the class, to memorize a song that made no sense to me at the time. I recall feeling frustrated by the whole situation, thinking and feeling as though I was being punished for some reason; however, Mrs. Akan reassured me that I wasn’t being punished, and in “due time” I will come to understand the significance of the song that she admonished me to “never forget.” An excerpt from the song’s lyrics are as follows:

**Verse:**

Over hill, over dale  
We have hit the dusty trail,  
And the Caissons go rolling along.  
In and out, hear them shout,  
Counter march and right about,  
And the Caissons go rolling along.

**Refrain:**

For it’s hi! hi! hee!  
In the field artillery,  
Shout out your numbers loud and strong,  
And where e’er you go,  
You will always know  
That the Caissons go rolling along.

**Verse:**

In the storm, in the night,  
Action left or action right  
See those Caissons go rolling along  
Limber front, limber rear,  
Prepare to mount your cannoneer  
And those Caissons go rolling along.  
(Refrain) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Army\\_Goes\\_Rolling\\_Along#\\_note-Bragg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Army_Goes_Rolling_Along#_note-Bragg)

While in third grade, several days before school ended, Mrs. Akan lost her husband. Two weeks later, Mrs. Akan passed away. I often reflect on the “Caissons” song. Thank you Mrs. Akan; I think I finally got it!

### *Integrated Spaces: High School*

I have always loved learning, and I have always loved school. So, I was very eager to enroll in Reidsville Senior High, the only high school in my hometown. It was there that I asked, Mr. Clark, my 9th grade White, male geometry teacher to “please explain a [particular mathematical] concept.” Rather than assist me, as he should have because he was my teacher, he asked me, instead, “Didn’t they teach you anything at that old school where you came from?” I never asked Mr. Clark for help again. It was at this point that it REALLY dawned on me that I was going to have to work “extra” hard to achieve academically. Unlike my White counterparts’ parents, my parents were not able to assist me with my homework and other academic assignments due to their level of educational preparedness. Moreover, they did not have the monetary means to provide a tutor for me or to pay for expensive test preparation courses.

No doubt, my resolve to work hard has paid off in terms of my academic achievement and in my professional career goals; however, Archer and Francis (2007) caution us that

... this does not absolve society from addressing the unequal conditions that necessitate ... young people from having to work “extra” hard. Indeed, we might read the requirement of having to work extra hard as a form of injustice, highlighting the lack of a level playing field in education and employment.” (p. 159)

During my junior year in high school, upon receiving results back from a test in an advanced algebra class, I discovered that I had not included a negative sign on my answer sheet, despite having solved the problem correctly on the worksheet. Mr. Thomason (a Black male teacher) required us to show our work on a worksheet, and then transfer our answers to an answer sheet. We had to turn in both sheets. I approached

Mr. Thomason’s desk and brought this matter to his attention, while making the case that he reconsider my grade and give me full or partial credit for getting the correct answer, as demonstrated on the worksheet. Mr. Thomason refused my request, flat out, saying, “because you neglected to add the negative sign, the number is positive. Therefore, I can not give you credit for the problem.” I returned to my seat and continued my assigned class work. Minutes later, Missy, a tall, thin, blond, White female cheerleader, and daughter of a wealthy physician, approached Mr. Thomason’s desk with the same request that I had made only minutes earlier. That is, change her grade as she, too, had neglected to transfer her negative sign from the work sheet to the answer sheet. Keep in mind that Mr. Thomason had just denied my request; however, he was eager to accommodate Missy. Thus, he changed her grade on her answer sheet and corrected the score in his grade book. I sat one row away from Mr. Thomason’s desk, so I witnessed the exchange. I was saddened, and it must have shown on my face. When Mr. Thomason’s eyes met mine, he then asked me to bring my paper up to his desk so that he could change my grade as well. I told him that it was Okay “I don’t want you to change my grade.” I hope he got the point, though I am not sure what the point was. Did he change Missy’s grade because she was White, rich, beautiful, or any combination of these? Did he change her grade because it was a second request? While I cannot say for sure that “this” particular incident signified a racist or classist act; however, it has been my experience that White people typically are given the benefit of the doubt.

During that same year, Mr. Coy, my White male sociology teacher had not been teaching our class sociology. Instead, he allowed students to play cards, sleep in class, and do crossword puzzles, etc. I used his assigned class time as a study hall. On one occasion, when Mr. Coy asked the class what we wanted to do on that particular day, instead of being silent and allowing the more vocal students to encourage the teacher to let them “goof off,” I said that I wanted him to teach sociology since “one day I intend to go to college.” With that said, Mr. Coy stood up from behind his desk in a very intimidating manner and announced to the class (in a very sarcastic tone), “I guess I have to teach you sociology today because somebody in here plans to go to college.” Boy, did I feel small. After all, the only sin that I had committed was to ask my teacher

to teach me.

Throughout my high school years, I continued to work “extra” hard as I took College Parallel (CP) courses, versus the general courses offered in our high school curriculum. In most instances, this likely meant that I would be the only Black person in a given CP class. Our CP courses were the equivalent of Advanced Placement (AP) courses offered in many high schools today. As the only Black person in my CP classes, my White teachers consistently asked me, “Do you understand Wanda?” They did not ask the White students, repeatedly, whether they understood. I did understand; as evidenced by the fact that I graduated in the top five percent of my class, with an overall average of 95 on a 100 point scale.

### *Undergraduate School*

Although the doors of traditional all-White educational institutions had legally opened to all (one of the provisions of *Brown*) after graduating from predominately White Reidsville Senior High, in North Carolina, I chose to go to an HBCU, meaning a Historically Black College and University (North Carolina Central). Reminiscent of my early years in segregated elementary schools, I wanted to return to an academic environment where I would be valued. This was a last minute decision, particularly since I had already been accepted into a predominately White university of my choice.

At North Carolina Central University the majority of my teachers looked like me and they nurtured my intellect. It is not uncommon to find that many top Black students “choose traditional Black colleges because they find them more hospitable, caring, and nurturing [than traditional White colleges and universities]” (Powell, 1998, p. 99).

I graduated Magna Cum Laude from North Carolina Central. Being in a safe house can reaffirm who you are, so you have the strength to go back into the contact zone, certain of who you are and what you represent (Pratt, 1999). However, this is not to imply that a common cultural heritage inherently creates a safe house or place of shared understanding (Anzaldúa, 2000).

In considering the 50 plus years since *Brown*, it is worth not-

ing the numerous advancements in the legal system towards combating racial discrimination. However, Court-ordered integration, desegregation policies and other instances of forced justice have hardly been the panacea for what ails Black “America” in its quest for parity in education. Further, it is worth noting that the legal system can legislate actions not attitudes. As we know, legal victories do not automatically translate into victories for social justice.

The true barometer for gauging whether the vision of *Brown* has been realized is the quality of education provided to poor students, African American students, and other non-dominant cultural groups trapped in inner-city and urban schools (Morris, 1999). In this case, the so called “*Brown* victory” casts a shadow of defeat in that, some fifty years later, similar arguments advanced in *Brown* are no less prevalent in many of our public schools today. Schools in the United States have increasingly become re-segregated for Black and Latino student populations for the past eighteen years, making today’s classrooms almost as racially separated as they were in the early 1970s. In fact, in some situations, conditions may have eroded from the times that predated *Brown*.

Given that legal barriers and White flight have thwarted desegregation plans and made integration nearly impossible to achieve, those who still view the goals of *Brown* as critical find themselves in a quandary as to ways to revive its legacy. Should we continue to push for integration? Even if it means that Black children will continue to run the risk of not reaching their full potential in hostile environments. Or should we push for equity in the contexts in which children best learn? If so, this might signal taking several leaps backwards to reclaim the unfulfilled promise of *Plessy*’s “separate but equal” doctrine. Does it really matter where children attend schools or with whom as long as they have opportunities to obtain an education that will help maximize their intellectual and creative potential?

W. E. B. Du Bois insisted upon excellence for all Black children’s education. In his famous article published in 1935, *Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?*, he stated “The negro needs neither segregated schools nor mixed schools. What [s/]he needs is education” (Du Bois, 1935, p. 335).

However, as noted by Yale Law School professor Drew Days III,

in trying to obtain a high quality education, Black “America” has paid, in some instances, a “high price for desegregation” (Wilkinson, 1996, cited in Barnes, 1997, p. 2386), a view prevalent among scholars who have investigated the cultural, academic, behavioral, and psychological consequences of the Brown decree and its progeny (Barnes, 1997). Who knows what the real extent of this damage is and will be for generations upon generations of Black youth.

### **From the Perspective of a Black Female: Gender, Race, and Class Matters**

When racism, classism, and sexism are discussed, higher achieving groups of Black females tend to be absent from the discussions as it is taken for granted that gender, race, and class does not matter and that we do not experience any significant challenges that warrant any particular considerations or resources (Archer & Francis, 2007). To the contrary, classist, racist, and sexist acts are pervasive in many U.S. schools and classrooms and are oftentimes perceived to be a non issue.

#### *As Student*

#### *Taking Note of the Underclass Achievement Trap*

Patterns of teachers’ interactions with Black students, poor students, and female students differ as opposed to White students, male students, and students from more affluent backgrounds (Gay, 2000).

Students of color, especially those who are poor and live in urban areas, get less total instructional attention; are called on less frequently; are encouraged to develop intellectual thinking less often; are criticized more and praised less; receive fewer direct responses to their questions and comments; and are reprimanded more often and disciplined more severely. Frequently, the praise given is terse, ritualistic, procedural, and social rather than elaborate, substantive, and academic. General praise of personal attributes is less effective than that which is related to task-specific

performance in improving the learning efforts and outcomes of students. (Damico & Scott, 1988; Good & Brophy, 1994; Grossman & Grossman, 1994; U.S. Civil Rights Commission, 1973, cited in Gay, 2000, p. 63)

Studies on the education of girls and female students also indicate that teachers interact differently with males and females. However, the instructional disparities associated with the intersectionality of race creates a triple threat to the academic achievement of Black females. To no one’s surprise, males are treated preferentially. They have more interactions with teachers and they dominate the classroom (Streitmatter, 1994, cited in Gay, 2000).

European American males also ... receive more encouragement, feedback, and praise, are cued, prompted, and probed more; are rewarded more for major accomplishments; are asked more complex, abstract, and open ended questions; and are taught how to become independent thinkers and problem solvers. By comparison, females ... receive less academic encouragement, praise, prompts, rewards, and expectations for success; have less total interactional time with teachers; are asked more simple questions that require descriptive and concrete answers; are disciplined less frequently and less severely; and are rewarded more for social than for academic accomplishments. (Good & Brophy, 1994; Grossman & Grossman, 1994; Sadker & Sadker, 1982; Scott & McCollum, 1993; AAUW, 1995, cited in Gay, 2000, pp. 65-66)

Teacher interactions with Black females paralleled that of Black males, but was more negative when compared to White males and White females. Even in instances when Black females’ performance is equivalent to or greater than Black males, they still receive “less and lower-quality opportunities to engage in instructional interactions” (Damico & Scott, 1988, cited in Gay, 2000, p. 66). In the stories that follow, I attempt to elucidate how race, class, and gender has mattered from my perspective as not only a student but from that of an art teacher, parent, school administrator (principal), and university professor.

*As Art Teacher*

*Taking Race, Class, and Gender Matters to HeART*

Following a one year stint in Okinawa, Japan, with my spouse, Julius, who was an officer in the United States Marine Corps, I took my first job as an art teacher in Stafford County Schools, in Northern Virginia. I traveled daily between two schools. In the mornings, I taught 7th and 8th grade art classes at Garrisonville Middle School, and in the afternoons, I taught 6th grade art classes at Stafford Middle School. The vast majority of the students were White, and most of them had parents or guardians affiliated with the military. I was one of three Black female teachers at Garrisonville Middle and I was one of three Black teachers (one male and two females) at Stafford Middle. My principal was a Black male at Garrisonville Middle and his assistant principal was a White male. At Stafford Middle School, both the principal and assistant principal were White males. I do not recall either of their names.

What I do recall however, at Stafford Middle School, was the fact that the school's assistant principal had a six-foot Confederate flag plastered on the wall in his office, directly behind his desk. Also, in October of my first year of teaching at Stafford Middle, I recall the school's guidance counselor (Mrs. Collins, a White female) dressing up like Aunt Jemimah. She smeared a black substance on her face and body (it looked like shiny black shoe polish), and she exaggerated the size of her lips by painting them a bright red color. Additionally, she tied a white scarf around her head with the bow positioned in front. And, oh!, do not let me forget, she wore an apron and baggy clothes, with big "boobs" to match. Despite the fact that the majority of the White teachers and students found her racist act humorous as the principal paraded her through the hallways from classroom to classroom, the few Black students and Black teachers failed to see the humor in her racist shenanigans. Following that incident, I wondered how many of the Black students in our school (or any students for that matter) would feel comfortable going to the guidance counselor for assistance. Moreover, after the incident, I wondered how many students felt safe going to the principal or to the assistant principal.

Also, in Stafford Middle School, the White teachers and the White school secretary frequently reminded me that "[I] don't talk and act like other Black people." What immediately comes to mind when I hear such remarks coming from White people is that one would have to assume that they have a preconceived notion of how Black people talk and behave.

While I was teaching in the Stafford County Schools in Virginia, our second child, Mark was born. We had had our first child, Franchesca, while living in Japan. Many of the personal experiences I have described here caused my husband and me to worry about putting our children in schools where they may have to contend with the racist, classist, and sexist practices; that we witnessed on almost a daily basis.

*On the (Bumpy) Road Again:  
Sharp Turns and Uneven Slopes Ahead*

Because I chose to support my spouse's career in the military, our family moved every three years or so to a new location somewhere in the world. Skipping ahead several years, after having subsequently taught in two other school districts (one on a military installation in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and the other in an under-privileged mixed-race school in Albany, Georgia), I landed a job as an elementary art teacher in an overwhelmingly White upper middle class school district, in the Chipewa Valley Schools in Michigan. What I will never forget about this situation is that, when I first introduced myself to my primarily White students at Erie Elementary School as their new art teacher, some of them started to cry. Others expressed their fears in various ways. A few did not talk to me. Some students would not make eye contact with me, and some left the room, following complaints about being sick. Several students asked me to leave the door open for fear that I might harm them in some way if the door were closed.

To allay my White students' fears, I allowed them to spend as much time as necessary getting to know me. I allowed them to ask questions, and express any concerns that they may have had about me as their new "Black" art teacher. In doing so, I recognized that if my students did not feel psychologically safe and physically safe in my classroom,

I could not teach them about art, or about anything else for that matter. The same was true for the White parents and guardians of the students whom I taught. They had to know that their children were safe with me. To that end, I made my classroom accessible to the parents and care-givers of the students whom I taught so that they could volunteer or visit my classroom at their convenience or leisure. However, no one took me up on my offer. Instead, nearly every parent (which appeared to be a few hundred) showed up during “Meet the Teacher Night,” which occurred a few weeks after school had started during my first year of teaching at Erie. The inquisitive ones, among others, hoped to “see” me and hear about my vision for the art program. I found out from the principal, (Dr. Brun, a White female whom I respected and admired for her positive, fair, and competent leadership) that previously, upon my hiring, several parents had questioned whether I might be “articulate enough” and whether I might be “intelligent enough” to teach “[their] kinds of kids.” At one point, during our “Meet the Teacher Night,” I was totally engulfed by students, their parents, and relatives. This precarious looking situation prompted Dr. Brun to push through the crowd to make sure that I was okay. In retrospect, while I had (from the outset) spent a disproportionate amount of time trying to make students, parents, and community feel comfortable and safe with me, perhaps, I should have spent more time attending to my own physical, and psychological well-being in the contact zone.

Moreover, in Chippewa Valley, I was frequently stopped by security when I tried to gain access to functions or entrance to buildings within my school district. The security officers assumed that I was from Detroit. The same is true for my two children, Franchesca and Mark, who were oftentimes asked to leave the playground of my overwhelmingly White school, when they came as visitors, as they did not fit in with the surrounding landscape.

I worked “extra” hard to let the students know that I was not a person to be feared, and that I genuinely cared about them. As time went on, the students became more comfortable with me, and shared their excitement about what they were learning in my art classes. However, when I thought that all was going well, Dr. Brun summoned me to her office to let me know that one of the White male parents of a child in our school

had started a rumor in the community. The rumor was that I was “using mind altering drugs on the children,” because his son, like others who disliked school, were suddenly interested in school and “excited to come to school, because they love their new art teacher.”

### *As Parent*

#### *Who’s the Fairest of Them All: My Daughter Franchesca*

When our daughter was three years old, we enrolled her in a private all White Montessori School in Jacksonville, North Carolina. Within several weeks of attending her new school, we noticed that while playing at home, Franchesca would get a towel (a yellow one) and cover her curly black hair. Periodically, she would brush or toss the towel out of her face, or sling a portion of it over her shoulder to keep it from falling into her face and impeding her vision. One day, after observing her behavior for a while, slinging the yellow towel back and forth and over her shoulders, I asked her what she was doing. Franchesca exclaimed that the towel was her hair, and while further adjusting her hair (the towel) she stated, “I’m a White girl, and I am the fairest of them all.” In sharing this story, some years later, with my eldest sister Ida, who lives in North Carolina, she recounted a similar story in which her only daughter, Jimmica, who is several years older than Franchesca, had worn a towel on her head, while pretending that it was her hair as well. Unlike me, Ida never asked Jimmica, why she was wearing *her* towel.

Several years later, while in the fifth grade in a mostly White elementary school in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, a White male student in Franchesca’s class called her a “Black Monkey.” Moreover, he told her to “go back to Africa, climb a tree, and eat a banana.” The student’s racist remarks hurt Franchesca very badly. When she reported the incident to her White female teacher, her teacher told her to ignore the student’s remarks as the student didn’t likely understand what he was saying. Upon returning to school the following day, I asked Franchesca to report the incident to her White female principal. In doing so, the principal also told her to ignore the incident. And “besides,” the principal exclaimed, “what do you want me to do, have him jump off a bridge or step in front of a semi-truck?”

No doubt, one way of dealing with racism on a daily basis is to “ignore it.” However,

... advocating that racism is ‘ignored’ can leave inequalities protected and unchallenged. Moreover, it relies upon the individual or collectivity experiencing racism(s) to ‘deal with it’ themselves—as opposed, for example, to requiring the culprits to acknowledge and change their discourse and behaviors. The ‘ignore it’ response may also hint at the potential fruitlessness of complaining about racism(s). Furthermore ... the requirement for [an individual] to ‘ignore’ racism can generate a level of psychic stress, as it requires considerable suppression and control of the emotions and demands a high degree of work on the self. (Archer & Francis, 2007, p. 159)

*As School Administrator  
Principal(ly) Speaking About Race, Class and Gender Matters*

As I reflect upon the three schools in Ohio in which I have served as principal, not one of them had ever had a female in its history, and two of the schools in which I served had never had a person of color. Throughout my service in these schools, I frequently heard comments from parents, teachers, and community members, questioning whether a female could handle the day-to-day school affairs as well as handle discipline. Moreover, I was criticized by some of the teachers in my schools, for not being as harsh a disciplinarian as my male predecessors because the students in my schools liked me and did not fear me. Additionally, in Elyria, Ohio, where I served as principal, on the occasions in which I found myself in the main office with my White male assistant principal, parents and most visitors to the school assumed that my White assistant was the principal.

*As University Professor  
Black K(night) White Castle:  
Race, Class, and Gender Matters In The Academe Game*

As one might suspect, there is a direct correlation between educational attainment and social class. At the outset of this essay, I mentioned that I hold a Ph.D. from a major university. That is one way in which I have attempted to transform my life. When I started my journey as a professor in a predominately White, “Research I” institution, I sincerely believed (perhaps naively) that academe would be a place where I would be viewed as a “legitimate” scholar, and that I would be judged by my hard work and scholarship. However, race, gender, and class stereotypes and expectations continue to serve as impediments towards overcoming racial, economic, and gender barriers in academe. My path continues to be bumpy, filled with twists and turns, and uneven slopes.

The literature on the experiences of female faculty of color in predominately White colleges and universities reveal pervasive entangled social realities (Alfred 2001; Gregory, 2001; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Opp & Poplin Gosetti, 2002; Turner, 2002).

Unfortunately, the lives of faculty women of color are often invisible, hidden within studies that look at the experiences of women faculty and within studies that examine the lives of faculty of color. Women of color fit both categories, experience multiple marginality, and [our] stories are often masked within these contexts. (Turner, 2002, pp. 75-76)

In institutions of higher learning in the United States, the standard academic lens through which race, gender, and class are examined is that of White, male, and middle-class culture, which posits an adversarial stance toward those who are not of the “right” race, gender, or class. Far too often, when I have critiqued racist, classist, and sexist systems of oppression and their impediments to social mobility, access, and choice, or rebelled against the engravings of my body, I have been further marginalized, alienated, and labeled as “ungrateful.” Moreover, when I have challenged racist, classist, and sexist practices, I have been silenced, and denied the privilege of academic discourse for fear of reprisal.

Having found my way into academe, despite not conforming to racial, gender, and class stereotypes, I am acknowledged as an “exception to the rule.” However, interestingly enough, “no modifications are

made to the rule itself” (Gay, 2000, p. 60). People wonder how I will measure up against the “Other,” that is, those who are male, White, and economically privileged. Also, I find that many of my White students and colleagues are leery of me, on their guard, watching how I will perform. Rarely, am I given the benefit of the doubt. It seems to me that many of my colleagues just tolerate or put up with me because they know or think it is the collegial thing to do. I know that I am just being tolerated, when I oftentimes do not get critical feedback from people in positions of power, since they do not expect me to be successful in the first place (Cullinan, 1999).

In schools, like other places, the achievement effects of teacher expectations are exponential. If teachers expect students to be high or low achievers, they (students) will respond in ways that achieve this outcome. This is known as the “self fulfilling prophecy” (Madon, Jussim, & Eccles, 1997, ¶ 2).

### *Being Other(wise)*

Race complicated by gender also affects assumptions about skills and ability (Figart, Mutari, & Power, 2002). In almost, every educational context, White people assume that I have achieved my positions through affirmative action. With that assumption comes the assumption that, through some legal mandate, the hiring agency or educational institution had to fill a quota.

My experiences at the major research university from which I received my Ph.D. was no exception. During a class discussion in a teacher education course in the College of Education, a White male course participant made a statement, about affirmative action, directed towards me. He stated, “I am not saying that you are not qualified to be here; however, my best friend [a White male] did not get into ‘Somewhere University’ because they have to let ‘minorities’ fill so many slots.”

Such an assertion presumes that had the White male’s best friend been Black, he would have been able to attend the college or university of his choice. It also presumes that White males are not afforded racial and gender privileges. And, it does not take into consideration that Whites are more likely than Blacks and other cultural groups—even with

affirmative action in place—to get into their first-choice colleges and universities. Moreover, even when achievement is characterized as being tainted by giving a “leg up” to Black people, it does not take into account that affirmative action, based on racial privilege, has a long and very White history in business and employment, promotion, education, and academic admissions, politics, criminal justice, and housing among other things (Katznelson, 2005).

In most simplistic terms, affirmative action is the United State’s attempt to redress its long history of racial and sexual discrimination based on race and gender preference. As a consequence of misunderstandings and misinterpretations about how affirmative action operates in education and in hiring, more often than not, I am considered to be incompetent. Thus, I have to resist dominant narrow explanations of my positionings and prove myself as other(wise).

As I reflect upon my resistance to racist, classist, and sexist “practices that operate to restrict [life] choices, [civil] rights, [social] mobility, and access” (Contreras, 1998, p. 144), I recognize my daughter’s transgressive journey towards negotiating oppressive systems that have been triple threats to her academic achievement as a Black female. Despite a lifetime of covert and overt racist, sexist, and classist messages of inferiority, and with being literally told by her White female high school guidance counselor that she was not “four year college material” (a comment she would have never heard from a Black professional educator), Francesca has obtained a Bachelors Degree in Early Childhood Education and a Masters Degree in Educational Administration. Moreover, she is a first grade teacher, serving in an overwhelmingly White, affluent school district in Central Ohio. Francesca, and her spouse have a child, Leila, a Black female.

### **Working for Equality and Equity in Art Education: Implications for Dealing With Racism, Classism, and Sexism**

In the succession of fragmented personal stories, I have described blatant forms of individual racism, sexism, and classism. The danger in doing so; however, is that individual, institutional and cultural racism, sexism, and classism are entangled and threaded into every day life,

and can be so subtle that many art teachers may be completely unaware of their influences; hence, they become the creature that sits on top of another creature all day, every day, without the slightest idea about them whatsoever. Likewise, a significant obstacle to teaching about racism, sexism, and classism is the belief by some that discrimination based on race, class, gender or some combination of them is a thing of the past. Compounding the problem is that art teacher education programs are remiss in preparing teachers to see the subtle, unintentional but nevertheless damaging race, class, and gender bias that continue to prevail in various teaching and learning contexts.

In citing examples of two Black females (self and daughter) who have achieved a high level of academic success, I have offered three types of responses as to how one who is oppressed might “deal with” various forms of oppression. They can ignore them, work “extra” hard to overcome them, or be otherwise (Archer & Francis, 2007). Hence, this places the onus or responsibility for dealing with racism, classism, and sexism on the oppressed individual. However, in order to diminish the effects of institutional racism, classism, and sexism, it is important for art educators to focus attention on organizational and structural impediments in schools and teaching contexts that have most consistently resulted in unacceptable levels of academic performance and achievement for Black youth. It is also important that art educators grapple with ways to expose inequality regimes inherent within our educational organization and within our own teaching contexts, thus shifting the burden of responsibility for responding to racism, classism, and sexism away from the oppressed and on to institutions and structures. Art educators can achieve these objectives by creating safe houses within our individual teaching contexts, within our art education programs, and within the field of art education, in general.

*Safe houses within our individual teaching contexts* could entail incorporating space in lessons to discuss issues of gender, class, and race, particularly Whiteness and the role of Whiteness in the re/production of educational privilege. Moreover, safe houses within our individual teaching contexts might incorporate story telling, which uses opportunities for reflection on shared experiences or reflection upon one’s own schooling and how it differs or has affected achievement and educational outcomes

based on race, gender, and socio-economic class.

Preservice and practicing art teachers need to develop a more critical awareness of race, class, and gender and other social issues and their impact on teaching and learning. Moreover, they should be able to respond accordingly when issues of racism, among others, are reported and observed in schools and their various teaching contexts; therefore, *safe houses within art education programs* could involve an increase in the amount of time devoted to discussions of inequality regimes inherent in educational institutions, which (ideally) warrant mainstreaming and embedding throughout coursework topics related to social justice and equity, racism, sexism, classism, and other “isms.”

With the over emphasis on policy related to “standards and achievement” in education, it is crucial that there are *safe houses in the field of art education* that advocate policy that attends to issues of social justice and equity. Moreover safe houses in art education could promote scholarship that values learning from lived experiences, with further emphasis on critically examining discourse in the field that privileges White, middle-class values and thus the achievement of White middle-class children.

In closing, I hope that my stories inspire art educators to work for equality and equity while challenging oppressive systems and that the aforementioned transgressive steps offered will serve as a catalyst from which to start the journey. Even so, it is crucial that the art education field as a whole engage more meaningfully “with the complexity of racialized identities and inequities and the ways in which these are bound up with axes of gender (and class). Without more complex understandings of these intersections [or entangled social realities] educators may unwittingly reinforce oppressive relationships” (Archer & Francis, 2007, p. 165).

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