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FROM THE GOLDEN GATE TO THE GREEN MOUNTAINS:
A HAPA EDUCATIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND META-CRITICAL
REFLECTION

A Thesis Presented

by

Noelle Brassey

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts
Specializing in English

October, 2012

ABSTRACT

As a former UC Berkeley undergraduate and a University of Vermont graduate student, this is an educational autobiography of a self-identified Hapa, or mixed-race Asian American, through the lens of race and identity. Exploring what it means to be “white” and “privileged,” and realizing that these concepts--like identity--are fluid, this thesis adopts a dual methodology that includes personal narrative, as well as a meta-critical reflection. This thesis focuses on three memoirs: *Bone Black* and *Wounds of Passion* by bell hooks, and *Hunger for Memory* by Richard Rodriguez, each of which explore themes of reclaiming voice and reconstructing identity with regards to race, class, and culture.

DEDICATION

when we are loved we are afraid

love will vanish

when we are alone we are afraid

love will never return

and when we speak we are afraid

our words will not be heard

nor welcomed

but when we are silent

we are still afraid.

So it is better to speak

remembering

we were never meant to survive.

--Audre Lorde, *The Black Unicorn*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my advisors, Greg and Sarah, for your patience and encouragement. I am grateful for your expertise, and incredibly lucky to have been guided by each of you.

Thank you to Robert for your willingness to join the committee. I appreciate your contributions, and it has been a pleasure to work with you.

Thank you to my sisters, Christina and Dom, for reading drafts and offering feedback and moral support. I am grateful to my parents, Anita and Steve, and my stepdad, James—along with the rest of my family—for encouraging me to complete the project.

For facilitating my recommitment to the project, I would like to recognize Keyna Houston, and my employer, Title Nine Sports- each of whom allowed me the time and space needed to refocus on this paper.

I am grateful to Tony, who has supported my writing efforts in every way that he could.

For her relentless compassion and encouragement throughout the writing process, I appreciate my former roommate, MJ Sims.

I am thankful to the people I've written about, without whom there would be no story.
(Names have been changed to protect privacy.)

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Chapter One: Outsider

In college I learned to hate my whiteness. My boyfriend, Gabriel, an international student from Caracas, Venezuela, commented that my mother had “saved me” in that, without her, I would be completely white, rather than just half, as she is Chinese American. Although he said this in jest, on some level he meant it; to him, being of mixed race meant that I was more attractive than if I had been fully white, but it also meant that I was not “inane of culture” like other white girls (most of whom were from Los Angeles and were mocked by my Asian guy friends for having skin that was darker than their blonde hair, due to their “fake and bake” tans). While I tried to not take to heart these conceptions of whiteness from the men in my life, I did wonder how my status as mixed race fit into their paradigm of who had culture and who was sorely lacking.

Thus, I had my own insecurities around not having a culture. When Gabriel’s parents flew in to attend all four of his graduations (general commencement, economics, political science, and the Latino graduation), I admitted my jealousy of his rich cultural background; the Caribbean-flavored Spanish he spoke with his family was quick and truncated much more than the slower paced, fully-enunciated Mexican Spanish I was used to hearing in high school and at UC Berkeley. In addition to language, the food he was accustomed to (back home) was fresh, as people bought their groceries frequently, and in smaller, more sensible amounts than the enormous quantities consumed by stereotypical Americans. I romanticized the way of life he could claim to know, but he

reassured me that I too have a culture—though it's one that is economically-based. The American culture, in his eyes, had to do with individuality, competition, and consumption.

I agreed with his conception of American culture, yet was dissatisfied, believing that I wanted his culture rather than my own. When we went out to dance, he would laugh at me for raising my right shoulder to the beat of the music, and I wished that I were a better dancer, like his sister and his female friends back home. Once, when we were waiting outside of Eshleman, the student government building around which we revolved (he was a Senator one year and an Executive the next), he told me that his Latino friends were concerned that I was not Latina, or rather, that I was white. He responded that I wasn't white, and that if he wanted to date someone of his own race he could do so at home, but here he wanted to explore racial groups other than his own.

I invested in the authority of Gabriel. I believed that he knew more about the world than me, in terms of politics and economics, as these were his majors; I on the other hand was a humanities student in the Rhetoric Department. But I also saw him as a template of success. He became my mentor, academically and professionally, looking over my papers for Rhetoric and Spanish, and proofreading my applications to internships and undergraduate research positions. He was ahead of me in age: when I was a freshman, he was already a senior and would graduate the following year. Given his standing in college, he was already socially established, and popular. Everywhere we would go students would nod to him or wave, though he often confessed as to not having any idea who these people were. They were likely people who had voted for him, or had helped with the campaigning of his political party. Nonetheless, I saw his popularity as

bolstering his credibility as someone who was highly involved on campus and well-respected.

Thus, it was through Gabriel that I adopted the religion of social justice. Given his commitment to serving underrepresented minority students at UC Berkeley, I likewise chose to dedicate myself to working with underprivileged communities in the Bay Area. I was attracted to working with these communities because I wanted to learn more about the world —and I didn't want to be the kind of white person who I imagined to be oblivious of others less fortunate. While I was eager to gain the acceptance of the communities in which I volunteered, one of my students reminded me of how different we were. I tutored GED material to San Francisco County Jail inmates, and even in the cold tank (a large cell with beds on one side, a table on the other, and bathroom in the back) of men, I smiled. It did not occur to me to change my usual demeanor, though perhaps I simply could not comprehend such a different reality, as no one close to me had ever been through the criminal justice system. Thus, teaching in jail was a way to learn about a culture from the outside, without ever getting too close. I think my students saw me from a distance, too. One of my students had written me a note, which I had unknowingly collected with their weekly writing assignments. He called me a DT, or dick teaser, and I was embarrassed that he saw me this way. Without being aware of it, I had wanted to be on “their” side. I did not want to be seen in the same light as the correctional officers, but rather, as an ally, someone who was critically resistant of the prison maintenance in California. In *Hunger of Memory*, Richard Rodriguez writes about what he considers a false notion – namely, that academics can be in league with the poor:

Ethnic studies departments were founded on romantic hopes. And with the new departments were often instituted ‘community action’ programs. Students were given course credit for work done in working-class neighborhoods. Too often, however, activists encouraged students to believe that they were in league with the poor when, in actuality, any academic who works with the socially disadvantaged is able to be of benefit to them only because he is culturally different from them. (158)

Contrary to Rodriguez’s notion that academics could only be of benefit to the disadvantaged because they were culturally different, I believed the opposite, that I could only benefit this community if I could relate to its common struggle. It was through this lens that I became jaded in my social justice work. I believed that my presumed white privilege prohibited me from working with communities of color, and that I would always be on the outside. Even so, there was one archetype in particular that I sought to avoid. I didn’t want to be that white missionary who “saved” people of color, those “savages” in need of goodwill. I did not want to be one of those white women teachers who were featured in movies like *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers*. Yet, I did want to be a different *kind* of white person. When I was buying a five-pound bag of tootsie pops, I ran into one of Gabriel’s allies, Vicente, a student activist and leader of RAZA, the campus recruitment and retention center for Latinos. When he asked what I was buying candy for, I relished the chance to mention that the candy was for flyering on Sproul Plaza, to get the word out about jail tutoring. I wanted him to think that I was the kind of white person who had come to terms with my whiteness, and was doing social

justice work not because I needed to affirm my identity, but because I could relate to something larger. Rodriguez writes:

Students at the new middle-class campus lacked deep appreciation of their social advantages. What had been lost in the postwar expansion of higher education was the sense that higher education implied privilege. Thus, for a few years, students could be lured by a romantic idea of their victimization. (165)

I could not appreciate my social advantages because I wanted to believe that I was a victim. Unknowingly, I wanted to align myself with the “oppressed” rather than the “oppressor” so that I would not have to recognize the ways in which I profited from racism. Thus, I was indeed lured by the idea of my own victimization, and made conscious efforts to acknowledge the ways in which I too was socially disadvantaged. I called attention to my status as first-generation college student, my parents having only attended some college (which on standardized forms I marked with pride, thinking this made me even more deserving of my achievements). I too was a student who in fourth grade was called out of class by the Upward Bound Program, as I was identifiably “at risk” of not pursuing a higher education. I too went to a high school of which most of my graduating class eagerly attended a junior college rather than a university. I was not someone who came to UC Berkeley along with sixty other peers from the same high school, as was the case with Lowell, a private Jewish high school in San Francisco, known to funnel their graduates into premier universities nationwide.

But my biggest claim to disadvantage lay in my mixed race background; like other racial minorities, whites discriminated against me, but I was also rejected by Asian Americans. Thus, to some extent I believed that I had it the worst, as both sides oppressed me. This is the notion I sought to uphold, and one of the ways I did this was through the mixed race student group on campus. Hapa Issues Forum (HIF) was a student group exclusively for mixed race Asians who did not see themselves fitting into (full) Asian American cultural organizations. Such a group was committed to providing a safe space in which fellow Hapas felt that they belonged. We found support in connecting with each other's stories of being excluded by Asians and whites alike, as we "just didn't fit in." However, my friend Jon, who was Hapa and from Hawaii, a place in which mixed race is normative, warned me that HIF was a place where you go in *without* issues, but come out *with* issues.

Buying into the mixed race narrative, I came to see myself as occupying a liminal space. While I generally "passed" as white, throughout my childhood I had white friends who teased me for being Asian, pointing to Asians in public, and asking if we were related, or, hearing an Asian language being spoken on TV, asking me to interpret. In the same way, I had been outcast by Asians, who would laugh at my claim to being part Chinese, scoffing at my white facial features and the fact that I knew none of the Chinese language. While being rejected was painful, I came to accept that I would never fit into traditional racial categories, and thus grew more comfortable as the "only one" – in fact, it made me feel *special*. My sandy brown hair and almond-shaped eyes hinted to the world that I was different. Others ask me, "What are you?" and I'm able to pretend that I live in a different dimension than everyone else. But what I've

realized is that being mixed-race doesn't make me more special than others, despite what the narrative would have me believe. Nevertheless, I've used this narrative in applying for multicultural fellowships to compel admissions boards.

I postured myself as a victim in applying for multicultural fellowships. I took advantage of the fact that multicultural organizations had no choice but to honor the narratives of their applicants, given they were not too farfetched. My friend, Jake, the Director of the multicultural center at UVM, said that students had the right to identify however they chose. It was not his place to disagree. Thus, when I applied to such multicultural organizations as the Institute for Recruitment of Teachers (IRT), I had the freedom to tell a story without fear of critique. I was able to emphasize my marginalized status as a biracial woman who struggled to fit in, and a first generation college student who was not sure how to navigate the system. By pushing this narrative, I was afforded the resources to apply to graduate school—but I felt like a fraud. Growing up among the wealthy children of Marin County, whose council would block the subway system from entering our suburbs, I attended distinguished public schools, and was surrounded by parents who were engaged in their children's academic futures (even if these parents were not mine). As Rodriguez writes, I felt unrelieved in receiving this aid, knowing there were others who were more in need:

I was the minority student the political activists shouted about at noontime rallies. Against their rhetoric, I stood out in relief, unrelieved. *Knowing*: I was not really more socially disadvantaged than the white graduate students in my classes. *Knowing*: I was not disadvantaged like many of

the new nonwhite students who were entering college, lacking good early schooling. (146-7)

In my mind I had a portrait of the kind of student who deserved to be a part of IRT. I came to befriend Vicente and Oscar, Chicanos from UC Berkeley who were teaching in Boston; they seemed to better fit the description. As male Chicanos in higher education, they were an “endangered species,” as they put it, and I went with them to a protest on Thanksgiving Day at Plymouth Rock, to recognize the history of the holiday through the lens of Native American activists. In the same way that I felt out of place when I’d go to political events with Gabriel, I felt like an outsider at this gathering, as well. Leaders of these events were quick to spout off phrases like “it’s about equity, not equality” when discussions against affirmative action came up, and would dismiss others as “Zionist” if they weren’t to be trusted. I didn’t speak their rhetoric, though I was impressed by their political consciousness and conviction in their beliefs. Although their radical ideologies resonated with me, I felt different from the activists around me. I felt implicated, knowing that I could be doing more to eradicate white privilege – but I simply wasn’t acting.

Passing as white, I’ve never had to question my academic merit or had others question it, at least to my face. Being accepted to UC Berkeley, I was never plagued by people suggesting that I got in because of my race. I was white, and therefore deserving. However, something happened when I went to graduate school at UVM. Having received an “Opportunity” or “Diversity” fellowship that allowed me to teach one year only, to focus on my own studies, other graduate students questioned why I was worthy.

David and Matthew, fellow graduate students in my program, suggested that I had received the fellowship because I was a person of color in a predominantly white program, and that being from UC Berkeley would help the program recruit students from similar big name schools. Although I'm sure these were factors in the decision-making process, it was the first time I was forced to question why I deserved what I was given. This was painful for me, and caused me to doubt why I was chosen above others, though I initially became defensive. Although I wished my confidence were bolstered by these critiques- forcing me to work even harder to prove others wrong-- I found my confidence deflated, doubting why I had applied to graduate school, and unsteady in a hostile environment. But more than anything, I was enraged. I always thought that people of color in universities were that much stronger because they knew what to do with this rage, how to channel it in a way that was productive. I had no idea that it could just sit inside me, brewing. I sought out people of color for support, hoping they could help me cope in this predominantly white university. I had the expectation that we would band together in an unspoken solidarity based on our shared outsider status. Rodriguez writes:

In my department that year there were five black graduate students. We were the only nonwhite students in a department of nearly three hundred. Initially, I was shy of the black students – afraid of what they'd discover about me. But in seminars they would come and sit by me. They trusted the alliance of color. In soft voices – not wanting to be overheard by the white students around us – they spoke to me. And I felt rewarded by their confidences. (161)

I believed that I would be included in this “alliance of color.” Yet I learned that my common outsider status did not mean that I could be trusted. When I attended the weekly Friday morning breakfasts at the ALANA Center (ALANA being an acronym used in New England universities to refer to their Asian, Latino, African, and Native American counterparts), conversations were forced. The community I walked in on was busy catching up with each other, meeting mutual friends, and most importantly, were already socially-established, not by the color of their skin, but by their work on campus. While I was welcomed as a newcomer, I would need to volunteer and socialize to gain admittance. It was not enough to be biracial and from the liberal Bay Area. Even though the ALANA community praised diversity and inclusivity, it felt like an exclusive club that was hard to enter. The breakfasts were very much like parties, in which the popular flaunted that they knew everyone, proving that they had a place in this community. Although I was the only graduate student from the English Department, as the other grad students were from the HESA (Higher Education and Student Affairs) program—my feelings of alienation surprised me. Upon being accepted to UVM, I remember sharing with my mother my personal statement. After reading it, she voiced the admissions board’s excitement in admitting me: “I want one of those!” she exclaimed, as a student like me would add diversity to the student population. I laughed, and began to develop the notion that I would likely “pass” as a person of color, given that I was not the typical white student from New England. I thought that this was my chance to learn what it felt like to be a minority in the United States. I would learn what Gabriel, Vicente, and Oscar felt in attending a predominantly white university, and my

perspective as a white person would be enlarged. I would have a new found understanding of what it felt like to “not fit in.” Although I had my own experience not fitting in as a mixed race person, somehow I believed that this narrative would be more legitimate, as, in my eyes, multiracial identity remained on the fringes. As I tried to “pass” as a person of color, I would lump persons of color and white folks into monolithic blocs. Rodriguez writes of a summer in which he tried to pass as one of the “brazeros” or rather, one of the day laborers that worked with his hands, only to realize that the group was much more diverse than he’d imagined:

Some days the younger men would talk and talk about sex, and they would howl at women who drove by in cars. Other days the talk at lunchtime was subdued; men gathered in separate groups. It depended on who was around. There were rough, good-natured workers. Others were quiet. The more I remember that summer, the more I realize that there was no single *type* of worker. I am embarrassed to say I had not expected such diversity. (133)

When I met Tiffany at the ALANA Student Center, I was surprised by how similar our backgrounds were. For some reason, when I saw her name, Tiffany Tran, on the back of the center’s pamphlet, I was expecting that she would be your typical FOB (“Fresh off the Boat”) who spoke limited English, had a thick accent, and dressed as if still living in the “Old Country.” I was not expecting someone who had also attended a UC (University of California school), was from Santa Monica, and used the bicoastal

slang of “hella” and “mad,” and talked of how you shouldn’t call attention to others by “putting them on blast.” Despite her ties to mainstream culture, she had the cultural authority to take the Asian Student Union (ASU) to the annual Asian American student conference, and in the ALANA monthly newsletter for February wrote about the significance of Lunar New Year. Nonetheless, I was suspicious of her ties to the Vietnamese culture. I believed that you had to give up the old to take in the new, as my family had done when they emigrated from China and settled in San Francisco, assimilating into American culture. As Rodriguez writes:

My relationship to many of the self-proclaimed Chicano students was not an easy one. I felt threatened by them. I was made nervous by their insistence that they were still allied to their parents’ culture. Walking on campus one day with my mother and father, I relished the surprised look on their faces when they saw some Hispanic students wearing serapes pass by. I needed to laugh at the clownish display. I needed to tell myself that the new minority students were foolish to think themselves unchanged by their schooling. (I needed to justify my own change.) (159)

Jake made me aware that my education at UC Berkeley had changed me. He referred to the school as “elitist,” and while I denied it, I later came to realize he was right. I came from a place in which we talked about ideas, practiced theory, and then proceeded to graduate school. We were not a commuter school, and we took to heart what it meant to be students of the prestigious UC Berkeley. Like other students of

historic schools, we had a myth to uphold. In the same way that I believed in the myth of Gabriel as an authority on social justice, and symbol of success, I believed in the legend of Cal. Professors were bastions of knowledge, and I invested in their authority by holding their opinions above others, including my own. When graded essays were handed back, I would keep those that reaffirmed my academic rigor, filing them into a special folder to remind me that my admittance to this university was justified. (As I was intimidated by how articulate and confident my peers were, I needed this validation.) Investing in the opinions of others, I learned to erase my voice in essays, so well that one of my Rhetoric teachers, Professor Bellamy, told me that he wanted to hear more of what I thought. Aside from my close readings, what did *I* believe? But I could not tell him that I believed what my Rhetoric professors, leaders in their fields, told me to believe. While I paid close attention to what foundational texts proposed and what my professors espoused, I could not participate in discussions because I did not have my own opinion. As Rodriguez writes, “Merely bookish, I lacked a point of view when I read. Rather, I read in order to acquire a point of view. I vacuumed books for epigrams, scraps of information, ideas, themes – anything to fill the hollow within me and make me feel educated” (64). Rodriguez speaks of how he resembles the “scholarship boy,” or someone who abandons his parents’ culture to pursue the merits of education, believing that he cannot have both (Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*):

He becomes especially ambitious. Without the support of old certainties and consolations, almost mechanically, he assumes the procedures and doctrines of the classroom. The kind of allegiance the young student

might have given his mother and father only days earlier, he transfers to the teacher, the new figure of authority. (qtd. in 49)

After Gabriel had moved to the East Coast, having received a public policy fellowship at Carnegie Mellon University, I needed a new authority figure. Needing direction on how to be successful, and wanting to use all the resources that were available, I sought to form connections with the scholars who I most admired. On some days I wanted to become a disciple of Professor Engstrom, whose office hours I attended after stalling in the hallway for forty-five minutes, not knowing if I had anything worth saying. But even when I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do with my life, I thought it was wise to get to know these men, to learn what they had done to gain their certainty. Rodriguez writes, "It was not the occupation of teaching that I yearned for as much as it was something more elusive: I wanted to *be* like my teachers, to possess their knowledge, to assume their authority, their confidence, even to assume a teacher's persona" (55). I believed that if I could assume this persona, and have others place their confidence in me, perhaps I too could trust myself. For a long time I allowed myself to be silenced, placing my trust in authority figures, and it is only recently that I have begun to speak my voice, to define who I am, and decide what I want to believe.

Chapter Two: Insider

I have come to believe that it doesn't serve me to hate my whiteness. While I have previously feared and misunderstood this part of my identity, I have realized that I need to "reclaim" this part of myself, in order to survive. "Taking back" my whiteness is an ongoing process, though I do believe that I am making progress, and in doing so, letting go of useless emotions that used to rule my thoughts and actions. This is a story of relentless denial and guilt, but also of hopeful rebirth.

I had not wanted to be honest with myself about my upbringing because I felt that being privileged took away from my achievements. Reflecting on my middle class upbringing, I tended to emphasize that I was not part of the upper tier, as I never attended private schools, and my parents weren't doctors or lawyers. Yet, it's important to be honest about how I grew up. While my parents had always worked jobs that didn't require a college degree-- my mother started out in customer service working the phones at a software company, and ran her own out-of-home daycare, and my dad jumped back and forth between stock brokering and selling mattresses-- they were able to afford the expenses that I incurred as a competitive high school soccer player, and there was no doubt that my sisters and I would attend college so that we would have greater opportunities than our parents. While my family was much thriftier than other families I knew in Marin County, as my mom grocery shopped with a coupon book that looked more like an accordion, with all its categorical dividers (it was my chore each Sunday

morning to go through the paper and clip coupons for the rest of the week), I have never identified as poor, but rather, as unwaveringly middle class.

I used to think that my success meant less because I had to overcome less than friends who had attended UC Berkeley coming from East Oakland or South Central Los Angeles. While I still fall into this kind of thinking, I'm trying to understand that we simply have different stories, and that success is relative. While I believe that hardships can make us grow and develop more deeply, I also don't want to glorify suffering. Ironically, I used to feel insecure, assuming that I did not have the obstacles I needed to make me a better person, that being middle class wouldn't allow me to develop a strong character, which I assumed came from being poor and enduring hardship. But I think this is an example of my privilege, that I can sit back and wish that I could have struggled more, when I doubt I would have made this choice in the moment. While it's important to honor the ways in which I have utilized my opportunities by working hard, my environment played a key role in my achievements.

While I grew up in a household in which two races and cultures were present, the one that prevailed was the dominant culture of society. Preserved fish and rice porridge were mere novelty against a meat and potatoes backdrop that characterized our household's dietary preferences. Chinese New Year was never just referred to as "New Year" and calling my Chinese grandmother "Po Po" was all that I was used to, yet I still felt self-conscious about it, albeit in a way that made me feel "special." Throughout my college curriculum, which predominantly adopted a multiculturalist bent, what was echoed was the need to embrace all sides of your cultural upbringing. But, while I was eager to acknowledge my mother's heritage as first generation Chinese American, I

grossly reduced my English, Irish, and German roots to “white,” and in doing so, saw myself in a troubling portrayal of whites.

In *Wounds of Passion*, bell hooks portrays the kind of white person I was afraid of becoming:

They are the kind of white people I have spent a lifetime wanting never to be in close contact with the kind that have blood on their hands...*They are into success, material comfort, into education and culture, but they try not to think too hard about anything.* (52)

This portrayal of the white person hit so close to home for me that I sought refuge from it in circles of progressive people of color. If only they adopted me as one of their own, affirming that I was a different kind of white person, then I might be saved. This wasn't hard to find in UC Berkeley's Ethnic Studies Department, where, in my Asian American Studies course, my classmates are more radical than our professor. We were unsatisfied with her PowerPoint slides, knowing that dissecting these charts and statistics didn't tell the whole story; we wanted more than a sociological analysis. We wanted to be fueled, activated, our souls to be nourished by revolutionary calls to take action. At the end of the semester, Professor Tabitha Wong acknowledged that we had challenged her in this way, and other students expressed their gratitude of other non-Ethnic Studies majors for having “come around.” Outside of class, Vicente, an Ethnic Studies major, admitted that everything he interpreted seemed to come back to race, and that may not be a good thing. I reassured him that was just his lens, and that is valuable. Even though I

did think that sometimes (on rare occasions), it was *not* about race. I didn't say this, though, for fear of saying the "wrong" thing.

One of my peers paid the consequences for saying the "wrong" thing. It was an Ethnic Studies class on the History of Mixed Race Peoples, and in a lecture hall full of 75 students, she characterized her friend as talking "ghetto." This comment created a storm of responses- one student was wounded and began to cry, telling us that she was offended because she herself had come out of the "ghetto" and felt triggered by her peer, who did not know the realities of the slang word she casually used. Several students followed her lead, explaining why they felt that the term was offensive, despite its widespread use within mainstream society. The student who had made the comment didn't leave right away, but when the class let out you could see that she was in tears. We even talked about this incident in seminar, and in our next lecture the student apologized for her comment, explaining that she did not mean to hurt anyone. While the situation had been put to rest, I was afraid this might happen to me- that someday I too might be caught for a slip up that I would not be able to take back. A part of me believed that, because I was white, I harbored racist beliefs (this is what my friends of color seemed to believe about most whites), but, if I was careful enough, I could avoid her blunder-- by not speaking up, and revealing them. Although I was not ready to interrogate my whiteness, believing that whites tended to live better in the world made me feel guilty. hooks writes:

She has learned to fear white folks without understanding what it is she fears....She and the other children want to understand Race but no one explains it. They learn without understanding that the world is more a home for white folks than it is for anyone else. (*Bone Black* 31)

In my mind, whiteness was tied to guilt for wrongs committed historically and today. Such wrongs could be witnessed in the criminal justice system. As an intern at the Alameda County Courthouse in Downtown Oakland, I carried this guilt with me, as I could not help but to feel implicated as I witnessed the system's inequalities. As an aspiring prelaw undergraduate, it was my job to interview detained men and women in hopes that I could bargain with the judge to release them on their own recognizance (the promise to make all court dates). But I did not believe that I could help these people. I was enmeshed in the thinking that I needed to rescue them, who in my eyes were victims of "the system." I learned to see shoplifters, prostitutes, wife beaters, and drug dealers as no more than people who had been caught in a downward spiral of drugs, poverty, lack of education, and abuse—they were failures of society rather than failures as individuals. As one black man noted on the elevator ride to court, it was "justice for just us." I saw the same profile again and again: young black men between the ages of 18 and 25 years old- which in some cases made them younger than me (I remember our supervisor pointing out that, as 2006 rolled around, we were now seeing those born in the year 1988, which for some reason was hard to stomach, as my birth year of 1984 seemed young already). To observe these inequities each day was too much for me to handle. While I played a vital role in providing pretrial services to those in need, I felt powerless, believing it was too late to intervene and break these destructive cycles. The circumstances of the detained made me feel implicated- ashamed of how good I had it- and I didn't know what to do with these feelings of pity, shame, and grief that overcame me.

I began to feel sickened by my social advantages, that instead of fighting to survive, I had the luxury to be preoccupied with my own success. As jail tutors, we were busy building our résumés, expanding our viewpoints, so that in interviews we could say things like, “What I learned while tutoring in jail was....” We wanted to distinguish ourselves from our competition, to carve ourselves a niche amongst an undergraduate population of 30,000 students (this is what we need to do, our CalSO [Cal Student Orientation] leaders tell us, in order to find a home on campus, but also to succeed). But it seemed that this mentality led me astray, as I neglected the needs of the people I aimed to serve. I realized this in a job interview for a similar position: tutoring GED material to residents of Hunters Point, the abandoned San Francisco port district known for its high poverty and correspondingly high crime rate. I remember telling my interviewer, Dwayne Jones, that our tutoring group was not effective. We were disorganized, and unclear of our purpose – we seemed to be doing the work more for ourselves than our students. Jen, our founder, was applying to dental school, Robert was seeking to redefine himself after being rejected by Haas (UC Berkeley’s business school), Joseph was demonstrating that he was a different kind of Republican, and Henna was fulfilling her Christian duty to help those in need. We were not interested in networking with other like-minded student groups: Books Not Bars, Letters to Prisoners, and Abolish the Death Penalty each existed with a clear purpose in mind: to advocate for prisoners’ rights. Yet when I mentioned these groups to the rest of the tutors, I was discouraged by the prevailing view: that these groups were too radical, and if we associated with them, we would not be able to recruit tutors who did not share these political longings. We decided

that we would not bring politics into our group's purpose—we each had individual reasons for working with the incarcerated population.

I pursued jail tutoring because I wanted to learn how to live with my whiteness. I thought that inmates had the knowledge and power to make me think differently about my skin color-- that they would allow me to finally accept it. I thought that men in such circumstances possessed an understanding to which I did not have access; romantically, I believed that the trauma they had endured must have taught them how to transcend their condition, to still be capable of loving themselves. I wanted them to teach me how to love myself, too, despite the crimes my skin color had committed. Yolanda, the jail's tutoring coordinator, had told us not to come to jail looking for love. But I couldn't help myself. On my first day of tutoring, after the correctional officers locked me inside the tank and went about their rounds, my anxiousness was apparent to all. It was then that Ebony approached me, and said that I had nothing to fear, that the guys just wanted to get out, and knew that hurting me would only increase their time inside. I appreciated his effort to make me feel safe, yet I wanted more from him. I had this fantasy that Ebony would validate that, despite my whiteness, I was *good*. I blamed myself for the hardships of others, believing that the misfortunes of Ebony and others in the tank were partially my fault-- and thus sought redemption from these men. I sought their rescue from a whiteness that I could not otherwise reconcile. I wanted them to take charge of righting my skin color's wrongs, as I did not want to see myself, but instead wanted to hide. It was not so much that I sought their love, in and of itself, but rather a byproduct of their acceptance: allowing me to love myself and see beyond my own whiteness. It was as if I needed their permission to love myself.

I realize now that the inmates with whom I worked did not have the power to pardon me of my whiteness, or allow me to love myself. It was a mere fantasy that perhaps originated from Ebony asking me out for coffee (we could go when he got out, he said)-- a scenario that I had secretly entertained, believing that it was my chance to align with the "other," and in doing so, escape culpability, and any accountability that I had for my skin color. I think I resorted to this kind of wishful thinking because I did not have the tools to understand how to deconstruct my unearned advantage in a way that did not focus primarily on blame. Instead of confronting whiteness and critically asking myself what it meant to be white, I let other people define me, accepting that I was guilty of whatever crimes that "whiteness" has committed. In doing so, I lost the opportunity to "own" my whiteness. I believed that there was only one kind of whiteness, one which affirmed that white people were "covered in blood" and "guilty as charged." I took this notion to heart, and was afraid to confront my whiteness, not wanting to see the presumed blood on my hands. I attempted to separate myself from my privilege by identifying with the mixed race group on campus, Hapa Issues Forum (HIF), but I could not escape feeling implicated. Although we have conversations about what it means when people of color say that they wish they were mixed, that this usually means with white, rather than black, we don't acknowledge how we too play into the system. Rather than being honest about how most of us benefit from white privilege, we feign ignorance, pretending that we are a separate, unique entity that is not tied to traditional notions of whiteness and privilege. Consequently, we receive a backlash from certain Asian Americans on campus who see through our post-racial ploys.

Hardboiled, the Asian American campus newspaper, believed that there was no nice way to say it –HIF is a self-exotifying meat market whose main interest is self-promotion, and irresponsibly plays into its own white privilege without holding itself accountable. In response to this attack we feigned outrage for years to come, as no one can admit the truth: that we use white privilege to our advantage, and *like* being looked at. We are publicly critical of the stereotype that mixed race people are more beautiful, as it exotifies the “other” while at the same time implies that people who look closer to white are more beautiful. However, no one is able to admit that we secretly believe that we *are* more beautiful, that we buy into a standard of beauty that is white and exploits exoticism. But it’s not okay to admit our feelings because it takes away from our legitimacy – that, after historically being excluded by whites and minorities alike, we have a right to exist. However, it’s no secret that we harbor an ethos of entitlement because of our reputed aesthetic appeal. We like that we are associated with models and pop culture celebrities such as Naomi Campbell, Halle Berry, Keanu Reeves, and Jessica Alba. But no one is willing to name our self-assuredness as a product of our (white) aesthetic privilege. When HIF opens itself up to all mixes, not just Asian mixes, and adopts the name of Mixed Student Union (MSU), you can see it on our faces that we have lost some of our mystique by allowing people in who do not fit a certain “look.” Looking around at our first meeting, we believe that these “others” make our group less beautiful, but we have already committed ourselves to being more inclusive. We fall into the same group mentality that excludes others in order to assert that our identity is unique and coherent, even though we have a history of being rejected ourselves. Yet I cannot let go of this defensive way of thinking, as the hapa identity allows me to assert that I have

some kind of cultural belonging, that I have a history that is not, contrary to whiteness, based on bloodshed, pillaging, and wrong doing.

I had conflicted feelings about being inclusive, and they were shaped by my need to belong, which I experienced more urgently as a graduate student at the University of Vermont than as an undergraduate at UC Berkeley. For instance, at a UC Berkeley HIF meeting, I remember a Chinese American male expressing to the rest of the group that he felt like a “banana,” yellow on the outside and white on the inside. Although he did not see himself as “mixed,” he could identify with our struggle of being seen one way, yet identifying otherwise. I saw his admission as refreshing, and I could sympathize with his feelings of being misunderstood. Yet I was critical of Tiffany, who makes a similar argument at the University of Vermont. It is our first mixed race meeting, and I was annoyed that she was there. Yet her case was relevant: as a Vietnamese American with immigrant parents, she felt torn between cultures and social classes. She expressed feelings of guilt in being of a higher educational tier than her parents, their hard work to provide greater opportunities to their children having resulted in mutual estrangement. While I heard her argument, I was unable to empathize with her, as I felt threatened. As a graduate student and person of color at UVM, it seemed that there was not enough space to go around, so I needed to fight for a space of belonging. To me, her claim to a mixed race narrative seemed tactical; she already capitalized on the territories of “Asian American,” “California girl,” and now she wanted to complete her monopoly by landing the term “mixed.” This made me bitter, as she seemed to want to territorialize all potential niches--not considering the needs of other community members to define themselves and be “seen.” In my eyes, she had re-appropriated the term “mixed” to

include “full” Asian Americans and exclude *actual* mixes, as suddenly I was not “Asian enough” to be considered “mixed.” But, while I was resentful that she had pushed me into a space in which I did not feel comfortable- as I was forced to acknowledge my whiteness- I am also grateful, as it gave me the chance to challenge conventional notions of race and identity.

In retrospect, I am critical of the ways in which I previously viewed race and identity, dismissing my own experiences because they did not make sense according to notions of race and identity as fixed and categorical. I wish that I would have been able to assert my identity more strongly, and not have felt pressured to self-identify according to others’ restrictive notions of “whiteness,” “mixedness,” and “coloredness.” It makes me sad that I betrayed myself, that I relinquished my authority to define myself, and believed that others knew me better than I knew myself. I also feel that I have wasted a lot of time feeling guilty, and that I have been self-indulgent in allowing myself to drown in shame. I believe now that guilt is a useless emotion, as it does not force me to act, but rather, wallow in fear and chosen paralysis. I now hold the consciousness that privilege is a gift, and that we all possess privilege in one form or another, whether it is tied to race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, class, age, aesthetic appearance, language, education, or nationality. The way that I reconcile my privilege is by remembering to be grateful for my gifts. But I also feel a sense of urgency to use these gifts, and not let them go to waste. I don’t mean to use this as an excuse for future actions, but rather, to recognize that much is expected of me, because much has been given to me. While I am still contemplating how I want to use my gifts, I know that this shift in mentality will be empowering as compared to my old school of thought. While

grappling with my privileges will be an ongoing process, I do feel that I have made progress, and that it's time to put into practice what I have learned, and move forward.

Meta-critical Reflection: Storyteller

Introduction

I am interested in exploring Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* and bell hooks' *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* and *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life* in order to better understand my educational experiences as a UC Berkeley undergraduate and University of Vermont graduate student, with respect to race and identity. In doing so, I will delve into the ways in which these authors contextualize whiteness and privilege within a broader discussion about social oppression in the United States. I am interested in social oppression as it relates to the ways in which my advantages implicate my identity. I also intend to examine the ways in which the genre of memoir has uniquely facilitated hooks and Rodriguez in telling their stories, and I will speak to my own process as well. The questions I will be exploring are as follows: What is memoir? Why did I need an autobiographical approach? Which texts will I be working with and why? What are the premises of my primary texts? What does it mean to reveal the personal? What was my process in writing memoir? How is memoir a distinct genre? Who are we writing for? What is privilege? And, what is whiteness? By investigating these questions, I strive for balance between personal reflections, close readings of memoir, and methodological analyses.

Defining Memoir

It is hard to define memoir as it seems to be a deceptively simple genre. One place to start might be James Olney's liking for the term "periautography," which means "writing about or around the self" (xv). In *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing*, he explains that it is "precisely [the term's] indefinability and lack of generic rigor, its comfortably loose fit and generous adaptability" that he appreciates (xv). This suggests that memoir is a diverse genre that comes in many forms. For example, Rodriguez and hooks alike are writing memoirs, though the former is much more linear and literal than the latter, which challenges what is "real" in its incorporation of dreams and fantasies, and nonchronologically documents events in the form of a quilt. In this way, the category of memoir is simply a place to start, as each text takes on its own shape.

Nonetheless, I find it helpful to make distinctions. In *Then, Again: The Art of Time in Memoir*, Sven Birkerts defines memoir in contrast to autobiography. He writes, "'Autobiography' divides as neatly as Gaul into its three source elements: 'Auto,' or *self*; 'bio,' or *life*; 'graphy,' or *line*. No mystery there: the autobiography undertakes to set down the line of his or her own life. Implicit is the sense of the comprehensive, the inclusive, as well as the promise of at least an attempted objectivity" (51-52). He writes, "Memoirs by contrast, are neither open ended nor provisional. For as the root of the word attests, they present not the line of the life, but the life remembered" (53). Thus, there is far more subjectivity allowed and expected in the genre of memoir. In *Living to Tell the Tale*, Gabriel García Márquez affirms this notion, writing: "Life is not what one

lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it” (epigraph). In this way, memoirists construct their lives according to the ways in which they remember and recount their pasts. This is a radical notion, as it speaks to the instability of memory, how it is not a “re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless and fragmentary traces,” but rather, a constantly evolving “imaginative reconstruction” (Bartlett 213). The matter is further complicated by the ways in which the past is mediated by imposed narratives that filter events, constantly changing the lighting on the past.

This is not to say that personal narrative can be invented, but rather to point out that, like any piece of literature, memoir tells a story. According to Vivian Gornick in her essay, “Truth in Personal Narrative,” the requirements of personal narrative (and I use the terms personal narrative and memoir interchangeably) is that it be:

A tale taken from life that is, from actual not imagined occurrences and is related by a first person narrator who is undeniably the writer. Beyond these bare requirements, it has the same responsibility as the novel or the short story: to shape a piece of experience out of the raw materials of one’s own life so that it moves from a tale of private interest to one that has meaning for the disinterested reader. (8)

In this way, Gornick underscores the need to “shape” experience, in order to “move” a tale from the realm of the individual to that of the stranger by way of a larger “meaning.” Thus, memoir is about recounting actual events in a way that reveals a

larger insight. Her choice of the word “tale” seems to speak to her overall message: that we are creating something new out of raw materials, and moving into a realm in which we’re less concerned with the actual event and more attuned to its larger significance.

hooks’ contention that “the events described are always less significant than the impressions they leave on the mind and heart” goes hand in hand with this idea (*Bone Black* xv). In *The Soul’s Code*, James Hillman speaks to this notion, writing: “Our lives may be determined less by our childhoods than by the way we have learned to remember our childhoods” (4). Likewise, Gornick makes the distinction between the terms “situation” and “story.” She writes:

The context in which the book is set, our life in the Bronx in the 1950s, alternating with walks taken in Manhattan in the 1980s, was the situation; the story was the insight. What mattered most to me was not the literalness of the situation, but the emotional truth of the story. If [*Fierce Attachments*] has any strength at all, it is because I remained scrupulously faithful to the story, not the situation. (7)

In these ways, hooks, Hillman, and Gornick speak to the paradoxical nature of memoir, one that requires a writer to bend the particulars of what may have happened, in order to reveal a “truer” insight.

Why I Needed an Autobiographical Approach

As a UC Berkeley Rhetoric major, I learned a new way of seeing, one that probed deeply into theoretical and philosophical texts, and considered the text to be the ultimate authority. Thus, I was much more concerned with analyzing the arguments that were being made, and how they were being made, than I was with the actual person making them. In this way, I considered the text itself to be alive, and learned to discount the person who was behind it. I internalized this way of thinking on a personal level, shrinking my own self, and believing that what I wrote and studied somehow existed outside of my own realm of being. While this kind of behavior did not coincide with the discipline of Rhetoric-- as the point is to look at the text and consider the existing social, historical, political, legal, and cultural contexts that affect the ways in which the truth is constructed, and to critically bring the self into this discussion-- this was the way in which I chose to adopt this academic lens.

I am not sure why I chose to adopt this academic lens in this way. But perhaps I believed that it would make sense-making simpler. What I mean by this is that when I read complex texts, it was easier to handle complicated ideas when I did not have to reconcile them with my own ideologies and beliefs. By taking myself out of the equation, I did not need to consider ethical questions as readily, as the material seemed to exist on a plane that was disconnected from my own reality. But, this failure to engage was not “easier” in the long run, as it would eventually catch up to me with serious consequences. By not exercising my own critical thinking skills, I became

absent, numb, and lost, which made being reawakened especially painful, albeit necessary.

The ways in which I habitually failed to “show up” led to the turmoil I experienced when I became a graduate student at the University of Vermont; my academic beliefs discredited my own experiences, and my lack of self exacerbated feelings of alienation and confusion in a new place. For my survival, I needed to adopt a new paradigm that would allow me to reconnect with my studies and myself in a personal way. For this reason, the genre of memoir resonated with me, as it would allow me to rescue and reclaim my previously denied self. (The genre of memoir has also made my life more interesting, as it was boring [not to mention disempowering] to exist, having evacuated my own beliefs, and to not think about the contradictions and paradoxes that present themselves when bringing the self to bear. While bringing my personhood into the conversation has been scary, and has problematized my life, it has done so in a way that is life-affirming, as I now see the ways in which I am a part of, rather than separate, from matters, regardless of their nature.)

Premises of Primary Texts

When I first began writing this reflection, I was under the impression that I needed to stick with the three texts that I had used in my non-fiction chapters: *Bone Black*, *Wounds of Passion*, and *Hunger of Memory*. However, while it is my intention to focus on these texts, I needed to pull from a variety of works in order to explore the questions that I had. Throughout my paper I reference additional texts that are written

by bell hooks, such as *Talking Back* and *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work*. I also look at the following works: Rebecca Walker's "Pale as I am" and *Black White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*, Sven Birkerts' *Then, Again: The Art of Time in Memoir*, Charles Blackstone and Jill Talbot's *The Art of Friction: Where (Non) Fictions Come Together*, Phyllis Rose's "Whose Truth? Going public with your own life—and who knows who else's," Vivian Gornick's "Truth in Personal Narrative," James Olney's *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing*, and Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. By drawing from these works, I have gained further insight, and hope to provide a more nuanced, yet broader exploration of issues pertaining to race and identity. However, before I go any further, let me first outline the premises of the texts that led me to this project in the first place.

In *Hunger for Memory*, Richard Rodriguez tells the story of his education, exploring the ways in which he felt pressured to give up his language and culture. He frames his narrative in terms of loss and gain, namely, how he needed to lose his ties to his family in order to gain a public identity, and prosper. While his story is autobiographical, it is also inherently political, as he draws upon public policies such as bilingual education and affirmative action. He discusses the rhetoric behind these policies, and the ways in which they affected him personally, encouraging the reader not to forget about class when considering social oppression. Rodriguez leads us through his ultimate decision to leave academia in order to reconcile his political views with his experience as a beneficiary of affirmative action. He concludes his story with the realization that his schooling, coupled with his decision to pursue a writing career, had effectively disconnected him from the rest of his family.

In *Bone Black*, bell hooks explores her girlhood journey of becoming a writer. She explores the ways in which she was tormented by her family, and her struggle to read and write without the fear of being punished. She presents her story as a quilt, jumping back and forth through time and space, recalling events in a way that is non-chronological. In this way, she encourages the reader to think about memoir differently, recognizing that the ways in which we use dreams and fantasies to create the self is part of the realm of what is real. She reflects on how she experienced race growing up in the South, and the pain that she felt in finding a place of belonging. Ultimately she seeks refuge in her interior, which she refers to as the “bone black inner cave” where she is making a world for herself.

In *Wounds of Passion*, the sequel to *Bone Black*, hooks explores her journey of becoming a writer, taking us through her academic schooling and her relationship with her boyfriend, Mack, who was both a figure of inspiration and cause of pain as she forged her way. She again employs the technique of a quilt to document the spirit of her writing life, rather than providing all the details that certain readers may desire to get the “scoop” on bell hooks (xx). hooks revisits memories that are sexual and violent in nature, and in so doing, explores the ways in which reading and sexuality are intimately linked in her mind. Her story of becoming a self-actualized writer takes place in an era in which, according to hooks, the main event of a young woman’s coming of age was marriage-- the reality for girls born in the fifties and years before (ix). Her memoir is inherently political in her dealings with race, gender, and class through academia and the world of publishing.

Revealing the Personal

It has been difficult to reveal the personal on paper. Much of my fear stems from the possibility of being rejected by my peers who share progressive political leanings of which I have been critical, in looking back on my undergraduate and graduate years. In *Talking Back*, hooks explores the connection between speaking up and being punished:

In the world of the southern black community I grew up in, “back talk” and “talking back” meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion...To make yourself heard if you were a child was to invite punishment. (5)

While it was hard at first to relate to this notion that if I spoke my truth I would be punished, on some level I did possess this fear, even if it was harder to detect because it existed more on an unconscious level. Nonetheless, I was afraid that I would be punished if I voiced my opinion about my politics, my race, and my identity. I worried that taking a stand would make me unpopular, or worse, inconsistent – presenting a discrepancy between my actions and beliefs as I explore them on paper. But what I have learned is that expressing my beliefs forces me to take a stand and to be consistent, as I have stopped volunteering for the mixed race organization I used to really believe in. And, when it comes to UC Berkeley friends who used to view whiteness in an absolutist way, I now realize that their beliefs may have changed, as political identity is not static.

Not knowing what they believe, I'm able to let go of my need to please them, and seek their approval.

Yet I still feel squeamish about writing about my life, because in doing so, I am writing about the lives of others. In her essay, "Whose Truth? Going Public With Your Own Life and Who Knows Who Else's," Phyllis Rose writes:

The problem with writing about your own life is that there's no way to do it without writing about other people's lives, and however tangentially you include other people, you take something from them...their opportunity for self-representation. (36)

Rose argues that writing autobiographically is no harmless endeavor, as it necessarily takes something from the people who are being portrayed. I can relate to this idea in the uneasiness that I felt writing about Gabriel, as a part of me believed that I was exploiting his life, using it for my own academic and artistic purposes. Rose talks about this idea of stealing: "The memoirist is also a thief, for you cannot write about someone else, however briefly, however sympathetically, without stealing a little bit of their self-determination" (36). I would agree that memoir takes something from the people who are portrayed; for example, seeing myself through the eyes of another would change the way in which I viewed myself, and perhaps take away from my "self-determination." I suppose this consequence of memoir writing cannot be avoided, as it is a necessary expense incurred by those who are written about. Thus, it is no simple task to explain your rationale for writing about other people's lives.

Rodriguez admits that his parents did not understand why he needed to write about their lives. They called this kind of public disclosure “cheap,” and his mother wrote him a letter begging that he instead write about more impersonal topics. But, Rodriguez writes that there are things so deeply personal that they can only be revealed to strangers. While this is only part of his explanation for writing, it touches on the idea that there is indeed a place for the personal in public life, and helps to reaffirm my own desire to tell my story.

While revealing the personal can elicit harsh responses from family members, equally harsh judgment can come from the public. When writing is personal, this judgment can be even more painful. hooks talks about how disclosing intimate details of her life created a certain kind of resistance. While in previous works she had said very little about Gloria Jean, *Talking Back* was different. She writes:

In the other two books I had not said very much about myself—about Gloria Jean....Even when people would write stuff about me, things that were sometimes just not true, I had no urge to explain. But in this book I was doing things differently—and what was slowing me down had to do with disclosure, with what it means to reveal personal stuff. (1)

I am not sure how exactly I have gotten around this kind of resistance that comes from writing about my personal life. While I can see the ways that a penname can function to create needed distance between the writer and the work, this strategy has not

been applicable to me given the nature of this project. Although I cannot apply her strategy, hooks' discussion of her use of a penname still helps me. hooks writes:

Using the pseudonym was a constant reminder that my ideas were expressions of me but they were not the whole picture...To be made continually aware that I was not creating an identity for myself in this work--only sharing ideas—was crucial to my intellectual growth.
(Talking Back 163)

In this way, I aim to share ideas, rather than to create an unchangeable identity that will define me and restrict future growth. Thus, what I have presented has been my attempt to articulate what I have learned about race and identity, and in so doing, move from object to subject. It has been scary and liberating to speak my voice. But the more I exercise it, the easier it becomes. Thus, it is necessary to maintain the habit of speaking up, and to continue to express my ideas through writing. This process, while ultimately liberating, has been difficult, as memoir requires a writer to access her past, which is not always possible.

Reflecting on the Memoir-Writing Process

This project has challenged me to trust the process of writing. Requiring that I write *through* uncertainty, rather than *after* I have gained clarity, I have needed to figure things out as I go. This shift in thinking was difficult for me because I was under the

impression that, being in academia, I needed to already have the answers, and that anything less was unworthy. The same expectations seemed to exist within the genre of memoir. hooks writes: “When I first told everyone around me that I was writing a memoir, the initial response was usually ‘Aren’t you rather young to be doing that?’ A great many people still think that memoirs should be written late in life, in a moment of reflection and response when one is old and retired” (*Remembered Rapture* 88). Throughout my process, the notion that memoir should be written when I am older and have much more experience to draw upon presented itself as a constant psychological roadblock. The idea that I had to have all the answers before I started writing was discouraging, as it meant that I should not be writing otherwise, and discounted the ways that the act of writing can be a process of discovery.

Nonetheless, I did experience a certain amount of clarity, which allowed me to write about my past in a meaningful way. In *Then, Again: The Art of Time in Memoir*, Sven Birkerts writes of how almost overnight, he was able to gain access to the pieces of his past when he entered his late forties: “Quite suddenly, at least in retrospect, my relation to my own past changed... It was as if that past, especially the events and feelings of my younger years, had taken a half step back... These materials had, without losing their animation or their savor, become available to me” (4). I can relate to Birkerts’ sudden access to his past on a smaller level. I remember being stuck with my first chapter, but then discovering the narrative on an afternoon run along Lake Champlain. I held onto this idea of how I would narrate my events until I jogged home and could jot it down. It was like finding gold. But after this realization, the rest of my work has not come together in the same way; in fact, it is waiting for me to put it

together, and I just can't seem to know how to make it work. The more I wait for an answer to come, the longer the piece waits, unfinished. I think there is a balance between being ready to receive the truth, and being ready to create the truth for yourself, having faith that through the process of writing and re-writing, you can come to insights not available to you otherwise. I think this tension exists in memoir writing in general, and not just when the subject matter is race and identity.

On my final paper for her summer memoir class in 2008, UVM Professor Emily Bernard commented that there is a struggle, a wrestling between the writer and the story, each trying to pin the other one down. But the writer must also contemplate her past, acknowledging when she is not yet ready to fight, when she instead needs distance in order to gain perspective, and direction, to devise a strategy. For a long time I was not ready to grapple with my past, as I was still in it. When I was still in Vermont, I could not see the events I had experienced with much, if any, perspective. Returning home to California has at least helped me to gain geographical distance, as has the passing of time since I finished my coursework. In these ways, my relationship to the texts has changed, as I see them differently than I used to.

When I first picked up *Hunger of Memory* four years ago, I was shocked to hear Rodriguez's stances on bilingual education and affirmative action. I questioned why my advisor, Professor Greg Bottoms, had recommended this book to me. But, as I made my way through the text, I was drawn to his story, particularly when it came to his experience with affirmative action. While I will never know how or why I was chosen to receive the Opportunity Fellowship, my interest lies in how receiving this scholarship affected my experience as a UVM graduate student. By sharing his story, in which he

talks about the fact that he is not a “minority” anymore, having gone to good public schools, and assimilating into the dominant culture, he deconstructs the “minority” label. Rodriguez explains that he is no longer a minority in the *cultural* sense—no longer an alien from public life, as was the case with *los pobres*, the men he had encountered during his recent laboring summer. Rodriguez maintains that he was no longer a minority because he was a student -- as the term “minority student,” in his eyes was an oxymoron. He writes: “The reason I was no longer a minority was because I had become a student” (147). While I don’t necessarily agree with all of his political stances, I do find value in the ways in which he discusses personal events in a way that is political, implicating us all. In this way, I have gained a new perspective on my own schooling, and been forced to reconcile my own notions of what it means to be privileged, and the posturing that can occur to gain favor as “disadvantaged.” While I still cling to my belief that race is relevant, and cannot be replaced by class, reading his memoir has given me a better appreciation for the implications of class. This process has been challenging, as I have had to let go of self-affirming myths, and remember that critical thinking is a continuous act that never really stops.

hooks’ memoirs have encouraged me to be more critical about race, to no longer take at face value what others, particularly Gabriel and former CalSERVE party members, used to think about whiteness. In *Wounds of Passion*, hooks talks about growing up in the south, and her ambivalence about race. Learning to see whites as “guilty as charged,” she also expresses the desire to move beyond race and journey to the “heart of the matter” (45, 48). She gives us insight into the ways in which she is conflicted about race as a child, learning to fear whites without knowing what exactly she

fears. hooks writes: “She and the other kids want to understand Race but no one explains it. They learn without understanding that the world is more a home for white folks than it is for anyone else, that black folks who most resemble white folks will live better in the world” (*Bone Black* 31). In this passage she writes in the third person, thereby reflecting on her childhood memories from a distanced point of view. In this way, she mediates her past, offering us a more nuanced perspective than she could have offered as a young girl, while still retaining the unprocessed feelings of confusion that she felt as a child. Birkerts asserts this blending of two time frames—*then* (the many *thens*) and *now*—as characteristic of memoir (6). We look to the past, explaining it as if we were still in it, yet we give a revised understanding from our current vantage point, suggesting that an event’s meaning has changed over time (23).

I have tried this technique of writing in the third person, as it helped to explore painful experiences in that it created distance between myself and the material. Yet, I found it difficult to incorporate these writings into my narratives, as the difference in perspectives seemed to clash rather than provide a kind of dissonance that worked. Although I could not successfully incorporate this perspective in my own writings, I was able to come to insights that writing in the first person did not generate. For instance, I was able to see that there was a deeper-rooted issue behind my desire to write autobiographically, namely that there was a previously rejected self that I was trying to rescue (I explore this theoretical issue with the help of hooks in the next section.). While this self could possibly be rescued by other genres, it seems that the genre of memoir was most helpful, as it allowed me to experiment with different perspectives as I searched for a narrative that made sense of my personal experiences.

Memoir as a Distinct Genre

Memoir is distinct from other genres in the ways in which it employs mediation to interpret the past. In her Foreword to *Bone Black*, hooks writes: “Sometimes memories are presented in the third person, indirectly, just as all of us sometimes talk about things that way. We look back as if we are standing at a distance” (xiv-xv). In this way, hooks draws attention to the ways in which memoirists tell their stories from a remove, narrating from a place that is almost outside of themselves. She talks about her inclusion of the third person narrator in order to not mask this aspect of retrospective reflection, but rather, to give it a voice. Sometimes she uses this third person narrator to distance herself from the pain, but she also uses it to provide both critical insight and an almost psychoanalytic power to illuminate events of the past. She writes: “When we rewrite the past, looking back with our current understanding, a mediation is always taking place” (*Wounds of Passion* xxii). In this way, the act of mediation provides a framework of meaning, while at the same time destabilizes the notion of truth.

Drawing upon Audre Lorde’s memoir, *Zami*, in which she introduces to readers the concept of biomythography, hooks encourages a move away from autobiography as an exact accounting of one’s life. hooks writes: “Encouraging readers to see dreams and fantasies as part of the material we use to invent the self, Lorde invited us to challenge notions of absolute truth. Her insistence that there is no absolute truth when it comes to how we remember the past, that there is fact, and interpretation of fact, has shaped my thinking of autobiography” (*Wounds of Passion* xix). In this way, memoir reasserts the notion of truth, while at the same time embracing the idea that there exist multiple

truths—that there is no one way to remember the past. In writing memoir, this idea has been both liberating and challenging to my process, as it meant that there were many possible versions of my story—each valid—yet I still needed to honor the one that would be most authentic to my present self. The idea that truth is malleable required that I discover and maintain a voice that was dedicated to seeing from a firmly rooted perspective, and spoke to a specific audience.

This firmly rooted perspective reflected a new version of myself that intimates may not recognize. Rodriguez talks about a close friend’s reaction to one of his essays, as she did not believe that the person in writing was *really* him. His friend reacts: “ ‘All that Spanish angst,’ she laughs. ‘It’s not really you.’” Rodriguez responds: “Only someone very close would be tempted to say such a thing—only a person who knows who I am. From such an intimate one must sometimes escape to the company of strangers, to the liberation of the city, in order to form new versions of oneself” (190). In this way, Rodriguez brings up the issue of verisimilitude in that the version of himself that he presents on paper is merely “like” him. As Charles Blackstone writes in his introduction to *The Art of Friction: Where (Non) Fictions Come Together*: “I’ve always stressed, when defining verisimilitude for students, that it’s like life. Like. It’s not life, but it’s damn near close... I like Ernest Hemingway’s bit of advice... Don’t describe the world, make the world” (13). Vivian Gornick recounts a similar story in which a reader is disappointed that she is nothing like the narrator of *Fierce Attachments*, only to admit later that, “ ‘Well, you’re something like her’ ” (7). Gornick explains: “What was desired was the presence of [a person] who existed only between the pages of a book” and that, as an actual person, she could not give satisfaction, as she was just a “rough draft” of the

written character (7). She asserts that this character could not live independently of the story that had called her into life, as she existed for the sole purpose of serving that story. In this way, her argument is in line with Hemingway, as she is not describing herself, but creating a new version of herself.

Memoir presents the opportunity for a writer to create a new version of herself, and in so doing, reclaim a previously rejected, illegitimate self. While I am sure that there are exceptions, I do believe that this characterizes many memoirs, as the chance to put oneself back together again can justify an otherwise invalid self. In *Talking Back*, hooks discusses the idea of killing herself in writing in order to become the “me of me.” She explains that she used to believe that telling the story of her growing up years was intimately connected with the longing to kill the self without really having to die. She wanted to kill the Gloria Jean of her tormented and anguished childhood, the girl who was always wrong, always punished, always subjected to some humiliation or other, always crying. But, in reflecting on the process of telling her story, she realizes that she had not killed the Gloria of her childhood, but rescued her. hooks writes: “She was no longer the enemy within, the little girl who had to be annihilated for the woman to come into being. In writing about her, I reclaimed that part of myself I had long ago rejected, left uncared for, just as she had often felt alone and uncared for as a child” (159). hooks persuades me to believe that, in writing my own memoirs, I am not killing previous selves, but rather I am finding ways in which to reintegrate them. She continues: “Remembering was part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, ‘the bits and pieces of my heart’ that the narrative made whole again” (159). In creating this narrative, the memoirist is able to put herself together again.

Often this effort to understand the fragments of one's past is critiqued as self-absorbed and immature, but Rodriguez maintains that the act of remembering is an act of the present. Challenging his fear that his absorption with events in his past amounted to an "immature refusal to live in the present," Rodriguez writes: "I would tell myself that the act of remembering is an act of the present. (In writing this autobiography, I am actually describing the man I have become—the man in the present)" (175-6). In this way, one is never "stuck" in the past, because one mediates from a perspective that is rooted in the present. Rodriguez continues to explore the benefits of writing to an anonymous reader: "By rendering feelings in words that a stranger can understand—words that belong to the public, this Other—the young diarist no longer feel all alone or eccentric...In turn, the act of revelation helps the writer better understand his own feelings" (187). By expressing intimate feelings to the stranger, the diarist is able to "evade the guilt of repression" and the "embarrassment of solitary feeling"—no longer feeling "alone or eccentric" (187). In this way, a writer is able to transcend her feelings of aloneness by expressing her most intimate feelings to a stranger.

Yet confronting the pain of the past hasn't been easy. I've noticed that I tend to choose noisy cafes rather than quiet libraries to work on this piece. I think that I do this because I am afraid to face the blank page alone, to sit with myself in silence, when it's so much easier to be in the company of others, whose noise and presence I need to distract me. I have struggled with the isolation that writing requires. In this way, I can relate to Rodriguez when he writes: "There have been mornings when I've dreaded the isolation this writing requires. Mornings spent listless in silence and in fear of confronting the blank sheet of paper. There have been times I've rushed away from my

papers to answer the phone” (175). In *Bone Black*, hooks writes that she is drowning in her pain, but is rescued by Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*. She writes: “Like Rilke, [my grandfather] tells me not to be afraid to look deep into everything, not to be afraid even of the pain” (182). It is through exploring her pain that she is able to figure out where she belongs in the world.

While memoir can be therapeutic, hooks reminds us that writing is not therapy. In *Remembered Rapture* she grapples with Toni Morrison’s dislike for the connection made between writing and therapy. In *The Dancing Mind*, Morrison writes: “I have always doubted and disliked the therapeutic claims made on behalf of writing and writers. Writing never made me happy. Writing never made me suffer” (189). She continues to say that, “more than an urge to make sense artfully or to believe it matters,” the craft of writing is about offering the “fruits of my own imaginative intelligence to another” so that the reader could experience that “intimate, sustained surrender to the company of [her] own mind while it touches another’s” (190). hooks admits that Morrison’s description of the commitment to writing resonates with her. Nonetheless, she contends that “Still, I believe that one can have a complete imaginative engagement with writing as craft and still experience it in a manner that is therapeutic; one urge does not diminish the other. However, writing is not therapy. Unlike therapy, where anything may be spoken in any manner, the very notion of craft suggests that the writer must necessarily edit, shape, and play with words in a manner that is always subordinated to desired intent and effect” (14). hooks argues that, while writing can have therapeutic benefits, it is distinct from therapy simply by the mere mention of craft, which suggests that the writing must take on a form to serve a specific function.

In *Then, Again: The Art of Time in Memoir*, Birkerts makes a distinction between therapy and memoir, namely that therapy is private whereas memoir is public, and reaches out to an unknown reader. Thus, the insights of memoir must resonate with the disinterested reader in order for the work to be successful. He writes: “The work of therapy is private, and its goals of understanding and integration are not projected into the imagined public space of literature. They remain particular to the individual. The memoirist, by contrast, deploys many of the same energies of self-interrogation but does so with the goal of discovering a narrative that will make sense, not just as explanation, but also as dramatization, to a would-be reader” (22). He explains: “The act of storytelling—even if the story is an account of psychological self-realization—is by its very nature an attempt at universalizing the specific; it assumes there is a shared ground between the teller and the audience” (22-23). Birkerts reminds us that storytelling is only successful when the gap between public and private is bridged. He asserts that there is no case for the claim of navel-gazing when memoirs are relatable to the disinterested reader, making the particular universal.

Reflecting on Audience

In exploring the question of audience, I have come across a variety of answers. In the *The Art of Friction: Where (Non) Fictions Come Together*, Charles Blackstone asks: “For whom does anybody writing any sort of narrative write that narrative? Likely the answer we’d hear from the writers in this collection would be ‘I wrote this for people who read these sorts of narratives, people that get this, and the hell with everyone else,’

and I think that's a good answer. One piece of writing, or one novel, or one memoir, or one stage play, is not for everyone" (15). Rodriguez attests to this specificity more than he admits: "I write today for a reader who exists in my mind only phantasmagorically. Someone with a face erased; someone of no particular race or sex or age or weather...All that I know about him is that he has had a long education and that his society, like mine, is often public (*un gringo*)" (182). In this way, Rodriguez's reader is *supposedly* unparticular, except when it comes to his class, as he is educated and assimilated into mainstream culture. He seems to be writing for someone like himself (gender as male implied) — who "reads these sorts of narratives" and "gets it."

Another conception of audience would be that of hooks, who takes a feminist perspective as she writes in order to share necessary information with young women writers who are struggling to find their way. She writes:

Despite the success of feminist movement in challenging sexist assumptions about women and writing, the vast majority of females hoping to become writers still struggle with issues of creating necessary self-esteem, finding time, and cultivating trust that there will be an audience for their work...From a feminist standpoint understanding the process by which diverse women writers make their way is necessary information. (*Wounds of Passion* xxi-xxii)

In this way she explains both her purpose and who she hopes to reach. Taking a feminist standpoint, she is urged to share this needed information with younger versions of herself.

In the same way that hooks and Rodriguez write for folks who are like themselves, my intended audience was a younger version of myself. In *Memory and Narrative*, James Olney introduces the idea of writing intellectual memoirs for the “educational benefit of the young” (xv). This “education” does not necessarily take place when characters of color exist on the page, but rather, when these characters of color are critical thinkers (*Bone Black* xii). This younger version of myself is the nineteen year-old girl who struggled to make sense of her identity, who always looked to others rather than herself for answers, and how this outward gaze led her astray. While I have been critical of the mixed-race movement, in which we are encouraged to naively embrace all sides of ourselves -- I do want to empower young people to forge an identity that is authentic. A greater number of mixed race narratives need to exist in order to share the ways in which others have “owned” their lives and experiences.

bell hooks talks about how affirming it was to read Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, not because she made black girls center stage, but because she gave us black girls who were “confronting issues of class, race, identity, girls who were struggling to confront and cope with pain. And most of all she gave us black girls who were critical thinkers, theorizing their lives, telling the story, and by so doing making themselves subjects of history” (*Bone Black* xii). In these ways, Morrison gives us girls who are reclaiming their agencies. hooks talks about how awesomely affirming it was to read *The Bluest Eye* when she was a young girl, that it shook her to the roots of her being, and that

she would never be the same. Reading the fictional narrative, she recognized fragments of her story—her girlhood. Similarly, Rodriguez attests to the first time that he saw himself in the scholarship boy's story. He writes: "Then one day, leafing through Richard Hogart's *The Uses of Literacy*, I found, in his description of the scholarship boy, myself. For the first time I realized that there were other students like me, and so I was able to frame the meaning of my academic success, its consequent price—the loss (46). In the same way, I have recognized parts of my own story in reading the memoirs of hooks and Rodriguez, and they have changed the ways in which I see myself, specifically with regard to race and identity. Yet it was Rebecca Walker's article, "Pale as I am," and her autobiography, *Black White and Jewish*, which spoke directly to my desire to understand how whiteness and privilege factor into my self-identity.

Whiteness and Privilege

In *Black White and Jewish*, Rebecca Walker writes about what whiteness *feels* like, in response to her lover, who asks her one night what it feels like to have white inside of her. Walker is at first thrown by the question, but then quickly begins to ask questions of her own, namely: "What is whiteness? And how can one 'feel white' when race is just about the biggest cultural construct there is?" (305). Her lover then insists that she operate from inside race, rather than deconstruct the question, and just to "let herself go." Walker then responds that the only time she "feels white" is when black people see something in her that they do not want to own themselves, and so label it "white." She also says that she "feels white" when she physically compares herself to

darker people and finds herself lacking in the richness of her skin color or the “womanly” shape that she associates with abundance and blackness. These textual moments struck me, as they helped me to realize how ridiculous it is to talk about “feeling white,” even though sometimes I do operate in this mindset, of “letting myself go” and speaking from within race rather than outside of it. In this way, it’s difficult to strike a balance between deconstructing race, but also recognizing it as real.

Walker continues to say that, unlike a stomachache or a burn, whiteness is not something that she can feel in her body. While she admits that she carries with her a constant sense of “not black” in certain areas, and wishes she had more of it, she challenges the stability of race and its ability to yield separate groupings, such as “your people” versus “my people,” knowing that this kind of thinking is dangerously divisive, and dismissive of a larger sense of humanity that we all share, namely that we all suffer, regardless of our race. Walker writes that she can identify with other beings who suffer, “whether they are [her] own, whatever that means, or not” (307). She feels an instant affinity with the legacy of slavery and discrimination in this country, but also with the legacy of anti-Jewish sentiment and exclusion, and likewise with the internment of Japanese Americans during World War Two. In reframing the issue in light of historical suffering, she calls our attention to how memory works, namely that it calls on cultural and personal narratives that we’ve inherited or devised, and in some ways this surrendering to a larger framing takes away a certain freedom that we have to define ourselves.

She writes: “What do we become when we put down the scripts written by history and memory, when each person before us can be seen free of cultural or personal

narrative we've inherited or devised? When we, ourselves, can taste that freedom?" (307). This idea of putting down the scripts is powerful. It reminds me of my own surrender to ideas of whiteness that were part of a larger cultural and historical narrative that I adopted and applied to my own self-identity. The strength with which we hold onto these memories speaks to the difficulty in stepping outside of our constructed stories. It speaks to the power of stories to shape meaning in our daily lives, to provide us with a structured way of seeing, and it's hard to break out of them. Perhaps stories are so powerful because we construct them without even knowing that we are, so they seem to exist as true and given, and not as manmade, which necessarily has a specific point of view and bias. In Walker's point of view, race is real yet imaginary, and her narrative seems to reflect this duality, as it illustrates her experience, yet at the same time undercuts it. That to me is the power of the story- how it can at the same time create and critique, and the more narratives we have, the richer our understanding of others and ourselves will be.

In reading "Pale as I Am," I see myself in the narrative, and can relate to Walker's struggle with light skin privilege. In her narrative, Walker writes about how when she was 18 or 19, her dark-skinned mother told her that she would always be treated better than her because of her lighter skin; this thought "haunted and horrified" Walker because it implicated her in the "horror of racism" (not to mention the disillusionment in being treated better than her own mother). But what she has learned from many years of guilt and mental anguish is that it is not she who is guilty of the prejudging, but the ones who actually engage in this behavior. Walker writes:

I also now hold the consciousness that sometimes I will be treated better than people I love because of the lightness of my skin, but this makes the person doing the privileging the perpetrator of pain, not me. This understanding both soothes and propels me. Because of it, I am even more vigilant in my insistence that all people be treated equally. (15)

Although I find Walker's decision to act through her ambivalence to be courageous, when I first read her article, I was wary of the argument she was making. I felt suspicious of her attempts to distance herself from her white skin privilege. I thought instead that she should "own up to it," and accept its implications. Reading the piece now, I can better understand and appreciate her argument. Her argument seems to be that, while she recognizes that she is implicated in white skin privilege, it is not she who is guilty of prejudging others, but rather those who are actually engaging in this behavior. Her piece has helped me realize the extent to which I used to believe the narrative that I was "guilty as charged" because of my skin color, and there was nothing I could do about it. Now I realize that I don't have to feel guilty, and that this guilt is a useless emotion, anyway. Rather, I believe it's more productive to accept my white privilege and decide how I wish to work through it, rather than allowing it to define me.

What I have learned is that privilege, like identity and race, is fluid and constantly changing, so it is much less a defining term as it is a place to start. Depending on the context, a person's privilege is constantly operating differently, as some doors are being opened, while others are being closed. Although this may be an overly simplistic way of looking at privilege, it helps me to visualize and deconstruct it,

in order to better understand it, so that I don't give it more power than it deserves. When I was an undergraduate and graduate student alike, I had incredibly narrow views about what privilege meant, and I was more concerned with resisting the label than I was with understanding it. This was harmful to me, as I gave the nebulous label undue power to define me. I feared the unknown, and the label also likely stunted my growth: I felt that I could not change my identity, as I was "stuck" in whiteness. The ways in which I initially reacted to Walker's article reflect the insular views I held about white privilege.

I used to think that if I had light skin and could "pass" as white, then I was white, and that was the end of it. This was an incredibly simplistic, limited way of seeing myself, and race in general. Now I can better see that I exist on a continuum, as my skin is light, but not necessarily white—more like white with a tinge of yellow. I may still not feel at home in it, but I think a healthy dose of Walker's levity, which she illustrates through: "I know that one day soon I will feel completely at home in my natural unsunned state. Until then, well, pass the coconut oil!" would be helpful to adopt when thinking about my own discomfort with my skin color. Even though I am still in the beginning stages of accepting my white skin privilege, her tone encourages me to keep pushing forward.

I think the best way to push forward is to insist that all people be treated equally—by "talking back." In *Talking Back*, hooks writes: "Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back,' that is no mere gesture of

empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice” (9). In this way, hooks asserts that it is no empty gesture to reclaim one’s voice, that this movement from object to subject is characteristic of liberation. While it may seem strange to draw parallels between “talking back” and taking ownership of privilege, hooks’ quote reminds me of the liberation that is felt when I decide to accept my privilege, rather than deny it. Taking ownership of it inherently feels different, as I am able to define it for myself, namely a moving about in the world with a certain kind of ease, a lack of resistance, and an increased sense of affirmation and acceptance, and the luxury of not needing to speak up, as the dominant culture already has my needs in mind. By being honest about what privilege entails and how I benefit from it, I feel my voice liberated, and that I am acting as more of a subject than an object.

Conclusion

After reading *Bone Black* and *Wounds of Passion*, in which hooks makes mention of the ways in which she was inspired by Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*, I felt compelled to pick up the text myself. Rilke urges us to embrace our uncertainties and to not preoccupy ourselves with the quest for answers. He writes:

You are so young, so much before all beginning, and I would like to beg you, dear sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were

locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. (34-35)

This passage speaks to my struggle to accept uncertainty. Throughout the process of completing this project, I have been impatient in my search to discover the answers to my questions about race and identity. This impatience has only made my job harder, as my stubbornness for perfection and certainty became a roadblock in my exploration. I continually wanted to force the truth onto the page, believing that I could will myself to figuring out what I did not know before. I have been encouraged to realize that I cannot control the outcome of my pursuit towards knowledge. Rather, it is a process that takes time, research, contemplation, and an openness to revising my questions along the way. Before I can come to answers, I must be willing to live with and write through a certain amount of doubt.

The University of Vermont gave me the opportunity to work through this doubt. The ALANA community helped to reaffirm that what I had to offer was valuable. From the moment I met her, the ALANA Center Director, Beverly Colston, became a source of strength as I learned how to navigate a new university and graduate program. Echoing bell hooks, she reminded me that we needed more counter narratives. hooks tells us that: "Not enough is known about the experience of black girls in our society" (*Bone Black* xii). Colston reiterated that there needed to be more stories about the varied, mixed-race experience. Through the ALANA community I had the opportunity to meet Professor Rashad Shabazz, who asked me if I was going to share my story and create a cultural

document for future generations, or if I was going to keep my insights to myself. By posing this question he encouraged me to recognize that I have an ethical responsibility to document my experiences. He gave me faith that my writing would have an audience, which gave me a greater sense of purpose in completing my project.

In my graduate studies my advisors helped me to see the value in sharing my story. In the English Department, Professor Greg Bottoms encouraged me to bring my personal self to bear in an intimate way, and showed me how to appreciate the ways in which memoir challenges our assumptions of what it means to write in a way that is creative and critical. I was able to pursue the genre of memoir in several encouraging settings, such as Professor Greg Bottoms' class "Autobiography and Critique," Emily Bernard's "Expository Writing," and Professor Robert Nash's seminar, "Scholarly Personal Narrative." Professor Robert Nash helped me to think about the ways in which engaging in discussion is an ethical matter by reading his article "Moral Conversations," and I had the chance to put this into practice in his writing seminar in the Graduate Program of Interdisciplinary Studies. Professor Sarah Turner helped me to be more generous as she mentored me as a Graduate Student Instructor, encouraging me to share my insights with my students, and believe that what I had to offer them was valuable. In this way, she helped me to practice speaking my voice. I am grateful for the support I have received from my advisors, and for the chance to share my story with the rest of the UVM community.

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