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Learning Through Collective Testimony

African American Motherwork, Womanism, and Praxis

Focus groups serve as a form of collective testimony empowering women, in this case black mothers, to share their lived experiences and connect with one another. This article discusses how collective testimony revealed black mothers' gendered racial socialization work—or African American motherwork—done on the behalf of their young daughters attending predominantly white schools in suburban Detroit, Michigan. I use womanism as a guiding framework to reflect upon my own positionality and the significance of understanding, explicating, and employing these strategies. As an expression of black women's consciousness, womanism advocates for the empowerment of black women and thus requires me to share, as demonstrable praxis, my own personal testimony of the gendered racial socialization of my daughters.

Kitchen Table Testimonies as Epistemology

As I sat transfixed by the stories the black[1] mothers were sharing, my thinking was divided. The well-trained researcher in me sought to capture the nuances, glean connections, and embed theory; the mother in me made mental notes interlaced with silent shouts of "amen," and considered how all these mothers—my sisters—were schooling me. My thinking may have been divided, but my purpose was not. At the heart of my exploration was praxis, the symbiotic relationship between theory and action (Brown). Around a conference table, these black mothers shared their lived truth, which enveloped each of my queries into their stories about motherhood, black womanhood, multidimensional identity, and life in white U.S. society. The power and revelatory nature of these conversations emanated, in part, from sitting around a conference table—an object that came to represent the family kitchen table, a place where import-

ant conversations occur. In this space, the mothers could connect with one another and share their experiences. Esther Madriz posits that this collective testimony "can be an awakening experience and an important element of a consciousness-raising process because it asserts women's right to substantiate their own experiences" (116). While the conversations unfolded, my presence became increasingly tangential as the collective testimony served as "a vehicle for listening and capturing the socioeconomic, political, and human voices of [these] women" (Madriz 116). While at this table, I listened, made notes, and churned their experiences over in my mind as patterns began to emerge. These patterns led to a profound realization and ultimately to the development of strategies that similarly situated mothers could use—mothers like me.

These women began schooling me in 2011, when I conducted a mixed-methods study to answer the question: what strategies do suburban, middle-class, African American mothers use to promote a positive racial identity in their elementary-age daughters who attend predominantly white schools (Bailey-Fakhoury). The participants were mothers from metropolitan Detroit (comprised of Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties, also known as the "tricounty"), a region of the state of Michigan rife with contentious race relations. These women and their families had all left the city of Detroit and moved to surrounding, predominantly white suburban communities. They were part of a historic demographic shift occurring in Detroit. Between 2000 and 2005, Detroit lost ninety thousand of its black residents, whereas the tricounty area's African American population increased (*Census 2000*; *American Community Survey*). This loss marked the first time in fifty years that Detroit's African American population declined because of migration from the city to the surrounding suburbs or to other states.

My interest in this particular topic began with talk around an actual kitchen table. Several of my cousins have also left Detroit for the predominantly white suburbs. At family get-togethers, after helping aunts cook the meal and clean the kitchen, I listened as my cousins—who were mothers of young girls— talked about the transition from city to suburb. They shared their fears and exasperations as they retold the encounters they or their daughters had in the schools and neighbourhoods, these white places (Feagin et al.).

In this black women's collective, as our elders listened to these conversations and offered their wisdom, I was reminded of how the private and the public spheres seem to always overlap and how the so-called divide between the two is usually "negate[d]" for black women (Brown 619). The sociologist in me began to wonder how these white spaces, and the meaning they are imbued with, would affect the racial identity development of these young black girls, my cousins' daughters—particularly considering the white U.S. standard of beauty and the dominant narrative cloaking young black girls as defiant, row-

dy, and oppositional, which gets promulgated ad nauseam in U.S. classrooms (Bailey-Fakhoury and Frierson). More importantly, I wanted to discover the strategies that black mothers use to promote a positive racial identity in their young daughters who attend a predominantly white school. I wanted to help similarly situated mothers and use these strategies as a way to educate school districts experiencing demographic shifts in their student populations.

Uncovering Praxis: African American Mothers and Gendered Racial Socialization

The Process of "Uncovering"

Discovering these strategies meant investigating racial socialization practices (the messages parents transmit to children about racial heritage, the meaning and significance of race, and how to manage interracial and intraracial relationships); racial identity development; and gender identity development, all within a middle-class context. Unfortunately, the majority of studies of racial identity or gender identity development do not consider the simultaneity of these constructs: race as gendered and gender as raced (Bailey-Fakhoury and Frierson). Studies of racial socialization have tended to focus on urban, lower-income African American parents and their adolescent and/or adult children (Suizzo et al.). However, what may work for inner-city African American parents with children attending predominantly black schools may not address the realities faced by suburban parents with children attending predominantly white schools (Bailey-Fakhoury). Moreover, studies that have examined the complexities of a variegated black middle-class identity (Anderson; Lacy) have not evaluated the gender dynamic (Bailey-Fakhoury).

To develop a resource for mothers and predominantly white schools, I conducted a study aimed at countering the reified notion of an African American monolith by broadening our understanding of African American within-group differences. I adopted a sociopsychological orientation (M. White), guided by an intersectional perspective (Dill and Zambrana) and a social-cognitive learning theory (Bussey and Bandura). A sociopsychological orientation requires an understanding of the historic and contemporaneous machinations of race, gender, and class. Such an orientation allowed me to delineate "the dynamic interplay among historical situations, collective ideological interpretations, and individual explanation and analysis" (M. White 159) of a subject matter "situated where meaning meets social structure, where identity frames inequality" (Winant 171). Therefore, a sociopsychological orientation is more expansive and comprehensive than a social psychological approach because it embeds individual-level relations and practices within larger social structures and systems to make visible the tensions between these interacting elements.

The intersectional (race, gender, and class) framework was applied from the design of the study through the analysis phase. It provided a vehicle for examining how race and racial identity are produced and reproduced at the macro- and micro-levels and for explicating why the attempt to facilitate a positive racial identity in children is necessary in contemporary U.S. society. This perspective also promoted the exploration of racial socialization as a gendered practice—one which finds mothers socializing their daughters differently than their sons via the types of messages they transmit. Social-cognitive learning theory offered a guide for delineating the process of gendered racial socialization and for examining how various socialization messages may function when promoting a positive racial-gender identity in children. This theory also permitted an examination of "the kinds of behaviors that black mothers reward and punish in their daughters [which] are seen as key in the socialization process" (Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood" 270).

The study used surveys[2] and focus groups to examine parental racial social-ization practices, racial identity development, and gender identity development. Initially, personal contacts were used to recruit women who fit the study eligibility criteria. I distributed flyers, recruiting participants, through friends and family members and sent flyers to suburban elementary parent-teacher associations and organizations (PTA/PTO). I personally attended several parent network association meetings to recruit mothers. Also, advertising in church bulletins and visiting Detroit churches allowed me to reach potential participants as religious institutions continue to play an important role in the lives of African Americans (Brown and Brown), and it appears that many Detroiters who move to the suburbs often retain their places of worship. Lastly, I made contact with civic and professional organizations—such as local chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and histori-cally black sororities and fraternities who potentially had members fitting the study criteria or outreach programs attracting such persons (Bailey-Fakhoury). Once initial cases were identified, snowball sampling was used as well. The total study participants numbered 106, and the focus group participants were recruited from this pool. The mother-participants were overwhelming middle class and had obtained a BA or graduate degree (see Table 1). Eventually, six focus groups and one telephone interview were conducted for a total of twen-ty-one participants. The majority of the mothers resided in Oakland County, the more affluent of the counties comprising metropolitan Detroit (see Table 2). The focus group discussions lasted anywhere from 60 to 150 minutes (the telephone interview lasted approximately one hour). Kristin Esterberg writes that by "enabling women to speak with others who have had similar experiences, focus groups help empower women" (109). Because I believe empowerment to be an extremely important outcome, especially when applying an intersectional

perspective, the focus groups—and the epistemology they engendered—are the focal point of this article.

Using Barney Glaser's constant comparative method, I initially identified codes based upon concepts that appeared immediately across several focus groups. While I coded, aspects of the work mothers did inside and outside the school setting emerged. I discovered through the focus group sessions—the participants' collective testimony—that as mothers engaged in gendered racial socialization work, they enacted three particular strategies: presence, imaging, and code-switching (Bailey-Fakhoury).

African American Motherwork

Presence consists of the keen awareness of one's aesthetic appearance and the role it plays as mothers advocate for their daughters (aesthetic presence); presence consists of maintaining visibility in the school and at school functions (visible presence); and presence consists of being strategic in interactions with school personnel to gain leverage that will benefit daughters (presence through strategic interactions). When mothers "present" themselves in the predominantly white spaces of their daughters' schools, they are mindful of the negative stereotypes (e.g., uncaring, unloving, authoritarian, violent, etc.) and caricatures (e.g., welfare queens, mammies, Sapphires, etc.) that prevail about black women and mothers in U.S. society. As Lola C. remarked: "I feel like I represent all black women when I'm in a certain circle…my appearance, yes, my articulation of certain words, my demeanor, how I'm sitting in my chair, everything. I feel that it's a scrutiny on [me] and maybe because I'm new to the circle … but I am maybe one of the few African American links that they [whites] have." Taylor agreed with Lola C.: "I carry that in every circle, I mean in every circle where I am the minority, I carry that in every circle. I carry that on my shoulders." The mothers expressed what they believe it means to be a black mother entering into white spaces and the burden they feel to represent black women well as they navigate these spaces. Lola C. stated the following:

> I don't know if it's my non-official, non-scientific theory that for the most part, in my experience, black women's voices have a little bit more bass and are a little bit more heavier than Caucasian women's [voices], and I keep that in mind. They [white women] speak more softer and gentler and whatever. And it's perceived that they're [nonthreatening] … I can talk to you and still convey my point but not have you think I'm a bitter black woman who's a militant.

Hence, aesthetic presentation involves modulation of tone of voice as well as minimizing gestures, neutralizing facial expressions and selecting clothing

symbolizing mothers' middle-class position and professional occupation. Whether simply walking their daughter to the bus stop, dropping them off in the school carline, or walking them to the classroom door; conscientiously and consistently enacting aspects of aesthetic presence is important as mothers engage visible presence. To be in the school building—by walking their daughter to the classroom in the morning, helping out in the classroom, volunteering at the school book fair, or attending a PTA/PTO meeting—evinces that these women are involved parents and therefore, good mothers: black mothers who reflect the white ideals of the mythic, good mother. Aesthetic and visible presence work in tandem to help facilitate presence through strategic interactions. Black mothers who work to intentionally undermine the negative stereotypes and caricatures associated with them use aesthetic and visible presence as points of entry for engineering situations with teachers or school administrators that provide valuable information or resources that will benefit their daughters.

Imaging consists of mothers working hard to teach and show their daughters how to embrace their phenotypic features (imaging through hair) through the use of role models (imaging through role models), and through home décor and consumables (imaging through home décor and consumables). Imaging as a strategy is important to black mothers in supporting the healthy emotional and psychological development of their daughters. Black girls in the U.S. are bombarded with images and messages extolling the virtue, and seemingly inherent superiority, of phenotypic characteristics (e.g., long, straight, blonde hair, blue eyes, and white/light skin) that they do not possess. For black girls attending predominantly white schools, these images and messages are inescapable. Mothers are deliberate in teaching and showing their daughters images that reflect Afrocentric beauty ideals and values, in particular when it comes to hair. For black women, hair is political and has a long, turbulent history in the African American community (Bailey-Fakhoury; Johnson): "Hair is at the heart of many Black women's sense of who they are in the wider world that they navigate daily" (Prince 16). One's hair texture, hair length, hairstyle, and adornments can signify a great deal about the person upon which these are found—numerous African American women have hair stories to tell (Bailey-Fakhoury; Johnson). For the majority of these mothers, it is essential to provide various alternatives to the American standard of beauty, images which reinforce the unique, versatile beauty of African American women. Lola L. demonstrated how mothers help their daughters to recognize and appreciate their beauty:

> *And so I started making changes at home by telling my girls how beautiful they are with their complexions and [that] their hair is beautiful. And I would use God and say, "What happens when God designs us is that we're*

all designed unique… But what happens with our bodies and our hair and our eyes is that it is a uniqueness that is priceless." And I tell them what that priceless is. No one else can duplicate you and you are beautiful. When I started doing that with my children, I'm saying five days out of the week letting them know how beautiful their hair was and how beautiful they were and how unique they were within themselves, that made the change on what they wanted to pick up on the shelves. It helped. It helped. It doesn't solve everything but it helps coming from us to say you are beautiful, and God designed only you.

Imaging also consists of mothers purchasing clothing, book bags, school supplies, books, artwork, posters, and other items that reflect the phenotypic features of their girls. Renee mentioned buying the book *I Love My Hair* to illustrate for her daughter why she should love her hair in its natural state. Another mother, Paris, shared that she went so far as to alter Halloween costumes of Euro-American characters so that it reflected a more Afrocentric aesthetic when her daughter wore the costume. Many mothers reported that whenever they could purchase goods or bring items into the home that reinforced their daughter's image, they did it. Christina spoke of the importance of going to the movie theatre to see *The Princess and the Frog* (the 2009 movie featuring Disney's first black princess, Tiana), which provided her the opportunity to instill pride in her daughter. Christina stated, "But I think for me, I kind of stuff it at her a little bit, for instance, when *The Princess and the Frog* was coming out, I said, 'Oh, a black princess.' Okay, we gotta go…. But [I] just wanted her to be proud at the same time. And I'm like making a big deal of it." For many African American mothers Princess Tiana was a welcome addition to the Disney princess repertoire and merchandising line; for others much of Tiana's creation and storyline was steeped in controversy, and the "princess" construct itself presented its own set of problems. Overall, the gendered racial socialization work that black mothers do involves presenting images of strong, intelligent, beautiful black women and girls as role models for their daughters. These images may be sourced from family, friends, community, popular culture, or consumer goods, and are used to reinforce Afrocentric beauty ideals, foster self-love, empower, and liberate.

Code-switching refers to the ability to move between cultural milieus at will and with fluidity (Bailey-Fakhoury). Mothers teach their daughters the appropriate cultural rules, prescripts, vernaculars, and behaviours unique to each setting and how and when to use them. Taylor shared:

I teach [my daughter] purposely how to flip the script. We call it in our house "flip the script." So you know how to act in one setting and you know how

> to act in another setting…. We're intentional with her. Her daddy will say "What up doe?" And she'll say "What's crack-a-lacking." And he'll be like, "It's all good in the neighbourhood." And they do this back and forth greeting…. She knows she'll only do this with her daddy [and her family] but [in public] she'll go, "How are you? How are you doing, my name is …" Just totally [flip it], and we are intentionally teaching that balance.

Code-switching is an important skill for these young girls to acquire, as it provides insights into important domains and builds diverse epistemological orientations. Successfully traversing the white, hegemonic U.S. educational system and society, and the more egalitarian African American community with dexterity, supports not only the daughter's racial-gender identity development but also her academic and social selves.

All three of these strategies reflect one dimension of Patricia Hill Collins's motherwork concept. Motherwork is the "reproductive labor" that women of colour engage in to ensure the survival of family, community, and self (Collins, "Shifting the Center"). Black women, in particular, understand that it is black women who have been socialized to uplift the community with education being the paramount vehicle through which such uplift will occur. Therefore, part of the black mother's responsibility is to work to ensure that the next generation of duty-bound young black women are similarly socialized. This labour is embedded in a womanist tradition (Beauboeuf-Lafontant; Brown; Walker).

Motherwork Strategies as an Expression of Womanism

Presence, imaging, and code-switching are one set of African American motherwork strategies used to promote a positive racial-gender identity in young girls who attend a predominantly white school. This African American motherwork is rooted in the womanist tradition. Womanism is a derivative of the term "womanist," which was coined by Alice Walker in her 1983 book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Womanism is an expression of black women's consciousness (Brown) or black women's standpoint (Collins, "What's In a Name?"). Essentially, womanism asserts that "Black women exist within an intersectional history of racial and gender oppressions" (Rousseau 196), that "individual empowerment combined with collective action is key to lasting social transformation" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 72), and that black women are concerned with the liberation of all peoples, but particularly black women and men (Brown; Rousseau; Tsuruta).

The motherwork that the mothers participating in my study engaged in served these womanist ideals. As black women in the U.S., these mothers had to help their young daughters recognize their intellect and beauty, and

develop self-love in the face of racism and sexism (Bailey-Fakhoury). Through the use of visible presence and imaging through hair, role models, and décor and consumables, the mothers helped their daughters understand that systems of interlocking oppression exist, and helped them learn how to survive these systems by rooting them in their heritage and cultivating racial pride. Principally, these mothers were "empower[ing] their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 112). As mothers helped their daughters acquire an independent streak in order to engage in collectivist acts that support and nurture their racial community (Bailey-Fakhoury), they were ultimately preparing their daughters to usher in social transformation. The mothers in this study used all three dimensions of the presence strategy, along with the imaging through hair and imaging through role models strategies, to empower their daughters and help them realize that they also need to draw around them other girls and women—their collective or sisterhood—to care for the larger community (Brown).

Collins writes that "Black daughters are raised … to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities because these skills are essential for their own survival as well as for the survival of those for whom they will eventually be responsible" ("The Meaning of Motherhood" 270). This is the essence of womanism, an ethic of care for self and others. One's liberation is bound up in the liberation of all. Presence, imaging, and code-switching are all strategies that seek to foster the liberation of each young girl—and her mother—so that she may be one link in an unending chain of survival.

What I Learned through Collective Testimony

My Testimony

I employ these motherwork strategies as I navigate, negotiate, and advocate for my own daughters. To do so requires examining my own positionality from a womanist standpoint. I am an African American assistant professor of education at a predominantly white institution; I am also a married, middle-class mother with young, biracial daughters who attend a predominantly white school. Interrogating my own intersubjectivities demands that I take a seat at the table to share my testimonial—that of my experience with the gendered racial socialization of my now five- and eight-year-old biracial daughters. My young daughters who must live and thrive in a white, male, hegemonic U.S. educational system and society while being reared and rooted in the African American and Arab American experience.[3]

What I offer here demonstrates just some of what I learned from my mother-participants. The revelation of the motherwork strategies through the

collective testimony of these women reflects empowerment (Esterberg; Madriz, "Focus Groups"). These women empowered themselves and one another as they responded to questions about their own experiences with socialization and identity development as well as about their roles in the socialization and identity development of their daughters. As a black woman researcher, professor, and academic who experiences life from this vantage point, it is important for me to advocate for the empowerment of black women. An intersectional perspective resonates with me because it values the production of knowledge that emanates from the actors—those whose knowledge claims were once ignored but are now centred and validated (Bailey-Fakhoury). These mother-participants have generated knowledge that will benefit black girls, their mothers, and the larger black community, and I am glad to be but one vessel through which this knowledge is disseminated. Knowledge that surfaced around the kitchen table has been broadened around the focus group table, and it now finds its way into our collective human consciousness.

As a black woman researcher and mother, I feel deeply the importance of naming and situating these strategies in the broader literature. I have benefited from these women's stories personally and professionally. Whenever I present these strategies to local or national audiences, they are received warmly and enthusiastically. Similarly situated black mothers say to me, "You are telling my story." I have been empowered to learn more about motherwork, its various dimensions, and its power as an expression of womanism. It is my womanist lens that compels me to agree with Elsa Brown's dictate that for the womanist, "Her theory and her action are not distinct and separable parts of some whole; they are often synonymous, and it is only through her actions that we clearly hear her theory" (631). Praxis remains essential as I continue to explore and explicate this phenomenon. If these mother-participants have found success with these strategies, praxis requires using this knowledge to develop additional ways by which to dismantle the white, male, hegemonic educational system and society.

Praxis

Personally, I have availed myself of these strategies. My heterosexual, middle-class, professional identity—and the economic, social, and cultural capital associated with it—has provided me with a space to navigate, negotiate, and advocate for my own daughters. Currently, my eight- and five-year-old daughters attend a predominantly white school and daycare centre, respectively. However, for one year (when they were five and three), they both attended the same daycare. This facility was the first time they were cared for by an all-white staff with a very diverse population of peers. I approached this new daycare

centre with some apprehension having come from an all-black staffed daycare. Although my husband is Arab American (second-generation Jordanian) and the numbers of persons identifying as biracial are increasing (*Census 2010*), I am well aware of the U.S. obsession with, and history of, codifying the offspring of black women as black, with little or no regard for the father's racial identity. Therefore, generally, when people encounter me with my daughters, my racial identity becomes theirs.

I am sure this was the case when my daughters and I entered the current daycare centre on their first day. I also am sure this was the case when I entered the all-black staffed daycare centre with my eldest daughter on her first day. Yet the apprehension I felt on her first day, sprang from a different source. I entered the all-white staffed daycare with every stereotype and caricature of black women and mothers projected onto me. I remembered what my mother-participants had said about modulating one's tone of voice and being mindful of choice of clothing when entering a predominantly white school and interacting with the teachers and administration. So that day, although I was returning home to prepare course syllabi and materials for the start of a new semester, I dressed business casual, made use of standard vernacular English, and watched the tone and volume of my voice. This use of aesthetic presence was important. It is the gateway for enacting the other aspects of the presence strategy in order to deconstruct mainstream characterizations of black women and mothers (Bailey-Fakhoury). I deliberately informed the daycare's assistant director that I was an assistant professor of education who taught preservice teachers and prepared graduate students to undertake their master's theses or projects. I used my social class and professional position in an attempt to undermine (un)conscious bias on her part and on the part of the other staff. Even though I taught three night classes in a row, I wanted to uphold the mantle of the normative good mother (Dillaway), so I was determined to solely care for my daughters the other two days of the week. On my teaching days, I would drop my daughters off to daycare just hours before I was due to teach my classes. On the other two days, my world revolved around my daughters, my husband, and my household. But when would I have time to research and write? I needed time to produce the scholarship that would lead to tenure and promotion, a goal I wanted to obtain to secure myself and my family. But would I ever find that equilibrium between career expectations and society's mythical good mothering?

Reality soon hit. I realized just what I was up against as I attempted to enact visible presence by hanging around the daycare for fleeting moments—to signal that I am an attentive, concerned mother—after ushering my daughters into their respective daycare rooms. On one of these days a teacher commented to me, "Wow, it must be nice coming in late every day and dropping off your girls."

Coming in late to daycare? I did not realize that there was such a thing. In a matter of seconds, questions flooded my mind. Is she implying I function on CPT (coloured people's time), hence attempting to chastise me for perceived lateness? Does she think I am the popular culture, media-perpetuated, stereotypical "shiftless" black mother on government assistance who sits at home only to drop her daughters to daycare when leisurely activities beckon? How many of the white mothers who drop their children off "late" received this same scrutiny? I had dropped my daughter off in the late morning at the all-black staffed daycare center on several occasions. But at that time, they all knew I was working on my dissertation and held an adjunct university position. No one ever made such a comment, at least not to my face. So I was momentarily taken aback that day, but I quickly quipped (minding my tone and volume): "Yes, I teach from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. Monday through Wednesday, and with my university being seventy-five minutes away, by the time I get home everyone's asleep. If I didn't bring my girls here in the late morning they'd practically never see me." The teacher blinked wide at me and remarked, "Oh, you poor thing [a term deserving its own sociological analysis], now I understand why they're not here early in the morning." To which I replied, "Yes, it can be difficult balancing this whole 'mommy thing,' not to mention having to find time to write, conduct research, and publish papers outside of the three days that they come here. But that is all part of my job as a professor." Foregrounding my class position, professional status, and mommy-guilt represented the cultural capital needed to navigate and negotiate on my daughters' behalf in this specific social field.

In that moment, I realized I needed to be more strategic about carving out time to research and write; trying to uphold some untenable ideal was not being fair to myself or my family. I also realized that employing motherwork strategies would be a continual, unrelenting process requiring emotional work and reflection. My girls were cared for and treated well by the daycare staff. I believe a mutual respect developed between me and the staff that served my daughters' interests well. I am well aware that my agency (informed by the social currency of my mother-participants) was buttressed by my being a heterosexual black woman who was married, middle class, and who had status as a professor. As a black woman in the U.S., I am well aware of the caricatures and tropes associated with black womanhood and motherhood. As a sociologist and professor, I am privy to the research and theories that provide me a critical disposition and frame my understanding of interracial interactions as well as the language needed to give voice to my experiences so that they reverberate through my community, white spaces, and beyond. As a married, middle-class, gender-conforming heterosexual, I possess a level of privilege that creates access points where similarly identified white women might recognize glimmers of themselves. Had I been gender nonconforming,

bisexual, a lesbian, single, working class, or in a less prestigious occupation, I am certain my actions would have been less efficacious.

Navigating and Negotiating My Daughters' Biracial Identity

Race is a social construct imbued with real meaning that has real-world consequences; therefore, my daughters are biracial and are being raised as such. Some of their phenotypic characteristics reflect their African heritage and others their Levantine heritage. Inevitably, the day will come when someone will ask one or the both of them, "What are you?" I have composed a bevy of sharp-witted retorts for all manner of innocuous and capricious questions they may be asked. I have provided and pointed out images of brown-skinned, curly-haired girls and women being and doing all sorts of things. I have bought Doc McStuffins, Princess Tiana, Lego Friends Andrea and her play sets, and the book *I Love My Hair* (some of these toys are fraught with gender issues). But most of all, I have been a role model for my daughters and have taught them how to love themselves, their intellect, and the skin they are in. My husband speaks and sings to them in Arabic, plays his favorite Arab music to them, and shares with them artifacts from their Jordanian heritage; we even watch *Arab Idol* and other Arab television shows where they occasionally hear their names. Right now it is easy to teach my daughters about Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Kwanzaa, former President Obama and former First Lady Michelle and their daughters Malia, and Sasha; and other subjects easily accessible to eight and five year olds. The tough lessons will come when the intelligent, strong-willed, independent black girl archetype clashes with the intelligent, demure, dutiful Jordanian girl archetype in spaces reifying a white girl ideal. To emerge unscathed, my daughters will have to learn to "do race" and "do gender" subversively (Bentley et al.; Lewis).

The gendered racial socialization of my daughters is at once confounding and profound. My husband and I are not biracial; therefore, our girls do not have a parent with whom they can directly identify (Rockquemore and Laszloffy). Yet I know that as their black mother, it is my duty to racially socialize them so that they develop as whole, psychologically and emotionally healthy young women. I also know the importance given phenotypic characteristics and their use to categorize humankind in ways that seek to simplify a complex reality. I am sensitive to the characteristics that are more valued than others and the resultant differential treatment. One of my daughter's complexion is different than the other, and I am conscious of how she is treated by family, friends, and strangers in comparison to her sister. As they grow and develop, the marginalization or acceptance they encounter will be reinforced by these phenotypic characteristics and the contexts in which they are being assessed and

Table 1.
Select Descriptive Characteristics of Mother-Participants (n = 106)

Characteristic	Category	Valid Percentage
Racial/Ethnic Background	Black/African American	96.2
	Black/African	1.9
	Biracial	0.9
	Other: Black American	0.9
Marital Status	Never Married	10.4
	Married	77.4
	Separated	1.9
	Divorced	10.4
Educational Attainment	High School	7.5
	Vocational/Technical School	4.7
	Community College/Associate's Degree	17.9
	College/Bachelor's Degree	27.4
	Advanced Degree (ex. MA, MD, JD)	42.5
Household Income	Under $15,000	1.9
	$15,001 - $25,000	2.9
	$25,001 - $50,000	18.4
	$50,001 - $75,000	12.6
	$75,001 - $100,000	28.2
	$100,001 - $125,000	10.7
	$125,001 - $200,000	16.5
	$200,001 or above	8.7
County of Residence	Macomb	13.2
	Oakland	71.7
	Wayne	14.2

Table 2.
Focus Group Mother-Participants (n = 21)[4]

Pseudonym	Focus Group	County of Residence
Lola C.	FG #1	Oakland
Taylor	FG #1	Oakland
Kim S.	FG #1	Oakland
Ruth	FG #2	Wayne
Monique	FG #2	Wayne
Rita	FG #2	Macomb
Sherry	FG#3	Macomb
Vicky	FG#3	Oakland
Mac	FG#4	Oakland
Natasha	FG#4	Oakland
Auntie	FG#4	Oakland
Toni	FG#4	Wayne
Kim D.	FG#5	Oakland
Valerie	FG#5	Oakland
Tiffany	FG#5	Oakland
Lola L.	FG#5	Oakland
Renee	FG#6	Oakland
Lola S.	FG#6	Wayne
Christina	FG#6	Wayne
Paris	FG#6	Oakland
Lashawn	Phone Interview	Oakland

categorized. However, this fluidity and dynamism may facilitate personal agency.

The time will soon come when "passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African American women" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 112) via motherwork strategies may not be enough. There will come a time when surviving as biracial women will be essential. And although I will have worked hard to root them in the world as black-biracial women, they inevitably will need to flourish as biracial women. When that day comes, I hope that I have a wider sisterhood to call upon and draw knowledge from. My struggle is to help my daughters recognize their intellect and beauty, develop self-love in the face of oppressive racism and sexism, be proud of their cultures and heritages, be independent minded yet work for the collective good, and "assert themselves in freedom, confidence and creativity" (Tsuruta 3), all while finding their place at three orbiting tables.

Endnotes

[1]The terms "black" and "African American" will be used interchangeably throughout this work to refer to native-born black Americans.
[2]The survey comprised three metrics: the Stevenson and Bentley instrument, which measures parents' and caregivers' cultural and racial experiences of socialization (Parent-CARES); the Vandiver et al. Cross Racial Identity Scale, which measures black racial identity attitudes along six identities (CRIS); and the Ossana et al. Womanist Identity Attitudes Scale (WIAS), which assesses the development of a womanist identity along a four-stage progression.
[3]I do not presume that there is such a thing as a monolithic African American or Arab American experience. When referring to an African American or Arab American experience, I am asserting a reality that is multifaceted but with several commonalities shared by persons identifying or identified as African American or Arab American.
[4]A few mothers choose the name Lola as a result of various trade books and resources that were set-up on a table in the conference room. The book *Lola at the Library* by Anna McQuinn and Rosalind Beardshaw was one such book which many mothers stated they had read with their daughters as they perused the items on the resource table.

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