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Coping with the crickets: a fusion autoethnography of silence, schooling, and the continuum of biracial identity formation

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This study explores biracial identity development in the adolescent years through fusion autoethnography. Using an ecological model of biracial identity development, this study illustrates how family, peers, and school curricula validate and reject racial self-presentations. We pay specific attention to the different forms of silence (i.e. “crickets”) that teachers and peers deploy as tactics of rejection and how racially coded artifacts such as hip-hop culture and Black Liberation texts function as validations of racial self-presentations. Overall, this study helps researchers and practitioners to understand the fluidity of biracial and multiracial identity development as it relates to everyday school spaces and processes.

Keywords: racial identity development; school context; fusion autoethnography; silence

Ask any biracial or multiracial person what question makes them crazy, and 9 times out of 10 the answer will be the question, “What *are* you?” As a biracial person, even to this day, my¹ response to this question is often physical and visceral: I cringe, clench my jaw, and tense my body. Lewis (2006) writes in his book *Fade: My Journeys in Multiracial America* that his first thought after this question is, “Here we go again” (3). Ultimately, the question is infuriating because it is provoked by our physical appearance that seems ambiguous or “exotic” according to the insufficient, binary heuristics of race in the USA (Funderburg 1994; Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2002; Rockquemore, Brunnsma, and Delgado 2009). Though not intending to offend, a person asks the question based upon these narrow heuristics and expects the multiracial person to clearly identify in one category. Some people with multiracial backgrounds do indeed identify as one race, yet instances such as this are problematic, as Lewis (2006, 40) argues, because:

For multiracial people, there is an additional layer in the identity development process. It involves creating a sense of self by assembling pieces of their heritage that others view as incompatible or mutually exclusive.

This additional layer of identity development is inseparable from the process of schooling. Young people spend an enormous amount of their time in schools, thus

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teachers, curricula, peers, and social norms have a powerful influence on who they believe themselves to be along intersecting lines such as gender, ethnicity, and ability. While scholars have paid some attention to the racial identity development of Black students in schools, particularly males (e.g. Davis 2006; Miller 2008; Noguera 2008), there exists a dearth in scholarship about multiracial students who experience this “additional layer” in developmental and schooling processes (Williams 2009). Funderburg (1994, 108) attests to this specifically in relationship to curriculum:

Biracial people are also virtually invisible in the curriculum. The absence of material that represents or includes people with backgrounds like theirs is so prevalent that many biracial people have never thought to consider the possibility of inclusion. Again and again, the message is that there are two options: black or white.

For me, these two options of Black or white were directly connected to schools and community. Growing up in a predominantly white, rural New Jersey town as the biracial child of a white mother and Black father, there was no racial representation suitable for me in my community or school. My parents divorced when I was two years old, and my Black father and his family played no role in my life. My mother remarried a Jewish man when I was eight years old, so consequently, I was raised by white parents in a white community with absolutely no family, friends, or teachers who looked like me. This applied to the curricula I encountered in school too. It was strictly Euro-centric, except for the Martin Luther King, Jr. book that was read every February during Black History Month.

In middle school, my teachers and community made it very clear that, to them, I was Black, by applying the proverbial “one drop” rule that organizes the binary heuristics of race in the USA (Bowles 1993; Gatson 2003; Rockquemore, Brunson, and Delgado 2009). Accordingly, since it was clear from physical appearance that I was Other (i.e. not white), peers and teachers automatically classified me as Black. As an adolescent, I tacitly accepted this societal construction of race and the subsequent conclusion that I was Black, yet I yearned to know more about what it actually meant to be Black. When I did formulate and demonstrate a brand of Black female identity, I did this primarily through hip-hop culture and Black Liberation texts, the only identity resources reflective of Blackness that were available to me. From this, I was met with silence and rejection in schools. As I resisted this silence and rejection, I entered a complex process of biracial identity formation connected to peers, curricula, teachers, and other facets of school.

In this article, we unpack the complex process of biracial identity fluctuation and formation as it relates to schooling. We use fusion autoethnography to explore the biracial identity of the first author through her adolescent years in middle school. From an ecological perspective, we employ the Continuum of Biracial Identity Model (COBI) (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005) to understand how family, peers, school environment, and curricula both validated and rejected the first author’s racial self-presentations. We pay specific attention to the different forms of silence (i.e. “crickets”) that were deployed as tactics of rejection and how racially coded artifacts such as hip-hop culture and Black Liberation texts functioned as validations of racial self-presentations. Overall, this study helps researchers and practitioners to understand the complexity and fluidity of biracial and multiracial identity formation as it relates to everyday school spaces and processes.

Theoretical framework: continuum of biracial identity model

Most conceptions of identity formation have emerged from Erikson's (1963, 1968) work, which posited that adolescents try to establish an independent identity through a series of explorations and experiments. These key notions of exploration and experimentation have shaped most models of racial identity development, including ones that have focused exclusively on Black racial identity (Rockquemore, Brunnsma, and Delgado 2009). Although considerable attention has been paid to Black identity development (e.g. Cross 1991; Helms 1990), much less is known about how racial identity develops for people who are biracial or multiracial (Tatum 1997; Williams 2009). Within these two categories of biracial and multiracial, there are important overlaps, separations, and distinctions. Biracial can be considered one type of multiraciality. Consequently, we use these terms somewhat interchangeably throughout this article when referring to the first author's Black-White racialized experiences. It is important to highlight, however, that different multiracial "combinations" are not always viewed the same way in society and can produce very different social experiences. Thus, considering all multiracial people as part of one group overlooks important differences that result from the specific identity markers that people have.

Particularly in the USA, Blackness has a distinct salience due to the history of chattel slavery, segregation, and subsequent historical and contemporary events. This salience of Blackness is not limited to the USA, as other countries and global regions have their own legacies of enslavement, segregation, miscegenation, and/or apartheid of African peoples that shape present-day constructions of race (e.g. Brazil, South Africa; Telles 2004). These histories and subsequent effects mean that Blackness, as one aspect of multiracial identity, deserves unique attention. Williams (2009, 781) makes this point particularly clear while reviewing scholarship on biracial Black-White students:

Race relations between Blacks and Whites in the US continue to be a prominent issue. Therefore, an examination of Black-White biracial Americans as a separate group from other multiracial Americans is necessary as the US struggles with understanding and improving race relations between Blacks and Whites.

In light of this context, the attention that has been paid to multiracial identity development has centered on the biracial classification of Black-White. These theories can be categorized in four distinct periods. Building upon the categories framed by Thornton and Wason (1995), Rockquemore, Brunnsma, and Delgado (2009) identified these four approaches as: (a) the problem approach, (b) the equivalent approach, (c) the variant approach, and (d) the ecological approach. Figure 1 illustrates our depiction of Rockquemore, Brunnsma, and Delgado's (2009) framework of the general timelines of these approaches.

The problem approach that was prominent until the 1960s posited that a "mixed-race" person is "marked by tragedy." The approach focused on: "deficits, dilemmas, and negative experiences associated with the position of being mixed-race in a racially segregated society" (Rockquemore, Brunnsma, and Delgado 2009, 16). Ultimately, the problem approach conjectured that biracial people would go through crisis before adjusting to the will of society. The equivalent approach focused how biracial people eventually arrive at conceptions of their identities that are similar to their monoracial peers. In this way, biracial (and multiracial) people become

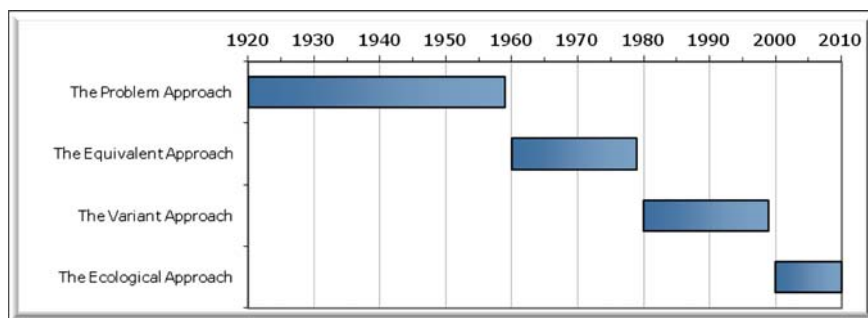


Figure 1. Timeline of Black/White multiracial identity theoretical approaches.

assimilated to society through social processes and adopt common patterns and personality traits (Thornton 1996). In the 1980s and 1990s, the variant theoretical approach grew to conceptualize, “the mixed-race population as distinct from any single racial group” (Rockquemore, Brunsma, and Delgado 2009, 18). Thus, biracial or multiracial became a category separate from Black, white, and other categories. It is in this generation of identity development that the most commonly used biracial identity development theory was created: the Biracial Identity Development Model (BIDM) (Poston 1990). The BIDM model contrasts the problem and equivalent approaches that claim a multiracial person needs to choose only one race for identification. Instead, the BIDM outlines five stages that biracial people progress through in order to finalize their racial identity as distinctly biracial. Briefly summarized, these five stages include: (a) personal identity focused on non-race factors, (b) choice of one ethnic group, (c) enmeshment/denial from having to choose one group, (d) appreciation for multiple identities, and (e) integration of both racial groups.

Most recently, ecological approaches to identity development have challenged the linear stages of the BIDM and emphasized the contextual variables that account for different identifications. Rockquemore, Brunsma, and Delgado (2009, 19) outline that ecological approaches are based on the following concepts:

- (a) mixed-race people construct different racial identities based on various contextually specific logics,
- (b) there are no predictable stages of identity development because the process is not linear and there is no single optimal endpoint, and
- (c) privileging any type of racial identity over another (i.e. multiracial over single-race identity) only replicates the essentialist flaws of previous models with a different outcome.

Similarly, in a review of Black-White biracial identity scholarship, Williams (2009) noted that people can experience stages in overlapping ways, skip stages, or go through them in inverse order. Based upon this ecological perspective, we used the COBI model to guide our study (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005). We unpack different components of this model below, but overall, we selected this model because it enabled us to understand the non-linear process of racial identity development and pay specific attention to contextual variables as well as important instances of rejection, resistance, and validation in school.

One important assumption of the COBI model is that biracial people identify themselves in various ways, and one identity is not necessarily better than the other. These different ways that people identify can be located on a continuum (Figure 2). According to this continuum, depending on the moment, context, and other variables, mixed-race people will locate themselves somewhere along a continuum of Black, blended, and white racial identity, or they may choose to transcend that continuum altogether and simply identify as human. Unlike previous variant models (e.g. Poston 1990), the COBI model does not posit that an individual necessarily moves along this continuum in any way. One might do just this, but an identity on this continuum can fluctuate over time and within situational moments depending on the person's interaction with self and the connection to his/her environment.

Various environmental factors and significant institutions in a person's life influence how a biracial person conceives of his or her identity and where they locate themselves. The COBI model outlines that influences and messages of identity filter through parents, friends, peers, extended family, neighborhood, and school (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005). All of these relationships and institutions are influenced by the physical appearance and gender of the mixed-race child.

Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2005) argue that based upon these various influences and their interactions, a biracial person formulates a conception of who she or he is, which manifests itself in a presentation of racial self to other people. From such a presentation of self to other people, the individual receives messages of validation or rejection. A message of validation affirms this conception and subsequent presentation of racial self. Upon a rejection of this self and presentation, the individual is forced to either reconsider and reformulate their conception of self or resist the messages of rejection from individuals and institutions. Figure 3 outlines this process and relationship between validation, rejection, and racial identity.

The COBI model (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005) outlined here and illustrated through these figures guides this study. Specifically, it directs us to pay particular attention to how the explicit and implicit definitions of race held by

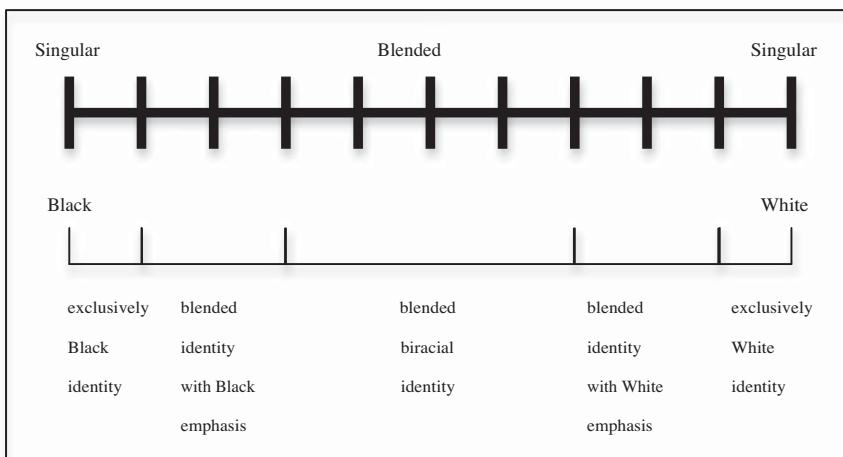


Figure 2. Continuum of biracial identity.

Note: This figure is adapted from Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2005, 6).

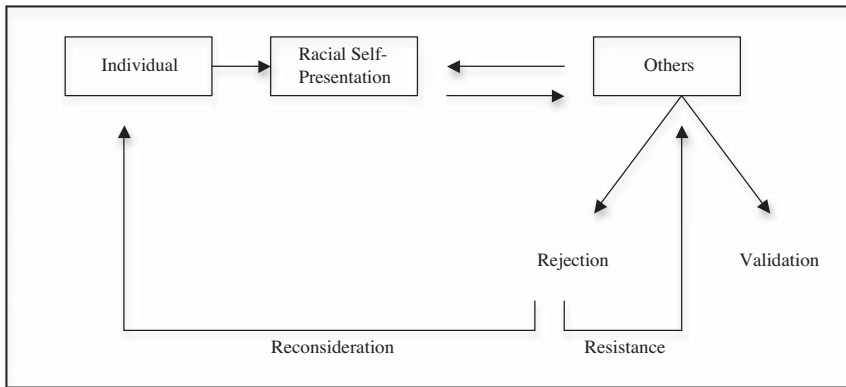


Figure 3. The relationship between validation, rejection, and racial identity.
 Note: This figure is adapted from Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2005, 10).

parents, peers, and schools caused continual redefining of the first author's racial identity. Additionally, the model directs us to understand how messages of rejection and validation shape racial identity development and presentation across time and context.

Fusion autoethnography

This study employed an autoethnographic approach to inquiry in which the research subject demonstrates the agency for exploration and theorization. McClaurin (2001) argues that throughout history, Black feminists have used autoethnography in order to theorize the self. Specifically, she argues that the use of self and subjectivity is never secondary but is woven into various aspects of Black feminists' scholarship:

Autoethnography both as a stylistic form to textualize the ethnographic experiences of Black feminist anthropologists and as a theoretical lens through which we can interpret how we do what we do provides a vehicle for a transformative ethnographic knowledge production. (64)

Though this exploration does not operate from a strict Black feminist framework, it clearly generates from the common tenet that women of color are authorities of their own experiences.

Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography as: "writing about the personal and its relationship to culture," while the author:

look[s] through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (37)

Currently, autoethnographic approaches range from ethnographic memoir to contingent autoethnography (Ellis 2004), all of which deal with the writer's reflection of self. Autoethnographic approaches that involve more than one researcher include interactive interviewing (Ellis 2004; Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy 1997) and

co-constructed narratives (Ellis 2004) in which researchers generally explore a phenomenon that each of them has experienced. In this study, we used a multi-authored autoethnographic approach we call *fusion autoethnography*. Typically, multi-authored autoethnographic approaches center on an equal negotiation between authors, or a “balancing act” and dance (Holman Jones 2005) to understand experiences with phenomena. This kind of balance did not suit our purposes because we brought fundamentally different knowledge bases (one experiential, the other research-based) to the topic. As we elucidate below, our fusion approach was based upon fundamentally different contributions for researchers to explore a phenomenon experienced by only one of the researchers.

Fusion autoethnography divides the inward exploration and wide-angle lens of autoethnography described by Ellis (2004) between two researchers in order to create a unified voice. In this way, the inward exploration is characterized by the lead researcher’s (Lynnette’s) reflection on experience. This is the “look inward” that exposes a vulnerable self in relationship to and through cultural interpretations. The corresponding wide-angle lens that focuses on the outward social and cultural aspects is orchestrated by the second researcher (Emery) through different strategies, which we describe below. We divide these key lenses of autoethnography between two roles/researchers under the assumption that a person’s outward reflection and wide-angle lens need not be a solitary endeavor as it most often is in autoethnography. Rather, the outward reflection can be facilitated by another person. This approach we used differs from the balancing act/dance approaches in the previous paragraph because we still aim for a singular voice in the autoethnographic findings and not an explicit negotiation between two voices.

Researchers have used artistic metaphors to communicate methodological innovations such as jazz (Dixson 2005) and artistic portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis 1997). Building upon this artistic realm, an appropriate metaphor for fusion autoethnography is the conjoined interaction between the dancer and disc jockey (DJ) in a classical sense. In a dance metaphor of autoethnography, all of the authors are on the dance floor trying to understand and interpret each other’s movements in order to collectively choreograph a new dance. In fusion autoethnography, one author is on the dance floor (i.e. the researcher-dancer) while the second author is the DJ (i.e. the researcher-DJ). In this way, there is a dynamic relationship between the two, but these roles are not identical. As the DJ, the second author is carefully observing the reflective movements of the researcher-dancer from a distance and deciding what theoretical records/songs to play in order to move the dancer to find his/her interpretive rhythm, expressions, and movements. Music does not determine a dancer’s movements, and a dancer’s precise movement is not known by the DJ or wholly determined by him/her. A movement that the DJ observes from the dancer shapes the records he or she plays next, and a dancer responds through movement to records. Each role is of equal importance but fundamentally different.

In practice, this approach took place through the following steps. First, Lynnette constructed her initial exploration through reflective writing and by consulting personal-historical artifacts such as journals, letters, photographs, personal memos, and school documents. She used these data sources to supplement and validate her inward reflections. Most consistently, she used letters from adolescent friends and school assignments between the years of 1992 and 1993 because key events in this article took place between these years. She also utilized photographs from that same time period as data that outlined racially coded items such as hip-hop cultural

artifacts (e.g. clothing brands) and key aspects of her physical appearance such as skin color and different hairstyles (e.g. relaxed/“permed” or natural).

Next, Emery, serving as the wide-angle lens, read the initial reflections and posed questions based upon theoretical constructs and scholarly research that he saw as relevant. For example, the first iteration of work saw no attention given to the role of family as a primary agent of racial identity formation. As this is a significant element of scholarship on racial identity development (e.g. Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005; Root 2001; Tatum 1997), he prompted the first author to consider how her family might have actively or passively inscribed her earliest notions of race. Upon seeing the prevalence of school and peer influence in Lynnette’s initial account, Emery also prompted Lynnette to consider a continuum of racial identity development rather than distinct stages. This led Lynnette to discover and use the COBI model as an analytical framework. These are two clear examples of the researcher-DJ playing a theoretical record to which the researcher-dancer can react. These suggestions seemed relevant to the reflections and moves developed by Lynnette, but she determined the exact ways these frameworks applied to her experience.

Next, Lynnette shared the pictures, school documents, and other artifacts with Emery for his analysis and understanding. These data were presented to Emery at this specific stage in order to preserve the distance and wide-angle lens that were to characterize his initial role. In other words, we believed that analyzing these personal documents early in the research process would compromise this key feature of fusion autoethnography. Analyzing these documents along with Lynnette at this median stage initiated a deeper set of questions, for example, about the salience of hip-hop clothing brands to perform Black adolescent womanhood and other racialized modes of identity work. Finally, we engaged in a more traditional series of manuscript exchanges and negotiations in order to create the final document. These negotiations continued over a series of months in order to complete the results section below.

An introduction to the silence

Tatum (1997) explains in her book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* that she often asks participants in her workshops to remember their first race-related moment. Mine was when I was six years old. My mother had just pulled into the parking lot of the McDonald’s in our town. A trip to McDonald’s was always exciting because it meant a new toy from my kid’s meal. My white mother was a single parent at this point, and she worked frequently, so our outings to McDonald’s were rare quality time we spent with one another. Excitedly, I exited the back of the car, grabbed my mother’s hand, and we walked into the entrance of the McDonald’s. As we approached the door, there were three white high school boys wearing their varsity sport jackets standing by the door. The boys spotted me and one said, “Look at the little nigger!” while another boy chimed in, “Yeah, there’s a nigger!” The third boy stood there silent, perhaps embarrassed by his friends’ actions. The two offenders then proceeded to laugh and point at me.

By age six, I was starting to become aware of the word “nigger” and the power of its hurt. This was the first time that the word was directed at me. Confused, scared, and upset, I clearly remember looking up at my mother for some clarity on the situation. She was a strong, powerful, and intelligent woman, as well as a

classic loudmouth New Yorker who often spoke her mind without a filter. If anything, I knew my mother would confront and reprimand the boys. However, she said nothing. She ignored the boys and did not acknowledge what had happened in the moment. This was the first time I was met with silence around the concept of race. In the 25 years that have passed since this incident, we have never spoken of it, and it causes me emotional distress to reflect and write about it.

For me, this moment established the tacit norms of silence about race in my family: (1) we never talk about race; (2) we never acknowledge how I look different from the rest of the family and how people treat me differently; and (3) we never discuss words that refer to race as they relate to me. It was evident in these norms that my family did not talk about race. Although unique to me at the time, these norms of silence were similar to the approaches that other families of biracial children have taken, minimizing issues of race rather than addressing them more directly through an open dialogue (Breau-Shropp 2003; Root 2001). This type of silence can generate from a variety of sources including discomfort, fear, and misguided efforts. The notion of pathologies of silence helps unpack some of the possible misguided efforts in my family's norms. Shields (2004, 117) defined these as: "misguided attempts to act justly, to display empathy, and to create democratic and optimistic educational communities". In other words, one can be silent on an issue of racial difference in an (unsuccessful) attempt to help a situation, perhaps by not drawing additional attention to it. This introduction to silence at McDonald's could have been due to my mother's discomfort and fear, or her misguided attempt to minimize the attention to the hurtful racial slur. Regardless of these possibilities, this episode introduced me to the tacit norms of silence.

These familial norms of silence were juxtaposed against the norms of school. In school, I was told without question that I was Black, that I was different, and that I was not part of the majority. Actions of students and teachers would demonstrate this explicit and monoracial classification, a finding of some empirical research (Chiong 1998). For example, classmates would frequently state, "Ask Lynnette, she's Black" when a topic related to African-Americans came up. My immediate and internal response to their comments was, "No, I'm not Black!" In essence, I rejected their classification because I wanted to be considered the same as my family members and my classmates.

This difference was further emphasized in history class, my most dreaded subject. When people of color were mentioned, students would turn to me as the "token" person of color to represent and speak for the entire population that was not white. In all other classes, I would sit in the front row of class ready to soak in the lesson for the day. In history class, I would sit in the back, hunched in my chair, trying to make myself as invisible as possible because I did not want too much attention given to my race, my difference. The attention given to me as the only person of color was uncomfortable, but it was also uncomfortable because truthfully, I did not know "my people" all that well. My family did not talk about race at home, so I did not know how to respond in class.

Ultimately, mixed-race people often seek validation from family, friends, and social institutions like schools (Literate 2010). My school, teachers, and classmates were telling me I was Black, but nothing was said at home. At this point, my identity was a blended identity with white emphasis (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005), as I had mixed messages from school and my peers that clashed with the silence of my home. However, during one distinct moment of validation from my

mother while on vacation, these messages began to cohere, and my identity instantaneously shifted along the continuum of biracial identity development.

Every November, my mother, stepfather, and I would go on vacation. During the fall of 1991 when I was in seventh grade, we went to Jamaica for our family vacation. One evening, my family sat down in the lobby of the hotel with one of the local employees. My mother and the employee were having a conversation about the use of patois and the historical view of Rastafari in Jamaica. This conversation between a white woman and an Afro-Caribbean man was starting to get very honest about race, touching on issues of prejudice and racism in the different countries. My stepfather and I were silent throughout the whole conversation. I was silent because this was the first time I had ever heard my mother talk explicitly about race. I was confused because she was breaking the established norms of silence in the family – norms that she had set and enforced. Then my mother said, “We’ll, having a Black daughter ...” I did not hear the rest of her conversation because the statement shocked me. It was the first time in my life that I had ever heard my mother refer to me as Black. It was the first time I ever heard my mom refer to me in any racial context.

Until this distinct moment, my racial presentation of self had been based upon a blended identity with white emphasis. But the rejection of my self-presentation at school, coupled with my mother identifying me as Black, caused me to reconsider my racial identity. “So my classmates are right? Am I Black?” I thought. In that moment, I capitulated to the racial classification given by everyone around me. “The school thinks I am Black, apparently my mother thinks I am Black, then I must be Black,” summarizes my internal monologue at that point. In this moment, my identity changed to an exclusively Black identity (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005).

In the coming months, this change left me with big questions about Blackness. As Tatum (1997, 53) explains, many Black youth ask the questions of “Who am I ethnically/or racially? What does it mean to be Black?” These same questions started to overwhelm me, but I could not turn to my family, friends, or school because none of them contained even one person of color. Thus, I turned to hip-hop music, the only place where I saw Black people, to school me.

Getting schooled about Blackness

It was 1992 toward the spring of my seventh grade year, and it was the start of the “Golden Era” of hip-hop during which one could readily find progressive, conscious, and positive messages in hip-hop music. This was most clear to me when groups like Public Enemy rapped about issues such as the lack of public resources in Black neighborhoods (e.g. “911 is a Joke”), to Tupac rapping about teen pregnancy in the Black community in the song “Brenda’s Got a Baby.” For many people who associated with hip-hop, it was a time of pride and intellectualism, much different from the overwhelming materialism and problematic images of much commercial hip-hop music today. During this period, I was immediately drawn to the music and culture as a way to self-identify as Black. My weeks were filled with anticipation for the end of the week. Every Friday evening, after I heard my parents’ door close at their bedtime, I would run to get my yellow radio and a blank tape cassette. Then I would wait. Like a devoted student in a classroom waiting for my new lesson of the week, I would wait for the start of *Yo! MTV Raps*, the groundbreaking show on MTV that featured the newest hip-hop music videos

and culture. I would take my radio with blank cassettes and put it up to the television speaker in order to record my lessons. This was my way to record and have continued access to the hip-hop music.

Hosted by Dr. Dre and Ed Lover, the show was not only my source to understand what was the new music in hip-hop, but the show also gave me clues about what it meant to be a Black girl. Performers such as MC Lyte and Queen Latifah, who were strong, intelligent, Black females, talked about gender equality and ladies deserving the same respect that men receive. The show at the time was, quite literally, my only classroom and outlet to self-discovery about my race. It was a source of validation for this newfound identity of Black exclusivity (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005). Since there were no music stores near me that would carry hip-hop music, the show became a way for me to sustain my lessons throughout the week.

I was silent about hip-hop and my developing sense of Blackness in my life during this period. Silence was a tactic of self-preservation for fear of being rejected again by my peers (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005). All of this changed the following summer, and my embrace of hip-hop and a related Black identity advanced when I went away to a YMCA sleep-away camp in upstate New York. The camp attracted most of its participants from New York City and Newark, NJ, and it was the first time that I was around people who knew of hip-hop and understood it. It was also the first time since my biological parents' divorce that I was around people who looked like me. Not only were there African-Americans, but there were also other multiracial campers like myself.

It was with these relationships that I felt secure. This security was not due to any explicit discussions of race among campers but due to tacit acceptance and validation of my emerging, exclusively Black identity (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005). I was with people who looked like me and understood my love for hip-hop. It was normal to sit around the campfire and talk about the new album by Das EFX, a popular hip-hop group at the time. As we were out collecting firewood, hip-hop would blast from inside the cabins. These forms of hip-hop cultural capital helped us to connect with one another, as they have in other community-based settings for young people of color (Clay 2003). Most importantly, I was not consistently Othered as I was in school. Biracial students at more racially diverse schools often experience negative feelings about themselves less often compared to biracial students at predominantly white schools (Brown 2001). The contrast between camp and school for me followed this pattern too. At camp among my peers, I did not experience the kinds of negative feelings I did at school. Ultimately, this was the summer of my rebirth. I embraced hip-hop for everything I understood it to be, especially the clothing because it was the most overt way I could demonstrate this embrace and affiliation.

The camp experience was only two weeks long, but my change in identity and behavior was almost instantaneous through the experiences with my fellow Black and multiracial campers. Tatum (1997, 61–2) unpacks the quick, almost overnight identity change that I experienced:

Sometimes the emergence of an oppositional identity can be quite dramatic, as the young person tries on a new persona almost overnight ... the young person returns to school much more aware of his or her Blackness and ready to make sure that the rest of the world is aware of it, too.

This change in racial identity then manifested itself in a racial presentation of self through hip-hop clothing. In other words, I came back from camp with a new and solidified Black persona, a new wardrobe, and ready to show my peers and teachers at school just how Black I was.

Flipping the script

The alarm clock rang at 5:48 am. I had my exact wake up time down to a science since elementary school. Yet, today was special because it was the first day of eighth grade. I rolled out of bed, brushed my teeth, and spent 20 minutes curling my bangs and the ends of my relaxed hair. With excitement, I ran to put on my new, fly outfit. I had a Cross Colours t-shirt two-times my actual size. Red, green, and black were emblazed across the front representing the Pan African colors. The phrase “Cross Colours; Dictionary of Hip Hop” was printed along the front of the shirt with hip-hop words like “Flavor,” “Milk,” and “Hit” running along the bottom of the t-shirt. As the name and colors suggested, Cross Colours was a popular clothing brand in the early and mid-1990s that could be seen on videos of progressive rappers and groundbreaking Black television shows like *In Living Color*. For many, the clothing brand was emblematic of this era’s authentic Black identity centering on Pan Africanism, Black consciousness, and bold racial pride. Per the strong Black women I saw on videos and my friends at camp, only the front of my shirt was tucked into my jeans, which were also two-times my size. A pair of white, Umbro shorts were underneath my jeans to complete the baggy “sag” look, with a coordinating red, black, and green embroidered belt to tie it all together. I gazed in the mirror and my objectives were met. This outfit screamed, “I’m *so* hip-hop and I’m *so* African American!”

Biracial author, Angela Nissel (2006) talks about how she used her hip-hop clothing to declare her Black identity in a Philadelphia school:

The next day, I proudly stomped my “Reeboks” through seven periods. *Look at me – I’m really black!* ... The eighth and final period of the day, I shifted in my seat and jutted my legs out into the aisle so that Fred, a male member of the cool black clique, could have an unobstructed view of my feet. (94)

Nissel tried to reinforce her identity with hip-hop clothing while trying to gain acceptance into the Black community of her school. In this way, hip-hop clothing styles were cultural capital to perform a Black identity (Clay 2003; Ibrahim 2001). Much different from Nissel, I was trying to use hip-hop clothing not as cultural capital to be accepted by peers at school but to demonstrate that I had accepted their categorization of me as Black (Poston 1990) and that now it had specific meaning to me. In the years prior, my peers had categorized me as Black, and I often rejected this notion and tried to be like them. Now through the music and social experiences at camp, my clothing was a symbol that I had accepted their and my mother’s classification of me as Black and that I had constructed my own meaning of it. This was so nuanced that it even implicated the way I wore my backpack. Instead of wearing it with only one strap over a shoulder like all other students, I slung my Cross Colours backpack over both shoulders because it was the hip-hop way to wear it, as was evidenced in videos, programming, and among other students of color at camp. This first became evident to me when I watched an

interview with the rap group Leaders of The New School on *Yo! MTV Raps*, and one of the members, Busta Rhymes, was wearing his backpack the same way.

With my newfound Black identity, my goal in eighth grade was to bring it unmistakably into school. When I walked into school on the first day, the reaction from my teachers, classmates, and friends was one of puzzlement. They had never seen someone dressed like this, at least in person. I was clearly violating the fashion and social norms of the school, but no one said anything about it directly. Peers would communicate non-verbally by shocked stares and whispers, but it was Dominic² who was the first to directly address my difference.

Our class was lined up single file in the hallway against the wall, waiting to go into computer class. Dominic was in line behind me. As we were waiting, he exclaimed, “So Lynnette, are you in kindergarten now or something? Why are you wearing your backpack on both shoulders?” I turned around and stated, “Whatever Dom, you wouldn’t understand.” In my head, all I could think was, “This is hip-hop!!!” I knew this slight style change was quintessentially hip-hop, but Dominic and my peers saw it as “Other” and different.

As my eighth-grade year continued, I was committed to demonstrating my Blackness in the classroom too. I was right that Dominic did not understand hip-hop, which meant he did not understand me, but I was determined that people would understand and accept it. In our drafting and woodshop class, our teacher who we addressed by his first name, Johnny, thought that music was an integral part of drafting, creativity, and curriculum. So, for my class, the music chosen by the majority of the students was the Steve Miller Band’s *Greatest Hits from 1974 to 1978* album. This album choice was also an example of the dominant music of my community. The majority of my classmates listened to the same Classic Rock their parents grew up with such as the Grateful Dead or Creedence Clearwater Revival. It was music that did not reflect me in terms of race, history, or interest.

This lack of identification with the music in the classroom certainly hindered my creativity. After two months of the Steve Miller Band, I received permission to bring in something different. Excited the next day, I was the first one in class. I put Das EFX’s *Dead Serious* tape into the cassette player – the same group I listened to that summer at camp. Students started to pile in while I took out my drafting paper, rulers, t-square, and pencil. Everyone settled into his or her seat, and then from across the room I heard, “What the hell is this music, Johnny?” My teacher exclaimed, “I don’t know really.” Across the table from me sat my friend Kaitlin who stated, “Lynnette, is this your rap crap?” “Yes, it is, but seriously give it a try!” was my response.

Giving it a try lasted all of another two minutes. The next thing I knew, the music had abruptly stopped after my classmate Sam walked over to the cassette player and ejected the tape. As the music stopped, the whole class stated, “Thank you!” in relief that my hip-hop was no longer playing. The Steve Miller Band once again filled the air, and Sam came over to my seat and dropped down the tape with the caution of, “Don’t ever bring this stuff again.” I have a clear image of myself, frozen for a couple of minutes just staring at the cassette tape on the table. It was like Sam handed me back part of myself and said I was not good enough. The community saw me as Black, but in that instant, I understood that Black or the music that represented Blackness was not good enough and did not belong in the school community. At camp, the music of a group like Das EFX was a site of connection that brought campers together. At my school, it was a form of negative

cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) that made me an outcast, an Other. Instead of reconsideration of my racial identity, this continued rejection brought about resistance to my peers, teachers, and school (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005).

Coping with the crickets

The music was my history teacher and my news anchor. The music was my connection outside my community, but also my connection to inward self-discovery. It was a place of validation (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005) in spite of the silence and rejection in school. The music would tell me that I am an African and to be proud of our roots. In the Public Enemy song “Fight the Power,” Chuck D would tell me, “Cause I’m Black and I’m proud and I’m ready to fight ‘cause I’m amped/Most of my heroes don’t appear on no stamps.” I lived the line. I was hyped and amped in a way that made sense to an adolescent. Instead of being the passive student hiding in the back of the classroom, I made history class into my platform and primary site of resistance (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005). A typical exchange went as follows:

“So class, what is Harriet Tubman known for?” asked my history teacher, Mr. Delrio.

“Ain’t she the one that helped the Black slaves to that railroad thingy?” Billy responded in his thick, New Jersey accent, hesitating before saying the word Black in a lower volume, thus marking it with some uncertainty.

“You mean the Underground—” Mr. Deliro began before I interrupted him.

“It’s African American!” I yelled from the back of the classroom.

When “Black people” were mentioned in class by the teacher or students, I would burst, “It’s African American!” overtop or after their statements. These Tourette’s-like outbursts would happen, on average, five times within the 45-minute period. Sometimes they were directed to my classmates, and sometimes they were directed to my teacher. Hip-hop told me to stand proud and speak up for my people. This was one way I asserted my racial identification of Black exclusivity (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005) through my daily hip-hop lessons. Unfortunately, no one ever listened to me change their titling of my people. But, my mission continued and intensified.

I started to become a chronic reader of Black history and Black Liberation literature. A common esthetic quality of hip-hop music is for rappers to sample from and draw associations to a wide array of cultural references. Of course, just mentioning historical figures in songs does not constitute a significant educational experience, but in context with my exclusive Black identity, these name references became learning prompts for me. I knew all about Martin Luther King, Jr. from school, but who were Malcolm X and Farrakhan, mentioned in Big Daddy Kane songs? Who were the “heroes who did not appear on stamps” that Chuck D alluded to? I found out that Malcolm X wrote a book, so I convinced my grandmother to take me to a bookstore where I could buy *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

My history teacher, Mr. Delrio, started noticing my one-woman Black Power movement in school and my chronic reading, and he was the only one willing to acknowledge it and embrace it. He broke the silence and started to validate my need

for Black identity formation (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005). This acknowledgment and vocalization of race was why he was the only teacher I trusted at the time. In early January, my English teacher assigned the quintessential “read-a-book-about-a-Black-person-and-write-a-report-for-Black-History-month” assignment. Though this assignment was a cliché in many ways, I wanted to embrace this project to its fullest. One day before history class, I started skimming through Mr. Delrio’s book titles on a shelf in the back of the room. One book caught my attention entitled *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver, a former member of the Black Panther Party. The title caught my attention because I connected it to the lyrics in the song “Electric Relaxation” by the group A Tribe Called Quest. In the song, the lead rapper named Q-tip raps, “They know the Abstract is really soul on ice/The character is of men, never ever of mice.” I knew that the second line referred to the classic John Steinbeck novel *Of Mice and Men*, but I did not know “soul on ice” was a book reference until I saw the book sitting in front of me. I turned to Mr. Delrio, who was aware of this impending English project. He pulled me aside and said, “This might be challenging to read, but I think you might like it.”

I was ready for the challenge, and challenging it was. The book took me a whole month to read. I would bring the book with me everywhere. It too, like Malcolm X’s autobiography, talked about tough topics like rape, but it also opened my world to the Black Panther Party. After finishing the book, I labored over the book report project. It took a full two weeks to write. My stepfather regularly helped me edit and correct my schoolwork, and this assignment was no exception. I knew that this paper would be my opportunity to share about my people to the rest of the students in the class. Eldridge Cleaver was important enough to be mentioned in hip-hop music, and it was my job as ambassador for all Black people in my middle school to correctly educate the minds of my fellow classmates. My resistance came from a place of desperately trying to educate the “Others” (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005).

The day came in my English class where we had to read our report to the class. My teacher, Ms. McGill, asked, “Who would like to read their book report first?” My hand shot up into the air. To make more of an emphasis, I then fluttered my hand and said, “Me! Me!” to which Ms. McGill finally relented. I walked to the front of the classroom, very proud, and clearly read my book report on *Soul on Ice*. After the five-minute presentation, I looked up from my paper with a huge smile. “I did amazing!” I thought to myself, “They will totally get it now!” Then I paused as my classmates were frozen in their seats. My smile quickly fell as the silence of crickets loudly filled the room. I looked over at Ms. McGill who was just as stunned as my classmates. Finally, seated from her desk, she asked, “Does anyone have questions?” Nope. Just more crickets. Ms. McGill then very sternly stated, “Have a seat, Lynnette.” Perplexed, I sat down and tried to figure out what I did wrong while the rest of the class presented monotonous Martin Luther King, Jr. and Harriet Tubman reports.

Later that week, I received my grade on the report. It was a C-minus! I was so upset that I cried, and I still did not understand what I did wrong. When I asked Ms. McGill why I received that grade, she stated, “That man [Eldridge Cleaver] was not a good person and should not have been discussed for Black History month.” Once again, I tried to bring my education from hip-hop into the classroom, and I was silenced. I had experienced direct rejection in school before, but this instance felt as if it were calculated. Because another *teacher* had encouraged me to

focus on *Soul on Ice*, simply put, I felt set up. Word of my report spread among teachers through their conversations in the teachers' lounge, and Mr. Delrio went to the school principal to explain the choice of book he advocated for me. From the "spread" of this information, I sensed that the issue concerning my choice of topic was deeper, and I wanted to know more.

It was at this point that my mother and stepfather intervened for the first time in my schooling. My parents called a meeting with Ms. McGill. At the meeting, my stepfather, mother, and I sat in chairs across from Ms. McGill's desk. My stepfather started off the meeting by stating, "We are here to understand why Lynnette received a C-minus on her report." I hunched down into my chair because I felt very awkward. This was the first time I was involved in an adult conversation about school matters, let alone that the conversation was concerning me. Unlike the strength of the Black Panther Party, my personal resistance movement was folding under the overwhelming presence of adults. After a very brief exchange that did not address the (in)appropriateness of *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver, or the racialized element of the topic, Ms. McGill stated, "Oh, it just must have been me. It's not a big deal to me. See, I'll just change the grade to an A." Ms. McGill then picked up her red grading pen and wrote a large A over the C-minus stamped on the front cover page, which consisted of a drawing I did of Eldridge Cleaver on pink construction paper. Her action of changing the grade made me feel even worse. It signified that grades were of little value and that the dedication I had given to the project was of equally little value. More significantly, her flippant change of the grade meant that there was no discussion of the real issue: why a Black leader who was significant to my developing Black identity was an inappropriate topic for school, despite what my music and another teacher had led me to believe. In light of the grade change, the meeting came to a quick close without the deeper issues being discussed between Ms. McGill and my parents.

In this meeting between my parents and Ms. McGill, the norms of silence that organized communication about race in my family were in full operation: we did not talk about race, how the specifics of the situation related to race, or how either of these implicated me as the only person of color. Drawing once again from pathologies of silence (Shields 2004), there are different possible reasons for this silence. The silence from my parents (e.g. not pushing for a deeper explanation from Ms. McGill after the quick grade change) could have been an attempt not to thrust me into the center of attention during the meeting. Perhaps sensing my uncomfortableness in the meeting, my stepfather could have enacted this silence as a way to protect me from more embarrassment. This choice, however, meant that Ms. McGill's casual dismissal of my culture (and thus me) remained unchallenged. Shields (2004) explains this process clearly: "Silence about color and ethnicity is another way of perpetuating the dominance of the status quo both in the wider school community and in the pedagogy of the classroom" (119). In this same way, the silence in our meeting buttressed Ms. McGill's power to assign (and change) grades based upon her ideas of appropriateness and inappropriateness. Given this unchallenged power, I was silent in her classroom after that meeting until the end of the school year. My resistance movement started to weaken from the constant rejection (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005).

About two months later, Mr. Delrio had an activity where we could read creative, historical pieces to the class. I knew exactly what I wanted to do. The prior summer, one of the "hip-hop heads" named Damien at summer camp

presented a rap/poem that was adapted from the Gil Scott-Heron song “The Revolution Will Not be Televised” to reflect more recent people and events. He presented it as a spoken word piece under a beat instrumental from the progressive hip-hop group Arrested Development. Since the poem referenced a host of important historical events, I knew it would be a perfect fit for this assignment.

I called Damien, and he sent a copy of the poem in the mail. I then had my mom take me to the mall located 45 minutes away in order to get the instrumental tape for the performance. Again, I thought this was my opportunity to bring a reflection of my worldview, and more importantly me, into the classroom. With that excitement, I practiced the spoken word performance for two weeks. I worked on tweaking it, making sure I knew which words I wanted to emphasize, and also timing myself correctly to the music.

The day of the performance came, and I was prepared and excitedly anxious. History was fourth period, so I was unfocused on all of my work until that point. The time came for the performance, and who volunteered to go first? Yes, me again. My hands shaking slightly from the adrenaline and nervousness, I was in my groove reading this poem. As I tried to steady the paper from my shaking hands, I began:

You will not be able to stay home, brothers and sisters. You will not be able to plug in, turn on, or cop out. You will not be able to loose yourself on crack and slip out for a beer during commercials. (Frye 1993)

I paused for a moment after the opening for emphasis. My nerves started to subside, and I was in my groove reading the in-depth poem. I made sure that I emphasized important lines in the poem like, “There will be no pictures of African Americans shooting down African Americans on the instant replay” (1) or my favorite line, “And women will not care if Oprah Winfrey has an affair with Arsenio Hall in their hours of power. Because African-American people will be in the streets looking for a brighter day. The revolution will not be televised” (2). My hard practice of reading the poem with music worked as I executed every accent and cue perfectly as planned.

I looked up from the paper with a huge smile as I finished. But, there was that familiar look from my classmates: blank stares and the silence of crickets in the background. My first thought was, *You’ve got to be kidding!* Mr. Delrio, standing in the back of the classroom, had the same blank stare. Then he stated, “Ahhh, I didn’t understand anything you just said.”

What! Not you, too!, I screamed inside. Here was the man that supported me in connecting hip-hop to literature, and *he* did not get it. I did not reply to his statement. I lowered my head, slowly walked back to my seat, and sank down into my chair. From that point on, I was silenced permanently in school. As Tatum (1997, 201) explains:

when we do not feel heard, we feel invalidated, and a relational disconnection has taken place. We might try again, persisting in our efforts to be heard, or we may choose to disconnect.

In my case, the efforts I gave throughout my eighth-grade experience showed persistence, but the incident in Mr. Delrio’s class was the defining moment of my decision to disconnect from my teachers, my peers, and my school. I no longer

tried to bring hip-hop into the classroom. I no longer actively tried to insert myself into the curriculum. I had such a great fear of being continually misunderstood that I went back to keeping my life and hip-hop separate from school. Ultimately, I subjected myself to the norms of the school and my family. I did not talk about race. I did not acknowledge that I looked different from other people. I did not talk about words that refer to race as they relate to me. I would only actively represent myself as a person of color when I would go back to my YMCA camp every summer.

Conclusions: silence and the COBI model

This study affirms many aspects of the COBI ecological model (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005). Some of these aspects are that identity development is non-linear, that there are multiple variables of influence, and that multiracial people can locate themselves at different points along a continuum of identity development. In addition to these affirmations, this study expands the model in two ways. First, this study illustrates that silence can be a powerful form of rejection that people experience when presenting their racial selves. It is often thought that racial slurs and micro-aggressions make up the kinds of damaging rejections in schools for students of color. While this is true, this exploration expands conceptions of rejection to include outright silence.

Second, this study expands conceptions of what young women of color can mobilize as sources of validation for racial identity. In the absence of racial affirmations through parents and caretakers, hip-hop media (e.g. shows, music) became a strong affirmation of an exclusive Black identity and an educator about what it meant to be Black. Previous scholarship has illustrated how young Black males mobilize hip-hop to shape identity in local and global settings (e.g. Dimitriadis 2001; Ibrahim 2001), but scholars know comparatively little about how young women engage with these cultural sites, particularly when their racial presentations of self are challenged and rejected. Regarding the COBI model and specifically the elements of validation and rejection (Figure 3), this study suggests that researchers should consider media and cultural sites such as hip-hop as potentially strong sources of validation.

Finally, this exploration also offers lessons for educators and school personnel about silence. As we discussed above, the concept of pathologies of silence (Shields 2004) helps unpack some of the crickets in this study. Pathologies of silence, however, do not fully pinpoint the forms of rejection in schools. For example, Mr. Delrio's comment that "I don't understand anything you just said" after the rap/spoken word piece was likely a genuine expression of confusion at a performance genre with which he was unfamiliar, rather than a well-intended attempt to help the situation. Similarly, parents asking to understand the reason behind the Eldridge Cleaver report C-minus grade was not silence in the strict definition. It did not, however, address the deeper issue. These examples and the larger study show that the everyday terrain of schooling such as curriculum and assignments can quickly become a battleground of resistance and validation. Book report choices, grade changes, esthetic choices such as music, and even clothes can all be tied to identity claims. Consequently, the kinds of crickets in this study can lurk about these elements and be the proxies of silence and rejection.

Coda: crickets, revisited

Despite these experiences in schools, years later, I chose to become an English teacher in an urban high school. One of the reasons I wanted to teach in public schools was to resist and challenge the ways that I had been silenced and rejected in my own schooling experiences. I wanted students like me to be free to have a voice in schools and to provide a way for them to see and insert themselves in the curriculum. Also, becoming part of the institution (as a teacher) that had previously silenced me was a way to finally have a voice.

In my second year of teaching, I was a ninth-grade English teacher in Philadelphia. My class was comprised entirely of students of color, most of whom identified as African-American or Black. On Fridays, I initiated a “free write” activity as part of our pre-class work. This activity was one simple way I tried to create space for my students to incorporate themselves and their interests into the curriculum. I would show them artwork, play music, or have them bring art or music of their own as a catalyst to inspire their creative writing. After a few minutes writing, I would have some students read their responses to the class.

About a month into the school year, I decided to bring in a song by a hip-hop group named Reciprok from France. The majority of my students listened to hip-hop music, and even though we were from different generations of hip-hop, it was something we had in common and was a way for us to connect. This was the first time I brought hip-hop in as a teaching piece, and I thought it would be fun and interesting for the students to hear hip-hop in another language. As was our routine, when the writing time was finished, I gave students a chance to share their free writes with the rest of the class.

“Okay, now who would like to read their free write?” I asked. My student Jalil shot his hand up with the same excitement I had in middle school. I had a feeling this was going to be a great writing piece. I had connected their interest in hip-hop, just like my interest in hip-hop, to the classroom, yet I gave them a different cultural experience because the lyrics were in French. I knew Jalil’s piece was going to be good from the musical inspiration.

“Okay Jalil, go ahead and share,” I said. Jalil started reading, “White. White. White. White. White. White. What is this stuff? I don’t get it!” The whole class erupted in laughter.

“Jalil, they are a group of 5 Black men and 1 white guy,” I responded while the rest of the class looked at me strange as the familiar silence of crickets filled our classroom. *Wow! This certainly feels familiar*, I thought.

The difference in this moment, unlike my own schooling, is that this silence started a deeper conversation about constructions of race. There was silence for a moment, but then we began a dialog about why Jalil called the music “White” and why other students had difficulty responding to the music, despite the fact that it was hip-hop. The discussion touched on students’ constructed ideas about Blackness and Whiteness both in and outside of the USA, language, cultures, and the different ways that people (like myself) can identify. These topics were particularly important given that the school was in Philadelphia, a very racially segregated city. This one conversation did not alleviate all confusion, misunderstanding, or conflict about race for the rest of the year, but it did help establish that silence could be an opportunity for dialog rather than a form of rejection.

Notes

1. In this article, individual pronouns (i.e. I, me) refer to the first author and plural ones (i.e. we) refer to both authors.
2. All names, with the exception of one person, are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. The one name, Damien, is not a pseudonym as his poetry was cited in this work.

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