5

Racial Identity in Adulthood

"Still a work in progress . . . "

When I was in high school, I did not sit at the Black table in the cafeteria because there were not enough Black kids in my high school to fill one. Though I was naive about many things, I knew enough about social isolation to know that I needed to get out of town. As the child of college-educated parents and an honor student myself, it was expected that I would go on to college. My mother suggested Howard University, my parents' alma mater, but although it was a good suggestion, I had my own ideas. I picked Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. It was two hours from home, an excellent school, and of particular interest to me was that it had a critical mass of Black and Latino students, most of whom were male. Wesleyan had just gone co-ed, and the ratio of Black male students to Black female students was seven-to-one. I thought it would improve my social life, and it did.

I thrived socially and academically. Since I had decided in high school to be a psychologist, I was a psychology major, but I took a lot of African American studies courses—history, literature, religion, even Black child development. I studied Swahili in hopes of traveling to Tanzania, although I never went. I stopped straightening my hair and had a large Afro à la Angela Davis circa 1970. I happily sat at the Black table in the dining hall every day. I look back on my days at Wesleyan with great pleasure. I maintain many of the friendships I formed there, and I can't remember the name of one White classmate.

I was having what William Cross might call an "immersion experience." I had my racial encounters in high school, so when I got to college I was ready to explore my racial identity and I did it

wholeheartedly. The third stage in Cross's model, immersion/emersion is characterized by a strong desire to surround oneself with symbols of one's racial identity, and actively seek out opportunities to learn about one's own history and culture with the support of same-race peers. While anger toward Whites is often characteristic of the encounter phase, during the immersion/emersion phase the developing Black person sees White people as simply irrelevant. This is not to say that anger is totally absent, but that the focus of attention is on self-discovery rather than on White people. If I had spent a lot of time being angry with the White men and women I encountered at Wesleyan, I would remember them. The truth is I wasn't paying much attention to them. My focus was almost exclusively on exploring my own cultural connections.

The Black person in the immersion/emersion phase is energized by the new information he or she is learning—angry perhaps that it wasn't available sooner—but excited to find out that there is more to Africa than Tarzan movies and that there is more to Black history than victimization. In many ways, the person at the immersion/emersion stage is unlearning the internalized stereotypes about his or her own group and is redefining a positive sense of self, based on an affirmation of one's racial group identity.

One emerges from this process into the internalization stage, characterized by a sense of security about one's racial identity. Often the person at this stage is willing to establish meaningful relationships across group boundaries with others, including Whites, who are respectful of this new self-definition. Cross suggests that there are few psychological differences between this fourth stage and the fifth, internalization-commitment. However, by the fifth stage the individual has found ways to translate a personal sense of racial identity into ongoing action expressing a sense of commitment to the concerns of Blacks as a group. Whether at the fourth or fifth stage, the individual is now anchored in a positive sense of racial identity and is prepared to perceive and transcend race.

In my own life, I see these stages clearly. I left Wesleyan anchored

in my sense of Blackness. I went off to graduate school at the University of Michigan and quickly became part of an extensive network of Black graduate students, but I did have a few White friends, too. I even remember their names. But there were also White people that I chose not to associate with, people who weren't ready to deal with me in terms of my self-definition. I continue to have a racially mixed group of friends, and I am glad to model that for my children. My choice of research topics throughout my career reflects my concerns about my racial group. I like to think that I both perceive and transcend race, but I am still a work in progress. I know that I revisit the earlier stages of development a lot.

Sometimes I find it helpful to compare this process to learning another language. The best way to learn a second language is to travel to a place where it is spoken and experience complete immersion. Once you have achieved the level of proficiency you need, you can leave. If you worked hard to become conversant, you will of course take pride in your accomplishment and will not want to spend time with people who disparage your commitment to this endeavor. You may choose not to speak this new language all the time, but if you want to maintain your skill, you will need to speak it often with others who understand it.

Though the cultural symbols for this generation are not the same as for mine, the process of racial identity development is the same. Black students practice their "language" in Black student unions and cultural centers and at college dining halls on predominantly White campuses all over the United States.[1] And they should not be discouraged from doing so. Like the Black middle school students from Boston, they need safe spaces to retreat to and regroup in the process of dealing with the daily stress of campus racism.

That life is stressful for Black students and other students of color on predominantly White campuses should not come as a surprise, but it often does. White students and faculty frequently underestimate the power and presence of the overt and covert manifestations of racism on campus, and students of color often come to predominantly White

campuses expecting more civility than they find. Whether it is the loneliness of being routinely overlooked as a lab partner in science courses, the irritation of being continually asked by curious classmates about Black hairstyles, the discomfort of being singled out by a professor to give the "Black perspective" in class discussion, the pain of racist graffiti scrawled on dormitory room doors, the insult of racist jokes circulated through campus e-mail, or the injury inflicted by racial epithets (and sometimes beer bottles) hurled from a passing car, Black students on predominantly White college campuses must cope with ongoing affronts to their racial identity.[2] The desire to retreat to safe space is understandable. Sometimes that means leaving the campus altogether.

For example, one young woman I interviewed at Howard University explained why she transferred from a predominantly White college to a historically Black one. Assigned to share a dormitory room with two White girls, both of whom were from rural White communities, she was insulted by the assumptions her White roommates made about her. Conflict erupted between them when she was visited by her boyfriend, a young Black man.

> They put padlocks on their doors and their dressers. And they accused me of drinking all their beers. And I was like, "We don't drink. This doesn't make any sense." So what really brought me to move out of that room was when he left, I came back, they were scrubbing things down with Pine Sol. I was like, "I couldn't live here with you. You think we have germs or something?"

She moved into a room with another Black woman, the first Black roommate pair in the dormitory. The administration had discouraged Black pairings because they didn't want Black students to separate themselves. She and her new roommate got along well, but they became targets of racial harassment.

> All of a sudden we started getting racial slurs like "South Africa will strike. Africans go home." And all this other stuff. I knew the girls who were doing it. They lived all the way down the hall. And I don't understand why they were doing it. We didn't do anything to them. But when we confronted them they acted like they didn't know anything. And my friends, their rooms were getting trashed. . . . One day I was asleep and somebody was trying to jiggle the lock trying to get in. And I opened the door and chased this girl down the hallway.

Though she said the college administration handled the situation and the harassers were eventually asked to leave, the stress of these events had taken its toll. At the end of her first year, she transferred to Howard.

While stressful experiences can happen at any college, and social conflicts can and do erupt among Black students at Black colleges as well, there is considerable evidence that Black students at historically Black colleges and universities achieve higher academic performance, enjoy greater social involvement, and aspire to higher occupational goals than their peers do at predominantly White institutions.[3] Drawing on his analysis of data from the National Study on Black College Students, Walter Allen offers this explanation of the difference in student outcomes.

> On predominantly White campuses, Black students emphasize feelings of alienation, sensed hostility, racial discrimination, and lack of integration. On historically Black campuses, Black students emphasize feelings of engagement, connection, acceptance, and extensive support and encouragement. Consistent with accumulated evidence on human development, these students, like most human beings, develop best in environments

> where they feel valued, protected, accepted, and socially connected. The supportive environments of historically Black colleges communicate to Black students that it is safe to take the risks associated with intellectual growth and development. Such environments also have more people who provide Black students with positive feedback, support, and understanding, and who communicate that they care about the students' welfare.[4]

While Allen's findings make a compelling case for Black student enrollment at historically Black colleges, the proportion of Black students entering predominantly White colleges continues to increase. Predominantly White colleges concerned about attracting and keeping Black students need to take seriously the psychological toll extracted from students of color in inhospitable environments and the critical role that cultural space can play. Having a place to be rejuvenated and to feel anchored in one's cultural community increases the possibility that one will have the energy to achieve academically as well as participate in the cross-group dialogue and interaction many colleges want to encourage. If White students or faculty do not understand why Black or Latino or Asian cultural centers are necessary, then they need to be helped to understand.[5]

Not for College Students Only

Once when I described the process of racial identity development at a workshop session, a young Black man stood up and said, "You make it sound like if you don't go to college you have to stay stuck in the encounter stage." It was a good observation. Not every Black person moves through every stage. People of any educational background can get stuck. Identity development does not have to happen in college. Malcolm X had his immersion experience in prison. As he began to read books about Black history and was encouraged by older Black

inmates, he began to redefine for himself what it meant to be a Black man. As he said in his autobiography,

> The teachings of Mr. Muhammad stressed how history had been "whitened"—when white men had written history books, the black man had simply been left out. Mr. Muhammad couldn't have said anything that would have struck me much harder. I had never forgotten how when my class, me and all of those whites, had studied seventh-grade United States history back in Mason, the history of the Negro had been covered in one paragraph. . . .
>
> This is one reason why Mr. Muhammad's teachings spread so swiftly all over the United States, among *all* Negroes, whether or not they became followers of Mr. Muhammad. The teachings ring true . . . You can hardly show me a black adult in America—or a white one, for that matter—who knows from the history books anything like the truth about the black man's role. In my own case, once I heard of the "glorious history of the black man," I took special pains to hunt in the library for books that would inform me on details about black history.[6]

Malcolm's period of immersion included embracing the teachings of the Nation of Islam. Though Malcolm X later rejected the Nation's teachings in favor of the more inclusive message of orthodox Islam, his initial response to the Nation's message of Black empowerment and self-reliance was very enthusiastic.

One reason the Nation of Islam continues to appeal to some urban Black youth, many of whom are not in college, is that it offers another expanded, positive definition of what it means to be Black. In particular, the clean-shaven, well-groomed representatives of the Nation that can be seen on city streets emphasizing personal respon-

sibility and Black community development offer a compelling contrast to the pervasive stereotypes of Black men. The hunger for positive expressions of identity can be seen in the response of many Black men to the Nation of Islam's organization of the Million Man March. The march can be understood as a major immersion event for every Black man who was there, and vicariously for those who were not.

Michael Eric Dyson expresses this quite clearly when he writes:

> As I stood at the Million Man March, I felt the powerful waves of history wash over me. There's no denying that this march connected many of the men—more than a million, I believe—to a sense of racial solidarity that has largely been absent since the '60s. I took my son to Washington so that he could feel and see, drown in, even, an ocean of beautiful black brothers.[7]

It was an affirming and definition-expanding event for Black men. And despite the White commentators that continuously offered their opinions about the march on television, it seemed to me that, for the participants, White people were that day irrelevant.

The need for safe space in which to construct a positive self-definition is, of course, also important for Black women. In her book *Black Feminist Thought,* Patricia Hill Collins identifies various ways that Black women have found to create such space in or out of the academy. "One location," she writes, "involves Black women's relationships with one another. In some cases, such as friendships and family interactions, these relationships are informal, private dealings among individuals. In others, . . . more formal organizational ties have nurtured powerful Black women's communities."[8] Whether in the context of mother-daughter relationships, small social networks, Black churches, or Black women's clubs, space is created for resisting stereotypes and creating positive identities.

Though Black churches can sometimes be criticized as purveyors

of the dominant ideology, as evidenced in Eurocentric depictions of Jesus and sexist assumptions about the appropriate role of women, it is also true that historically Black churches have been the site for organized resistance against oppression and a place of affirmation for African American adults as well as for children. The National Survey of Black Americans, the largest collection of survey data on Black Americans to date, found very high rates of religious participation among Blacks in general, and among women in particular.[9] The survey respondents clearly indicated the positive role that the churches had played in both community development and psychological and social support.[10] Many Black churches with an Afrocentric perspective are providing the culturally relevant information for which Black adults hunger. For example, in some congregations an informational African American history moment is part of the worship service and Bible study includes a discussion of the Black presence in the Bible. As these examples suggest, there are sources of information within Black communities that will speak to the identity development needs of both young and older adults, but there is still a need for more.

Cycles of Racial Identity Development

The process of racial identity development, often beginning in adolescence and continuing into adulthood, is not so much linear as circular. It's like moving up a spiral staircase: As you proceed up each level, you have a sense that you have passed this way before, but you are not in exactly the same spot. Moving through the immersion stage to internalization does not mean there won't be new encounters with racism, or the recurring need to retreat to the safety of one's same-race peer group, or that identity questions that supposedly were resolved won't need to be revisited as life circumstances change.

In his article "Cycles of Psychological Nigrescence," counseling psychologist Thomas Parham has expanded Cross's model of racial identity development to explore the kind of changes in racial identity that a Black person may experience throughout the life cycle, not

just in adolescence or early adulthood.[11] For example, during middle adulthood, that broad span of time between the mid-thirties and the mid-fifties, individuals regardless of race come to terms with new physical, psychological, and social challenges. This period in the life span is characterized by changing bodies (gaining weight, thinning or graying hair, waning energy), increasing responsibilities (including rearing children and grandchildren and caring for aging parents), continuing employment concerns, and often increasing community involvement. In addition, Levinson argues that adults at midlife fluctuate between periods of stability and transition, as they re-examine previous life decisions and commitments and choose to make minor or major changes in their lives.[12] What role does racial identity play for Black adults at midlife?

Parham argues that "the middle-adulthood period of life may be the most difficult time to struggle with racial identity because of one's increased responsibilities and increased potential for opportunities."[13] Those whose work or lifestyle places them in frequent contact with Whites are aware that their ability to "make it" depends in large part on their ability and willingness to conform to those values and behaviors that have been legitimated by White culture. While it is unlikely that the lack of racial awareness that characterizes an adolescent at the pre-encounter stage would be found among a Black adult at midlife, some Black adults may have consciously chosen to retreat from actively identifying with other Blacks. Choosing a "raceless" persona, these adults may have adopted a pre-encounter stance as a way of winning the approval of White friends and co-workers. George Davis and Glegg Watson quote a Black corporate manager describing some Black co-workers who took that path: "Most of them don't know and don't care much about Black culture or any other kind of culture. They won't even speak to you in the hallway when they see you, but they'll speak to the White guy, so they do have a negative racial consciousness."[14]

In terms of childrearing, adults in the pre-encounter stage are likely to de-emphasize their children's racial group membership as

well. This attitude is captured in the comment of one father I interviewed who said that his children's peer group was "basically non-Black." Unlike other parents who told me that they felt it was important that their children have Black friends and were regretful when they did not, this father said, "I think it's more important that they have a socioeconomic group than a racial peer group."[15] In this case, class identification seemed more salient than racial identification.

Those adults who have adopted a strategy of racelessness may experience racial encounters in middle adulthood with particular emotional intensity. Because of the increased family responsibilities and financial obligations associated with this stage of life, the stakes are higher and the frustration particularly intense when a promotion is denied, a dream house is unattainable, or a child is racially harassed at school. Journalist Ellis Cose has chronicled many such incidents in his book *The Rage of a Privileged Class*,[16] as have Joe Feagin and Melvin Sikes in *Living with Racism: The Black Middle-Class Experience*.[17] Parham distinguishes between these "achievement-oriented" stresses of the upwardly mobile middle-class and the "survival-related" stresses experienced by poor and working-class Blacks. However, he concludes that despite a person's social status, "if an individual's sense of affirmation is sought through contact with and validation from Whites, then the struggle with one's racial identity is eminent."[18]

The latter survival stress is described by another father I interviewed who is worried not about promotions, but about simply holding on to what he has already achieved:

> Just being Black makes it hard, because people look at you like you're not as good as they are, like you're a second-class citizen, something like that. You got to always look over your shoulder like somebody's always watching you. At my job, I'm the only Black in my department and it seems like they're always watching me, the pressure's always on to perform. You feel like if you miss a day, you might not have a job. So there's that constant

> awareness on my part, they can snatch what little you have, so that's a constant fear, you know, especially when you have a family to support. . . . So I'm always aware of what can happen.[19]

The chronically high rates of Black unemployment form the backdrop for this man's fear. Under such circumstances, he is unlikely to speak up against the discrimination or racial hostility he feels.

While some adults struggle (perhaps in vain) to hold on to a "raceless" persona, other midlife adults express their racial identity through immersion/emersion attitudes. On the job, they may be open advocates of institutional change, or because of survival concerns, they may feel constrained in how they express their anger. One male interviewee, working in a human service agency, fluctuates between being silent and speaking up:

> It's very difficult, and dealing with all the negative problems, and then going back and fighting the administration of the department that you're working in, and fighting the racism, and squabbling of White males as well as White females, it's really difficult, and one becomes programmed to be a little bit hard, but then in order to survive, you've got to control it, and generally I stay pretty much out of trouble. It's just like playing a game in order to survive.[20]

Adults in the immersion/emersion stage are likely to be race-conscious about their children's socialization experiences, choosing to live in a Black community. If the demographics of their geographic area do not permit such a choice, they will, in contrast to "raceless" parents, actively seek out Black playmates for their children wherever they can find them. One mother explained,

> I'm not opposed to my child interacting with White children or kids of any other race, but I want them to have a Black peer group just for the sense of commonality, and sharing some of the same experiences, and just not losing that identity of themselves.[21]

Though they may work in predominantly White settings, adults in this stage choose to spend as much of their nonwork time as possible in the company of other Black people.

Individuals who have achieved an internalized racial identity also usually embrace a race-conscious perspective on childrearing, but they may also have a multiracial social network. Yet, anchored in an empowered sense of racial identity, they make clear to others that their racial identity is important to them, and that they expect it to be acknowledged. The White person who makes the mistake of saying, "Gee, I don't think of you as Black" will undoubtedly be corrected. However, the inner security experienced by adults at this stage often translates into a style of interaction that is perceived by Whites as less threatening than that of adults in the immersion/emersion stage.

Some of the recycling that occurs in midlife is precipitated by observing the racial identity processes of one's children. Parham suggests that "parents may begin to interpret the consequences of their lifestyle choices (i.e., sending their children to predominantly White schools, living in predominantly White neighborhoods) through their children's attitudes and behaviors and become distressed at what they see and hear from [them]."[22] For example, a Black professor struggling with guilt over his choice to live in a predominantly White community suggested to his daughter that she should have more Black friends. She replied, "Why do I have to have Black friends? Just because I'm Black?" He admitted to himself that he was more concerned about her peer group than she was. When he told her that she could "pay a price" for having a White social life, she replied, "Well, Daddy, as you always like to say, nothing is free."[23]

The process of re-examining racial identity can continue even into late adulthood. According to Erikson, the challenge of one's later years is to be able to reflect on one's life with a sense of integrity rather than despair.[24] Although racism continues to impact the lives of the elderly—affecting access to quality health care and adequate pension funds, for example—Black retirees have fairly high levels of morale.[25] Those who approach the end of their lives with a positive, well-internalized sense of racial identity are likely to reflect on life with that sense of integrity intact.

Just as racial identity unfolds over the life span, so do gender, sexual, and religious identities, to name a few. Cross reminds us that "the work of Internalization does not stop with the resolution of conflicts surrounding racial/cultural identity." Referring to the work of his colleague Bailey Jackson, he adds that racial identity development should be viewed as "a process during which a single dimension of a person's complex, layered identity is first isolated, for purposes of revitalization and transformation, and then, at Internalization, reintegrated into the person's total identity matrix."[26] Unraveling and reweaving the identity strands of our experience is a neverending task in a society where important dimensions of our lives are shaped by the simultaneous forces of subordination and domination. We continue to be works in progress for a lifetime.

The Corporate Cafeteria

When I told my sister I was writing a book called *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?"* she said, "Good, then maybe people will stop asking me about it." My sister spends her time not at a high school or college campus but in a corporate office. Even in corporate cafeterias, Black men and women are sitting together, and for the same reason. As we have seen, even mature adults sometimes need to connect with someone who looks like them and who shares the same experiences.

It might be worth considering here why the question is asked at

all. In *A Tale of O,* psychologist Rosabeth Moss Kanter offers some insight. She highlights what happens to the *O,* the token, in a world of *X*s.[27] In corporate America, Black people are still in the *O* position. One consequence of being an *O,* Kanter points out, is heightened visibility. When an *O* walks in the room, the *X*s notice. Whatever the *O* does, positive or negative, stands out because of this increased visibility. It is hard for an *O* to blend in. When several *O*s are together, the attention of the *X*s is really captured. Without the tokens present in the room, the *X*s go about their business, perhaps not even noticing that they are all *X*s. But when the *O* walks in, the *X*s are suddenly self-conscious about their *X*-ness. In the context of race relations, when the Black people are sitting together, the White people notice and become self-conscious about being White in a way that they were not before. In part the question reflects that self-consciousness. What does it say about the White people if the Black people are all sitting together? The White person wonders, "Am *I* being excluded? Are they talking about us? Are my own racial stereotypes and perhaps racial fears being stimulated?"

Particularly in work settings, where people of color are isolated and often in the extreme minority, the opportunity to connect with peers of color are few and far between. White people are often unaware of how stressful such a situation can be. There are many situations where White people say and do things that are upsetting to people of color. For example, a Black woman working in a school system where she was one of few Black teachers—and the only one in her building—was often distressed by the comments she heard her White colleagues making about Black students. As a novice, untenured teacher, she needed support and mentoring from her colleagues but felt alienated from them because of their casually expressed prejudices. When participating in a workshop for educators, she had the chance to talk in a small group made up entirely of Black educators and was able to vent her feelings and ask for help from her more experienced colleagues about how to cope with this situation. Though such opportunities may not occur daily, as in a cafeteria, they

are important for psychological survival in such situations.

In fact, some organizations are creating opportunities for these meetings to take place, providing time, space, and refreshments for people of color to get together for networking and support. They find that such activity supports the recruitment, retention, and heightened productivity of their employees. Like the SET program, it is an institutional affirmation of the unique challenges facing employees of color.

A few years ago I was invited to give a speech at the annual meeting of a national organization committed to social justice. All the managers from around the country were there. Just before I was introduced, a Black man made an announcement that there would be a breakfast meeting the next day for all interested people of color in the organization. Though this national organization had a long history, this was the first time that the people of color were going to have a "caucus" meeting. Following the announcement, I was introduced and I gave my talk entitled, "Interrupting the Cycle of Oppression." After a warm round of applause, I asked if there were any questions. Immediately a visibly agitated White woman stood up, and asked, "How would you feel if just before you began speaking a White person had stood up and said there would be a breakfast meeting of all the White people tomorrow?" I replied, "I would say it was a good idea." What I meant by my response is the subject of the next chapter.

Part III

Understanding Whiteness in a White Context