

Journal of Colorism Studies

Volume 3|Issue 1

Article 1

March 30, 2018

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Recommended Citation

Pratt-Clarke, M. (2018). A critical race autoethnography: a narrative about the academy, a father and a daughter and a search for love. *Journal of Colorism Studies*, Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <http://jocsonline.org>



Journal of Colorism Studies (2018) 3(1)

Available online at: <http://jocsonline.org>

JPCS

A Critical Race Autoethnography: A Narrative about the Academy, a Father and a Daughter and a Search for Love

Menah Pratt-Clarke

Abstract

Using autoethnography and theoretical frameworks from Critical Race Feminism and Black Feminism, this article explores issues of race and gender in the context of a father-daughter relationship. The impact of racism on an African man's experience as a faculty member in the academy is discussed, including the effects on the father-daughter relationship as manifested in the daughter's college experiences. The opportunity for the Black community, Black organizations, and Black churches to assume a more active and intentional role in the socialization of Black children, and Black girls, in particular, as it relates to father-daughter relationships is also explored.

Introduction

There has been a very small body of research on father-daughter relationships (Fields, 1983; Krampe & Newton, 2012; Sheffler & Naus, 1999) and even less on Black father-daughter relationships (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Coley, 2003; Hill, 2002; Johnson, 2013; White, 2008). What little research has been done, however, indicates the power and influence of fathers on their daughter's lives, including their sexual and romantic choices and relationships (Sheffler & Naus, 1999, p. 45; Secunda, 1992). As Akers, et al. (2011, p. 2167) noted, "Families are an important influence on adolescent dating violence prevention. Families can influence partner selection, dating values, and norms regarding relationship behaviors." Research shows that Black fathers play an important role in their daughter's development (Austin, 1978; Boyd, Ashcraft, & Belgrave, 2006; Chadiha & Danziger, 1995; Gillett & Gudmunson, 2014; Johnson, 2013; Leadbeater & Way, 1996; Way & Gilman, 2000). Most of the research examines the impact of the relationship on multiple variables and outcomes including psychosocial function (Coley, 2003); academic engagement and self-esteem (Cooper, 2009); career aspirations and educational success (Willie & Lane, 2001); drug refusal self-efficacy (Boyd, Ashcraft, & Belgrave, 2003); gender role development (Mandara, Murray, & Joyner, 2005); sexual communication and safe sex practices (Brown, Rosnick, Webb-Bradley, & Kirner, 2014); reproductive health communication (Ohalete, Georges, & Doswell, 2010); and adolescent adjustment (Cooper, Brown, Metzger, etc., 2013).

This article contributes to a small body of qualitative work (Willie & Lane, 2001) on the Black father-daughter relationship. Using autoethnography and incorporating themes from Black Feminist Thought, Critical Race Feminism, and Critical Race Theory (Pratt-Clarke, 2010), this work explores the complexity of a father-daughter relationship and the role of higher education institutions in that relationship. It examines a father's experiences in the academy as a faculty member, followed by a daughter's experiences in college as a student. It concludes with a discussion of potential options for the Black community to assume a more active role in supporting father-daughter relationships.

Autoethnography, Black Feminist Thought, and Critical Race Theory

Patricia Hill Collins (2009, p. 40) challenges Black women intellectuals to "aggressively push the theme of self-definition because speaking for oneself and crafting one's own agenda is essential to empowerment." Rodriguez (2006, p. 1081) reminds us that women who write have power and that writing about our experiences with race and gender as women of color is a radical and political act. As women of color and activists, our stories and journeys inform our activism; they legitimate our perspectives and approaches; and they validate our theories and methods. It is part of our on-going struggle as scholar-activists to break the silence and marginalization that has traditionally encompassed our academic and personal worlds.

In an essay titled, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” Audre Lorde shares a story about a conversation she had with her daughter about silence (Lorde, 1984). The daughter said, “tell them about how you’re never really a whole person if you remain silent because there’s always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don’t speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside” (Lorde, 1984, p. 42). The use of autoethnography is a powerful tool for breaking silences, legitimizing voices, and valuing experiences (Chávez, 2012).

Qualitative and autoethnographic research provides a window into a world often hidden from view. This type of research can reveal the complexities and nuances of relationships not captured through quantitative work. It is also an important strategy of empowerment for women of color scholars who have been traditionally and historically silenced, minimized, marginalized, and disenfranchised (Griffin, 2012). Black women often struggle to find the spaces and the tools to talk about their experiences – particularly those that have been painful, difficult, and challenging (Delgado, 1988/1989; hooks, 1989). Autoethnography addresses this challenge by combining, “autobiography which is a story of one’s own life, with ethnography, the study of particular social group” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 6).

While autoethnography has limitations because it is difficult to generalize experiences (Chávez, 2012, p. 345), the benefits of building knowledge from lived experiences of individuals provides important contributions to the scholarly enterprise (Pathak, 2010). Autoethnography can be the most impactful when undergirded by theoretical approaches such as Critical Race Theory (Chávez, 2012), Black Feminism (Griffin, 2012), and Critical Race Feminism (Pratt-Clarke, 2010). As Griffin (2012, p. 138) argues, Black Feminist Thought can be combined with autoethnography to create Black Feminist Autoethnography (BFA) “as a theoretical and methodological means for Black female academics to critically narrate the pride and pain of Black womanhood.” Key themes from Black Feminism and Critical Race Feminism are the importance of narrative and storytelling, a focus on praxis, a recognition of intersectionality and the role of race, class, and gender on the experiences of Black women, and the relationship of power domains to the experiences of Black women (Pratt-Clarke, 2010, p. 24-33). A Critical Black Feminist autoethnography, then, is a powerful tool for analyzing Black father-daughter relationships.

A Father’s Journey

My father was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone in West Africa. Freetown has a powerful history for formerly enslaved people. Freetown began as Granville Town. It was named after Granville Sharp, a British abolitionist, who came to the coast of Sierra Leone in 1787 with 411 former slaves, known as the Black Poor (Flynn, 2007; Knight and Mason, 2007). The town’s name was changed to Freetown in 1792 when almost 1200 newly freed slaves arrived. These former slaves – the Black Pioneers -- were originally settled in Nova Scotia by England (Jeffries, Jr., n.d.). They had been granted freedom for fighting for the British in the American War of Independence. Due to the petition and efforts by Thomas Peters, an escaped slave from North Carolina, England agreed to relocate the former slaves to Freetown (Jeffries, n.d.). The population of early Freetown also included “Maroons” from Jamaica and “recaptives” rescued from illegal slave ships after slave trading was abolished (Background to Sierra Leone, 1980, p. 89-91). Sierra Leone became a colony in 1807 and from 1808 until 1863, Freetown was the

destination of thousands of liberated Africans (Creoles of Sierra Leone, n.d.). Collectively, these liberated Africans, African-Americans, and West Indians are known as Krios or Creoles. Because of this history, Freetown, Sierra Leone is known as the place “where people came out of slavery” (Knight and Mason, 2007).

Creoles were the ruling elite at one time in Freetown and were generally perceived as an educated class: “Even under British rule, the Creoles had a strong tradition of education. Creoles sent their children to Fourah Bay College or to a British university. They supplied the colony with lawyers, doctors, clergy, and businessmen” (Creoles of Sierra Leone, n.d.). They were also strong supporters of the arts and music (Creoles of Sierra Leone, n.d.). My grandmother’s family was a prominent Krio family with a long history as government officials, professionals, and educators. My father, then, was shaped and influenced by the cultural values of Creoles -- a fundamental and unwavering belief and commitment to education, excellence, and achievement. As a Creole, my father was raised to be a renaissance man – skilled in the arts, athletics, and academics. He played the organ and piano in church. He composed music and submitted a composition for the national anthem. He played tennis and helped create the Sierra Leone Tennis Association.

Despite these successes, his journals provide insight into his difficult childhood. My father’s parents divorced when he was a teenager and his father appears to have been a very strict man who believed in discipline and achievement. My grandmother was a strong-willed, stubborn, and determined woman. She came to America when I was two years old and pierced my ears. While I only had a faint memory of her visit as a child, I knew her from her letters and packages. She wrote long airmail letters almost monthly. The letters were quite detailed. They described her life in Freetown – mainly her struggles to survive as a single woman: her struggle to build an apartment building; her need for money; and her need for protection from soldiers, civil wars, and thieves. In addition to letters, she sent packages. Twice a year she would send a large package of African food: bitter leaf, crin crin, cassava, dried salt fish, egusi, ginger cookies, and coconut cookies. My mom would then cook Sierra Leone food, including Jollof rice, peanut soup, and other dishes from those packages as my father had taught her.

I visited my grandmother twice in Sierra Leone as a young adult. The first time was with my mother when I finished undergraduate school. The second time was after I graduated from law school and I went alone. I remember walking the streets of Freetown with my grandmother. I remember celebrating her 80th birthday and her pouring libations for the ancestors and placing large amounts of food into the libation hole for them. I remember visiting the cemetery and leaving food and drink for the ancestors. As I reflect on my interactions with my grandmother, I realize that she was not an affectionate woman. She was a woman of purpose and objective. Love and affection were irrelevant and unnecessary. I do not remember ever hearing her say, “I love you.” I do remember hugs that seemed quick, rough, rushed, and hurried.

A hint of her spirit is found in a letter she wrote on March 17, 1966, after the birth of my brother. In part, the letter read: “I thank God for this unspeakable gift afforded to me, and I pray that He will sustain you people to give him sufficient discipline whereby as you mention in your letter that he will be worthy of the name Pratt.” These words, written in 1966, epitomize the role that one word, “discipline” played in my life. The letter did not mention “love.” So, perhaps the ancient ancestral spirit of the Creoles in 1800s, struggling to create a new life and new freedom, was steeped in discipline and survival. Perhaps, there was no room for “I love you.”

There was, however, an expectation of achievement and excellence from both my father and grandmother. Being “worthy of the name Pratt” meant academic excellence. My father attended Prince of Wales High School in Freetown and Fourah Bay College in Freetown in the 1950s. From Fourah Bay College, he studied at St. Cuthberts Society in Durham, England. After teaching at the Prince of Wales School for two years, he came to the United States and received his bachelor’s degree in physics from Hampton Institute in 1964. He delivered the graduation address and then moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where he enrolled at Carnegie-Mellon Institute. He received his Master’s Degree in Science in 1965 and his Ph.D. in Nuclear Physics in 1968. He was the first citizen of Sierra Leone to get his PhD in nuclear physics. After serving as an Assistant Professor at Hampton Institute, he accepted a faculty position at Illinois State University (ISU) where he taught from 1969 to 1972. For the 1972-1973 academic year, he took a leave of absence from ISU to teach at the Federal University of Rio De Janeiro in Brazil. Upon his return to ISU, his contract was not renewed and my father’s career as a professor of physics was over. He never taught again. He never conducted research in a lab again even though he created a company called “StaTopt Research Company” with the motto “specialist in research services with the common sense approach.” He never wrote or published another physics article, even though he had published articles in numerous international physics journals.

The stories, often muted, that I heard about ISU involved racism and discrimination by the university. I do not really know what happened, as is often the case in children’s understanding of their parent’s lives. I did know that my father was an angry and bitter man. In the true spirit of survival of Freetown and new beginnings, however, my father recalibrated and recreated his life. He became a real estate investor and a pro-se attorney. My parents owned three apartment buildings: one was a converted house with three units; one was a townhouse building with six units; and another was an apartment building with eight units. The care of these buildings was the responsibility of our family of four, including my mother and brother. We painted walls, baseboards, and ceilings; we cleaned ovens and refrigerators; we shoveled snow; we changed locks; and we mowed the yards. My father was also a pro-se attorney. He sued tenants, banks, hospitals, and cities, and he was often successful.

In addition to his new career, my father transferred his scientific acumen to parenting; the house became his lab; parenting was his profession; and my brother and I were his research subjects. His vision was to raise successful African-American children who would never be dependent on the “system” that had decimated his character; stolen his livelihood; and sabotaged his career. Unsure as a child what the “system” was that he spoke about so often, I later learned as an adult that the “system” was the “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” that bell hooks (2006) frequently mentions. Our independence as children from the “system” would happen through a disciplined life of cultivating talents that, if well developed, would result in success: his and ours.

A Daughter’s Story

My life was a rigorously disciplined one. I woke up at 4:30 AM every morning. At the ages of six and seven, my brother and I began playing tennis. With our father as our coach, we normally practiced tennis in the morning before school. We were playing piano and violin by fourth grade, and after school, we had music lessons or practiced music for at least an hour on each instrument under my father’s critical eye. After dinner each night, it was always homework and then bedtime.

My father was a relentless disciplinarian and a perfectionist. Always a physicist, he saw the world through the lens of science and math; for him, it was a world of precision and perfection. There were right answers, correct equations, and logical steps that produced anticipated outcomes. Deviations were not acceptable. He raised and taught us as he would have taught a physics class -- with an expectation of efficiency and no room for error. He was not only a tennis coach; he was our life coach. We were taught how to change the oil and tires on cars; we knew how to use screwdrivers and hammers; and we knew how to peel and core apples. We were taught the importance of conservation through canning the apples, peaches, plums, and grapes from our yard. We wore handmade clothes to school and learned to darn our socks. Any new purchase of clothes, including underwear, required a justification. The dryer was only used in the winter. In the other seasons, we hung clothes on the clothes line in the backyard. Vegetables came from our garden, and coupons were used for savings.

My mother, Mildred Pratt, was a quiet yet ever-present partner in my father's plan for our lives. A child of sharecroppers and the great granddaughter of slaves from Texas and Alabama, my mother obtained four degrees: a B.A. in Religion; a M.A. in Religion; a Master's degree in Social Work; and a Ph.D. in Social Work. My mother also was a college professor. Her faculty position at Illinois State University was also in jeopardy after she returned from Brazil with my father. After a year-long fight, she regained her position. She was eventually tenured and promoted to full professor. Yet, despite her professional position, she did it all – wife, mother, and professor.

It was my mother who cooked every meal for our family. She even cooked my father's lunch every morning before she left for work. It was my mother who cooked breakfast at 5:00 in the morning so we could eat it in the car after morning tennis practice. It was my mother who drove us to piano lessons; and it was my mother who drove us to violin lessons. It was my mother who did the laundry and hung clothes out to dry on the clothes' line. It was my mother who also painted and cleaned apartments; shoveled snow; and mowed yards. It was my mother who sewed our clothes. It was my mother who planted a garden every year; and it was my mother who canned the fruit each season.

Through my parents, my brother and I were taught that life was serious. There was no room or time for fun and being frivolous; for socializing; for going to parties and dances; or for hanging out at friends' houses. There was only time and room for competitions and performances; for practices and lessons; and for yards of grass and driveways of snow. It was as if there was no room or time for love. In a college essay, I wrote, "My parents constantly spoke about how hard it is to be a Black person in America and how I have to work twice as hard as the White person to achieve the same goals." My father would often quote scripture and one of his favorites was, "When I became a man, I put away childish things." It was as if love was one of those childish things that needed to be put away, so that the larger, grander call of success for African-American children could be achieved. Love would take up too much space and require the use of too much energy. To my father, saying "I love you" was unnecessary and irrelevant.

I yearned for that "I love you." Scheffler and Naus (1999, p. 45) hypothesize that perhaps a father's affirmation is so important because it has to be earned. Suzanne Fields (1983, p. 11) observed: "A father's love is often more qualified than a mother's. Where a mother's love is unconditional, a father's love often is given as a reward for performance. Because her love is blind, a mother confirms a child's sense of security in a general way. When the father approves, a

child generally assumes that the love was earned.” For me, this was indeed true. I had to earn my father’s affection and affirmation by my performance on the tennis courts and on the performance stage.

I am not sure that as a child I recognized this need for love, affection, and affirmation. Yet, when I headed to college after two years on the tennis circuit following my graduation from high school, I was ready to go to “Freetown” – a place of freedom and new beginnings. My mind and my spirit were in a state of disharmony. I had tried to convince myself that hearing “I love you” didn’t matter. My body was used to moving through life with disciplined routines; and my mind was accustomed to a life focused on excellence and achievement. My spirit, however, refused to cooperate with my game of self-deception. It was as if she – my spirit – was on her own journey. She knew what she needed and she was being guided by a deeply rooted and almost imperceptible desire to hear the words “I love you” from the universe. And, that universe was the University of Iowa.

Iowa was supposed to be my “Freetown.” Instead, the “freedom” at Iowa was a vast and unsheltered world in which I had questions without answers. Who was I? How should I interact with other students? How do I act with a roommate? How could I participate in conversations about television shows and movies I had never seen? I never had been to sleepovers or overnight parties or dances or socials. My life had been my instruments and my rackets; it had been tennis tournaments and orchestras.

With no family socialization around relationships, sex, and intimacy, I was sent to college. I had secretly read romance novels and felt the excitement of the woman, often simultaneously running away and running towards the “rough” man. The “rough” man often initially took the woman violently, though the woman seemed to yield and eventually enjoy the ride. These images made me feel that perhaps love could be rough, but acceptable. The books portrayed romance and love in explicit, vibrant, and vivid language; they created a yearning for that experience in me. I wanted to be that woman in those novels. I wanted to be a Harlequin woman and I was in a co-ed dorm with rough “Harlequin” boys. I wanted to know what sex was, what sex felt like, and thus, what love felt like. In my young mind, sex was love. I wanted to connect with my spirit who was on her own journey. My parents had never talked about sex to me and I was under the dangerous impression that sex was love and I wanted to hear “I love you” from a man.

In college, I became addicted to soap operas and scheduled my class schedule around “All My Children”; “One Life to Live” and “General Hospital.” I continued to feed my spirit ideas about love, sex, and romance. The search seemed to take on a greater intensity and desperation. I was prey in a college dorm. I am convinced that boys saw my vulnerability; perceived my fragility; and sensed the intensity of my yearning. One of those “Harlequin” boys was a dashing, handsome, and sweet-talking track athlete from New York. He had a beautiful name with his Jamaican ancestry. His first and last name seemed to run together as one. I loved his accent. He had a slender built; a cute face; a flashy personality; and beautiful Black skin. I felt a connection with him. I was thinking connection and he was thinking conquest.

While our initial interactions were consensual, after a few weeks, he orchestrated a gang rape by his track teammates. This, I have learned, is not an unusual experience. As the White House Report (2014, p. 1) reflects, 1 in 5 women has been sexually assaulted while in college. In

addition, the report notes that “women of all races are targeted, but some are more vulnerable than others: 33.5% of multiracial women have been raped, as have 27% of American Indian and Alaska Native women, compared to 15% of Hispanic, 22% of Black, and 19% of White women.” Like the almost 95% of women who do not report, I did not report the sexual assault (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2009). Like most Black women, I suffered in silence (Funderburg, 1998; Powers, 1996; Simmons, 2002; Starling, 1998).

I survived by using the only skills I had. Ironically, these were skills that my father taught me: discipline, perseverance, hard work, and self-reliance. Thus, I studied hard; I worked hard; and I focused on literature, philosophy, and the writings of African-Americans in my major and double minor. I resorted to the only coping skills I had: a disciplined life of achievement. I continued to study hard, and I also continued to search for the “I love you.” The “I love you” finally showed up in the form of a man who became my husband. On one date, he sang the chorus from the Bob Marley song to me, “I don’t want to wait in vain for your love.” In all honesty, I couldn’t wait either. When he asked my father for his blessing to marry me, my father said, “I am not the Pope. I don’t give blessings.” My father did not approve of him and later sent me a scientific marriage questionnaire of factors to consider before getting married: compatibility with family values; financial security; education; and baggage from prior relationships. At the time, I was angry and ignored the questionnaire. Years later, I could sense the love and compassion in the document that he had created to help me make a good decision. I choose the “I love you” that I had finally found -- without the knowledge or blessing of my family. I walked down the aisle, alone, in an empty church.

Even during my marriage, I continued to search for the “I love you” from my father. Question just raced through my head: Why did I not hear those words? Why did the absence of hearing them have such a profound effect on me? What could I do to change the effects? Did my father hear those words from his father? Did my father hear those words from his mother? How far back had there not been an “I love you” said? Did the silence relate to the ancestral history of separations of family – separations from tribes and countries in Africa as part of the slave trade and separations of family in the slave auctions of America? What role did racism, segregation, and prejudice play? What about the “system” – “the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 2006)?

Perhaps, as my father said in one of his four letters to me, “I love you” was a “nicety.” The last letter I received from my father was dated January 6, 1996. The letter was prompted by a late payment by me on a loan that he had made to my husband and I, so we could buy our first house. In retrospect, the loan was an act of love. At the time, however, I could not see or perceive the love. The letter admonishes me in his strange combination of capital and lowercase letters:

WHEN YOU WENT AND GOT MARRIED WITHOUT MY KNOWLEDGE AND PERMISSION, your action could only be considered as “PROTEST. WHY AND WHAT ARE/IS BEING PROTESTED? YOU TALK ABOUT SACRIFICES! Shame but PITY. CAN YOU EXPLAIN SACRIFICES OR DO YOU, even as ENGLISH MAJOR, know what it means? You do not know what PREOCCUPATION WITH SUCCESS FOR YOUR BLACK CHILDREN in this country means. It was a 24hrs job – NO SLEEP –LYING IN BED OR NOT. THE FACT IS THESE WERE/ARE CHILDREN OF PARENTAGE, highly EDUCATED IN THE UNIVERSITIES and on the streets but with inadequate

FINANCIAL MEANS desirous of MAKING AN EASY and COMFORTABLE LIFE for everyone in the FAMILY. PARENTS WHO DID NOT HAVE ANY INHERITANCE OR initial financial family lift. ...I DO NOT HATE YOU BUT I FEEL DEEPLY BETRAYED- may be I had been living a LIE (WITH ALL THIS HARD WORK AND PREMATURE GREY) about FAMILY and FAMILY MATTERS within the PRATT – SET- UP... PLEASE REPAY THE balance of the LOAN immediately, at least in keeping with the terms of your CONTRACT. THERE ARE NONE OF THOSE NICETIES as I love you. THE FACT IS ---- YOUR BIOLOGICAL FATHER. TAACP.

So, “my biological father” (who signed the letter with his initials), told me that “there are none of those niceties as I love you.” He also told me that he did not hate me. A simple reading left me to come away with a message of no love and no hate. A more complex reading caused me to focus on certain phrases: “PREOCCUPATION WITH SUCCESS FOR YOUR BLACK CHILDREN in this country”; “Pratt Set-Up”; “inheritance”; “hard work” and “protesting.” He was right. I was protesting “the Pratt Set-Up.” Yet, the “Set-up” was designed to combat the “system” – the segregation, discrimination, racism, and oppression. It was designed to help Black children be successful. Life was about survival, financial independence, self-reliance, and discipline. It was about parents sacrificing for their children. In the context of a racist American society, “I love you” was a “nicety.” Yet, for me, the “nicety” was a “necessity.”

My father was not able to say “I love you” before he died at age 60. Two years before he died, he suffered a stroke that paralyzed half his body. For a long, grueling year, he fought back to almost a complete recovery. Just as he began to truly enjoy life, suddenly and quite unexpectedly, six liters of cancerous bile were drained from his abdomen and he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Seeing a strong man wither away from pancreatic cancer was a journey of contradictions. How could such a strong and seemingly all powerful and invincible man wither away to skin and bones? How could such a powerful voice be quieted, as his was in his last days when he was unable to speak? What was I to say to him as he lay immobilized in the hospice-provided bed? Simultaneously, I was drawn toward him with compassion and also repulsed by his physical appearance – gaunt, thin, and weak. The last time I saw him alive, he was not able to speak. I said “The Lord’s Prayer” to him and told him I loved him as I walked out the bedroom door leaving him behind in silence.

Though he died from cancer, I believe he really died from the racism, the discrimination, the grief from the loss of his career as a nuclear physicist, and the anger, bitterness, humiliation, pain and sadness of his life as an African man in America (Carter, 1994; Crocker, 2007; Jones, Cross, & Defour, 2007; Sellers, Bonham, Neighbors, & Amell, 2009). Though his life seemed to lack the impact he sought to have, in his death, he has had an even larger impact. When he died, my mother and a few close friends created the Pratt Music Foundation in his memory. Over the past twenty years, 600 scholarships have been awarded to provide free music lessons to young children with talent and need at Illinois Wesleyan University. Every year when scholarships are awarded, I think about my father and the values that he taught me: hard work, discipline, perseverance, determination, and drive. It was love. I just needed to hear the words.

My success in life I owe largely to him, as well as my mother. I have five degrees, including a law degree and Ph.D. in Sociology. I am a senior administrator in the academy and a tenured professor. I still wake up at 4:30 AM most mornings. My search to hear the words, “I love you,” ultimately returned me to myself. The search ended with my self-reconciliation and

self-affirmation where I could validate myself; where I could legitimize myself; where I could love myself; where I could care for myself; and where I could be compassionate to myself. As a critical race feminist activist-scholar, I found my own voice and I learned to write in it and then to speak in it. I learned the power of truth and the necessity for each of us to tell our story. Our stories can be a bridge for other Black girls to cross in their search for “I love you” in a society filled with racism, sexism, hate, and discrimination.

Praxis: Making a Difference for Black Girls

Our stories about our family relationships, father-daughter relationships, and love raise some critical questions. How do we as African-Americans teach and show love? How do we teach and show love in the midst of racism and sexism? In the midst of broken families? In the midst of poverty? In the midst of illiteracy? In the midst of sickness and illness? In the midst of our own anger? In the midst of self-hatred? How do we teach respect for ourselves and others? How do we teach about relationships? How do we teach the virtues of discipline, hard work, and sacrifice with love? How do we validate the lives of Black girls who are portrayed in sexualized ways in the media? How do we change the message about the value of Black girls? How do we help Black girls begin to value themselves? Where do we talk about sex, love, and relationships to children?

Critical Race Feminism and Black Feminism provide some guidance through their focus on history, praxis, and self-empowerment. In particular, the power domains of Black Feminism (Collins, 2009) which include the hegemonic domain, the structural domain, the disciplinary domain, and the interpersonal domain, suggest the importance of a comprehensive strategy. Such a strategy would need to be multi-layered and address social institutions and structures, interpersonal relationships, socialization practices in families and communities, and systems of thoughts and values.

One approach to these issues may lie in the past. In the early 1800s, free Northern black women formed single-sex, self-help organizations, including female abolitionist groups. The African-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston founded in 1831 was an example of an organization dedicated to the advancement of African-American women (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 3). Maria Stewart, a Black woman feminist, delivered a lecture to the association: “Though she spoke on a variety of issues relevant to the black community – literacy, abolition, economic empowerment, and racial unity – she admonished black women in particular to break free from stifling gender definitions and reach their fullest potential by pursuing formal education and careers, especially teaching, outside the home. She was also adamant that Black women assume leadership roles” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 3-4).

The Black women’s club movement, started in the 1890s, was a formal extension of these ideas focusing on “a unique set of issues – defending black womanhood, uplifting the masses and improving family life” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 7). These separate clubs came together at the National Federation of Afro-American Women -- a national conference of black women’s clubs which convened in 1895 with a focus on “black female empowerment for individual and race advancement” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 7). There was a recognition that “we need to talk over not only those things that are of vital importance to us as women, but also the things that are of special interest to us as colored women” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 7). In 1896, the National Association of Colored Women formed with Mary Church Terrell as its first president. Key

spokeswomen were Anna Julia Cooper, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Nannie Burroughs, Julia F. Coleman, and Margaret Murray Washington (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 8-10).

On the international scale, work was being done by Pan-African feminist, Adelaide Casely-Hayford in Freetown, Sierra Leone (Guy-Sheftall, p. 10). In Freetown, Casely-Hayford embarked on establishing a vocational institution to help girls learn their cultural background and instill national pride (Sesay, 2011). In October 1923, the Girls' Vocational School opened with fourteen pupils. Inspired by the ideas of racial pride and co-operation advanced by Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) at a conference in the United States, Casely-Hayford joined the Ladies Division of the Freetown Branch and became its President (Sesay, 2011). Casely-Hayford continued to be a passionate advocate for feminist rights until her death at age 90 in 1960 (Sesay, 2011). Today, Black sororities and Black women's organizations, including LINKS and the National Council of Negro Women, continue to support Black girls and women.

In addition to these organizations, given the prominent role of the Black church and of Black women in the church, I believe the church presents an untapped opportunity for addressing the challenges of these relationships. These churches are a physical presence and location within the Black community which could be a powerful site of transformation and instruction in values, relationships, love, and respect. Grounded in the history of Freedom Schools in the 1960s, churches are accustomed to serving as a site of preparation, political, social advocacy, and education. An objective of these Freedom Schools, often held in churches, was "to bring about a kind of 'mental revolution'" (University of Illinois, 2002).

The need for a "mental revolution" is still strong. I am convinced that the Freedom School concept needs to be reconceptualized and revitalized. We can use as a model the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom Schools which "incorporates the totality of CDF's mission to ensure every child has a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start, and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities" (Children's Defense Fund, 2011). These "schools" must be year-around programs, infused into the soul and core of the life breath of the Black community. They must be a tangible and visible presence. These Freedom Schools represent an opportunity for the Black community to infuse a consciousness of love, of healthy and loving relationships, of self-pride, and of self-respect into our communities. The curriculum must include parenting skills; dating guidance; sex education; and a space to talk about relationships. Many Black girls are looking for the "I love you" from the missing fathers and settling for sex with boys and the resulting pregnancy.

Freedom schools returns us to the idea of "Freetown" and creating freedom for our children; ending searches for love; creating havens and healthy relationships; creating places for love to flourish; and creating a place for the speaking and hearing of the words, "I love you." Freetown is a place where slavery ends and where crime against humanity ends. We need to transform our society into "Freetowns" where there is an intergenerational transmission of love. We can create "freetowns" – spaces that are full of freedom; full of self-love; and full of self-respect.

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