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A Sage on Two Stages: What a Black Academic Taught a White Scholar About Cross-Cultural Mentoring

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The most recent edition of Dr. Charles V. Willie and Dr. Richard J. Reddick's *A New Look at Black Families*, *Sixth Edition* included a new chapter focused on President Obama, his family, and his life as a leader and mentor to his fellow Americans (Willie & Reddick, 2010). Dr. Willie's and Dr. Reddick's (2010) book—in addition to a quasi-admiration for President Obama—inspired me to learn more about the Black community and become a better White supporter of all people of Color. While I was exploring doctoral programs, Dr. Reddick's scholarship had firmly pinned The University of Texas at (UT) Austin on my proverbial academic map. A few years later, the time was right to apply to UT Austin and write a personal statement urging the admissions committee to allow me to work with Dr. Reddick. When I arrived at the College of Education on UT Austin's campus, I was escorted to Dr. Reddick's office where I first saw Dr. Reddick. He introduced himself as Rich, and since then, he has been an exemplary mentor.

In late spring and fall of 2018, I attended two events on UT Austin's campus, both of which involved Rich's participation and contribution. These two events had such a profound impact on me that I decided to write the very manuscript you are reading. Ultimately, my recollection of these two events may be instructive for White allies developing their ability to support communities of Color. I am a White man and Rich is a Black man, and I will discuss our races openly and critically. While Rich has never owed me anything, he has nonetheless provided a series of incredible experiences that has made me a better supporter in the struggle that people of Color face in the United States. If doctoral programs truly are mechanisms for teaching students how to think, the words that follow may serve witness.

Method

In an effort to remove myself from the third-person comfort zone of traditional academic writing, I chose to write this manuscript blending autoethnography and personal narrative, drawn from the works of multiple scholars.

This manuscript loosely follows closely the guidance for writing personal narratives forwarded by Stivers (1993) and Nash (2004). Stivers (1993) wrote, "There is no such thing as removing the observer from the knowledge acquisition process, since to do so would be like trying to see without eyes" (p. 410). In this sense, I sought to convey my own knowledge acquisition process through the telling of a personal narrative, wholly understanding that my own knowledge and experiences are biased and subjective. Furthermore, Stivers (1993) asserted that "It is difficult - maybe impossible - to draw the kind of hard and fast line between a 'fact' and an 'interpretation' that efforts to distinguish 'history' from 'literature' sometimes imply" (p. 410) and being aware of the subjective nature of knowledge acquisition "do mean that there is no such thing as Truth, in the sense of knowledge that transcends the definitions, values, and rules of any or all specific knowledge" (p. 411). In telling my own personal narratives, I acknowledge that any knowledge I disseminate and experiences I convey are my own and represent my own form of Truth, and that this Truth may be instructive for some and less so for others.

Nash (2004) argued that scholarly personal narratives should articulate clear constructs or themes, understanding that personal narratives should be instructive and educational. As a result, both personal narratives I share are connected by three themes which are both illustrative of my experiences and instructive for my audience. Moreover, Nash (2004) argued that personal narratives ought to embrace honesty, vulnerability, and creativity to vividly convey one's experiences. The use of a personal narrative allowed me to write with honesty and vulnerability to creatively share my experiences.

Similarly, autoethnography is a form of qualitative research that seeks to employ detailed self-reflection on personal experiences to make connections to the issues relevant to one's society writ large (Holt, 2003; Wall, 2006). Wall (2006) argued that autoethnography:

> ...is accomplished through the use of personal writing and reflection, the stories of others (gathered through a series of highly interactive and even therapeutic interviews with individuals and groups), personal poetry, and an understanding of the relevant literature (especially knowledge of the gaps in the literature that can be answered only through personally focused inquiry). (p. 151)

Although my own autoethnography will not include creative works of fiction, this work does contain self-reflection and an articulation of lessons learned. Here is where my work will blend the personal narrative and autoethnography.

Similarly, Holt (2003) explained that autoethnographic research ought to be judged by a number of criteria meant to ensure high-quality writing, and thus, a high quality of shared knowledge and experiences. Of these criteria, Holt (2003) reasoned that the piece should contribute to our understanding of social life, and the text should be artistically shaped, satisfyingly complex, and not boring. I do believe that my authoethnographic approach to personal narratives in a cross-cultural mentoring context is illustrative of my lived experiences, is told with a creative flair, and may provoke emotional and/or intellectual affect.

The First Stage: Alumni College and a Room of Whiteness

Held partially inside the Etter-Harbin Alumni Center on UT Austin's campus, the annual Texas Exes Alumni College bills itself as "a campus learning experience that lets you soak in the best of The University of Texas" (Texas Exes, 2019, para. 1). Rich had informed me that he was speaking at this particular event, and I jumped at the opportunity to attend. The day of the event, I approached the Alumni Center and admired a statue of the man giving the "Hook 'Em" sign and smiling. There was a family of five clad in burnt orange behind the statue, having their picture taken by someone else wearing burnt orange and telling them to "Hook 'Em." The Alumni Center had a statue demonstrating how to "Hook 'Em."

I met with a friend and we found the room, which was filled with rows of seats and circular tables near the rear. There were perhaps 100 burnt orange acolytes performing any number of Texas Longhorn themed rituals: flashing "Hook 'Em," telling stories that start with "When I lived in Jester…," and always introducing oneself with one's year of graduation and academic major (e.g., "Jane Smith, '82, engineering"). Eventually, Rich made his way through the throng of Longhorns and took his place on stage. A massive projection display appeared behind him with "DR. RICHARD J. REDDICK" emblazoned on the screen. When Rich took his seat, everyone else followed suit while a

shorter White woman took the podium and said, "Ya'll find your seats now" with typical Texan flair. I was sitting at a table with two people of Color—fellow graduate students—and I saw Rich sitting on stage. I quickly scanned the room. Those three people of Color, at that moment, were the only three people of Color in the room. Out of the hundred Texas Longhorns in attendance, Rich was the only alumni of Color I saw.

In my Ph.D. program, there are many more students of Color than I had encountered in previous programs. In my cohort, over 50% of the students are students of Color. This statistic was part of what sold me on attending UT Austin: I held the perception that my particular program was committed to serve students of Color. The Alumni College reminded me that UT Austin's alumni base is overwhelmingly White, even though the state of Texas has continued to diversify along racial lines. Having experienced many cross-racial relationships and interactions while at UT Austin, I had completely forgotten about how White UT Austin's history actually was.

My urge to blame then somehow converted itself to feelings of intense admiration for what Rich was doing. I assumed he knew that he would be speaking in a predominantly White space to an audience of people who were never denied the right to earn a degree based on their skin Color. White folks have always been welcomed at UT Austin, whereas people of Color have historically been minoritized. To date, Blacks and African-Americans are still woefully underrepresented as students at UT Austin, which has made me all the more impressed and inspired by Rich. Yet on stage was a man who had earned admission to the state flagship institution, gained entry to one of the most prestigious honors programs in the United States (Plan II), graduated from the institution, earned a doctorate from perhaps the most prestigious university in the world (Harvard), and still possessed the humility and charity to speak in front of a group of people who had not encountered the hurdles that he had. Initially, seeing the racial demographic of the audience at Alumni College made me wonder: Why would Rich agree to speak here?

In the moment, I thought that it was possible for Rich's school pride to overcome any hesitation. Perhaps being a Longhorn and a faculty member at his alma mater gave Rich a certain level of comfort in this space. Then, my thoughts turned back to the audience and the fact that Rich had been navigating predominantly White spaces for his entire life. Perhaps, I thought, Rich had simply become accustomed to speaking to White people and did not think about race when speaking at Alumni College.

Months later, a colleague of mine introduced me to the concept of a possibility model. I learned that the creation of the term possibility model may have been originally attributed to Laverne Cox, a Black transgender actress and activist who rejected the term role model and preferred to refer to herself as a "possibility model" (Daily Mail, 2018, para. 3) for other people seeking representation and inspiration. Later, transgender writer and activist Janet Mock expanded on the term "possibility model" by explaining that it refers to "someone who reveals one possible way of being human in this world to you," whereas the term "role model" signifies modeling how one *should* live one's life (Point Foundation, 2017, para. 2).

Looking back on Alumni College, I saw Rich as a possibility model. Rich represents one (very unique) way of being human in this world, as he is one of very few Black faculty members at UT Austin or across the U.S. postsecondary professoriate. Recent estimates suggest that between six and eight percent of faculty members at U.S. postsecondary institutions are Black or Hispanic, even though Blacks and Hispanics comprise nearly 20% of the U.S. population (House, 2017).

Considering these statistics, as sobering as they are, and then reflecting back on Alumni College, I understand that what I was witnessing was incredibly unique in the contexts of U.S. higher education. Not only was Rich a possibility model for young Black kids across the country, he had also positioned himself as a possibility model for White people. Yes, a Black man can earn a college degree from UT, a doctorate from Harvard, and tenure at one of the most prestigious public institutions in the country. However, the phenomenon of cultural taxation was a concept that often and unfairly minoritizes faculty of college on college campuses (Padilla, 1994).

Adjacently, before I arrived on UT Austin's campus, I had never heard of cultural taxation. I was ashamed of my ignorance, but I had tried to make up for lost time by reading Caroline Turner, Tiffany Joseph, and of course, Rich Reddick. Padilla (1994) introduced the concept of cultural taxation in the following way:

> One of my other concerns—which is just as great as the biases about what constitutes acceptable research and publication outlets—has to do with what I will refer to here as the "cultural taxation" that is so prevalent in academia and in organizations that employ ethnic scholars. This "taxation" poses a significant dilemma for ethnic scholars because we frequently find ourselves having to respond to situations that are imposed on us by the administration, which assumes that we are best suited for specific tasks because of our race/ethnicity or our presumed knowledge of cultural differences. (p. 26)

Elaborating on Padilla (1994), Shavers, Butler, and Moore (2014) addressed the phenomenon of cultural taxation as it applies to Black faculty members (such as Rich):

> Black academicians, in particular, are often expected to engage in service activities that are not expected of their White counterparts. Additionally, they are presumed to mentor African American students, serve on diversity committees, and participate in other service activities that need diverse representation. (p. 41)

I had viewed Rich's speaking engagement at Alumni College as another cultural tax. This realization was sobering for me, as there had been moments in the past where I needed to ask Rich a question but was fearful that I would consume his time. I did not want Rich to pay a cultural tax, but I had mistakenly (naively) viewed my mentoring relationship with Rich as cultural taxation. I am still working through my feelings and perception of this issue, but I have come to learn that mentorship may not be cultural taxation. Instead, a cross-racial mentoring relationship may be an opportunity for members of two different races to learn from each other and grow intellectually and emotionally. It has taken me years of reflection to arrive at this conclusion and cease feeling guilty for communicating with Rich.

Also, my presence at Alumni College was not directly levying a cultural tax on Rich. Instead, I was participating in an academic event and learning more about cross-cultural and cross-racial communication from an exemplary speaker. Realizing that it could be beneficial for more people to have these cross-racial experiences, I have since taken a more active approach in promoting and attending events where Rich or another Black academic is imparting wisdom. As our country rapidly diversifies, leaders of U.S. higher education—of all races—must provide opportunities for academics of Color to share their experiences, especially with predominantly White audiences. I have personally learned a considerable amount about the experiences of people of Color by listening. Subsequently, I

have tried to ease the burden of cultural taxation by seeking opportunities to learn from faculty of Color, including attending events such as Alumni College.

When Rich took the stage, I felt the need to put my notebook away and dedicate my full attention. Wilken (2013) described this feeling as a desire to pay analytic and holistic attention. For Wilken (2013), the attention one pays to a particular person, event, or task can shape the emotions that individuals experience. Wilken (2013) explained:

> Individuals with an analytic attentional style pay more attention to focal objects and less attention to the surrounding context. On the other hand, individuals with a holistic attentional style pay more attention to the context and the relationship between focal objects and the context" (p. 7).

Wilken (2013) also asserted that one's emotions can be influenced—both positively and negatively—depending on the type of attention one is paying.

In terms of analytic attention, I had already taken note of the grandeur of the Alumni Center, the abundance of White alumni, and the lack of representation of people of Color. However, if I had split my attention by taking descriptive notes and writing down potential research topics, I may have missed an important detail. By paying holistic attention and opting not to take notes (as is common in the qualitative tradition), I allowed myself to fully experience the event. Here, a critical finding of this personal narrative emerges: the necessity for researchers to pay both analytic and holistic attention during events or in spaces that will likely evoke feeling.

During the address, Rich spoke about broad topics important to the system of higher education in the United States, including declining state appropriations and the underrepresentation of students of Color and low-income students on college campuses across the country. When Rich spoke of these issues, many of the alumni in the room shook their heads in disbelief. I overheard one man to say another person, "When I was here, tuition was a hundred dollars." I couldn't help but be reminded that I was living in the world of higher education, while Rich knew that many people outside of higher education don't think to look under the hood and see why the engine is burning so much oil. The brilliance of Rich's lecture was in its simplicity and relevance, which is a lesson I will take with me wherever I go.

When Rich concluded, the moderator of the event informed the audience that there would be time for questions and answers. Immediately, several White hands flew into the air. As I expected, many of these questions were personal opinions masquerading as inquiries, and Rich did a fine job of informing their perspectives without condescension. In fact, one of the White men stood and bluntly said, "I don't think college is for everyone." The irony was not lost, as I heard a few laughs from the back of the room. A prestigious degree was fitting for this man, but of course, college might not be for everyone.

When the Q&A concluded, the alumni scattered. Eventually, Rich made it a point to greet me and the other students to thank us for coming. I had nothing intelligent to say, so I shook his hand and continued to think. It was similar to seeing your favorite band, and then the lead singer pulls the setlist from the stage and hands it to you. I felt privileged that Rich even knew my name, and here he was, thanking me. It is a humbling feeling that has persisted for over three years.

Upon leaving, I was re-immersed in burnt orange and "Hook 'Ems" as I crossed San Jacinto and returned to my car. I-35 was jammed on the way home, and when I-35 is jammed, I usually take voice memos. I pulled out my phone and began to speak. Just ahead of me was a massive silver Chevy Suburban with a "TEXAS EXES LIFE MEMBER" license plate holder and two little burnt orange Longhorns pasted onto its rear window. Loud and proud. I heard the ping of the microphone activating, and I said to myself, "You should write something about Rich and Alumni College."

The Second Stage: The Precursors and Predominant Blackness

In 1885, UT Austin rejected an African-American applicant because of the Color of his skin (The University of Texas at Austin, 2016). Over a half a century later, Heman Sweatt sought admission to UT Austin's Law School and was denied for the same reason. The year was 1946, Heman was African-American, and no African-Americans had been ever been admitted to UT Austin's Law School. Heman fought the school's decision, took his case to the Supreme Court, and eventually won, helping overturn the regrettable *Plessy v. Ferguson* (The University of Texas at Austin, 2013).

The direct beneficiaries of Heman Sweatt's journey are the Precursors, a group of African-American alumni who were among the first to attend and integrate UT Austin in the 1960s. In 2017, the UT Press published *As We Saw It: The Story of Integration at the University of Texas at Austin*, chronicling the stories of the Precursors and their on- and off-campus experiences during the Civil Rights Era. In Fall 2018, the Precursors, along with UT Austin's Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, held an event to "Celebrate 1968" and Black alumni during a homecoming weekend. Rich was invited to sit on a panel with the Precursors featured in *As We Saw It*.

During Rich's advisee retreat in late summer of 2018, he mentioned the upcoming "Celebrate 1968" panel discussion. As soon as I learned of the event, I made an honest attempt at promoting it through word of mouth and over email. As I mentioned in the first part of this personal narrative, seeing Rich speak at Alumni College compelled me to take a more active approach in promoting and attending events featuring academics of Color. The "Celebrate 1968" event felt like the perfect opportunity. Had I not learned of the "Celebrate 1968" event and Rich's involvement, I may have never explored UT Austin's history. and experienced a deeper sense of appreciation and gratitude for what Heman Sweatt and the Precursors did for higher education in Texas and beyond.

The day of the "Celebrate 1968" event was rainy and overcast. The event was to be held at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs in its Bass Lecture Hall. Stubbornly, I wore shorts and a t-shirt, as the Texas summer hadn't quite tapped out yet. Serendipitously, the rain let up on my walk to the venue. Also, serendipitously, my path toward the venue passed the Martin Luther King, Jr. statue. Along with the Barbara Jordan's likeness near the Texas Union, the MLK statue was one of the lone statues still standing on the UT Austin campus. One year earlier, UT Austin President Greg Fenves ordered the removal of three statues from UT Austin's campus—Robert E. Lee, Albert Sidney Johnston and John Reagan. Fenves reasoned that the statues were being removed because they represented parts of U.S. history that "run counter to the university's core values" (as quoted in Watkins, 2017, para. 2). Fenves later elaborated on this rationale, arguing that "We do not choose our history, but we choose what we honor and celebrate on our campus" (Watkins, 2017, para. 3).

Passing the MLK statue reminded me of what was being celebrated at the LBJ School on that particular day. 1968 was not that long ago; for a frame of reference, Simon and Garfunkel, The Beatles,

Diana Ross, and Herb Alpert all had singles on the Billboard Hot 100 Chart that year (Billboard, 2019), and Bob Dylan was touring the country on the success of his 1967 album, *John Wesley Harding*. At the time of "Celebrate 1968," both Simon and Garfunkel were still strumming their Martins, two Beatles were still touring and selling out stadiums, Diana Ross scored a number one single on the Billboard Top Dance Chart in August 2018, and Herb Alpert had just released a best-selling Christmas album featuring his trademark Tijuana brass sound. As The Beatles might put it, 1968 was practically yesterday.

I climbed the slanted sidewalk running alongside the stadium and began to see several dapper-looking Black folks. The men were dressed in suits and the women wore floral dresses or quasi-evening gowns that would have fit right in at a wedding or a Sunday sermon. Seeing how formally the Black attendees had dressed made me realize how disrespectful my clothing was. I had known that "Celebrate 1968" was a celebration (as evident in its name), but I hadn't thought to dress as if I was celebrating anything. For that, I was ashamed of myself—I will never make that mistake again. Yet, continuing in the day's theme of serendipity, I saw a familiar face in the LBJ School parking lot: Rich was entering the building just as I was arriving.

"Hey man!" I exclaimed with a smile.

"Oh, what's up, man?" Rich replied. By year two of our interactions, he was no longer Dr. Reddick. He had become Rich, and our greetings had informalized to the point of "what's ups" and "hey mans."

"You look sharp, like you're ready to moderate some panel or something," I joked nervously, drawing attention to our contrasting wardrobe decisions.

"Man, this jacket is hotter than hell," he replied. "You made a good choice with those shorts."

His words made me feel less stupid for failing to recognize the formality of the event and the respect that I should have paid. We walked in together, and I followed him downstairs and toward the Bass Lecture Hall. Filling each corridor of the building were Black people of all ages, nearly all of whom were formally dressed and smiling. Laughter was omnipresent as people exchanged warm greetings, in contrast to the robotic introductions I overhead at the Alumni College event (e.g., "Jane Smith, '82, Engineering"). It seemed like that everyone knew everyone else.

In the previous personal narrative, I recounted witnessing people taking a photo in front of the "Hook 'Em" statue just outside of the Alumni Center. When Rich and I reached the bottom of the stairs, I was immediately witness to another photo. Near the hall, there were three rows of Black people arranging themselves for a picture. Everyone in the shot was laughing, with a few folks draping their arms around each other. "Bill! Bill, you gotta get in here!" exclaimed one woman in the group, waving her arms toward a man whose face lit up in response. He walked briskly toward the group and was greeted warmly by several other folks. Seconds later, another person was ushered into the group. Everyone wanted everyone to be in the photo. There was something touching and profound about that.

"I'm gonna get in there," Rich said, slapping me on the shoulder and entering the lecture hall. I had noticed that no one had asked me what I was doing or if I was looking for someone. Folks saw me there and acknowledged me with a smile or with a nod. Prior to arriving at the venue, I had

anticipated having to answer a question or two about what a White man was doing attending an event that was celebrating Black history. I had falsely assumed that I would be questioned or not welcome. My understanding that the "Celebrate 1968" event would be a predominantly Black environment had produced a sense of anxiety, enough so that I felt I would need to justify my presence. Again, I was wrong.

As I entered the auditorium (still the only White person I could see), I saw a familiar face – my friend James. I had met James through Rich, who had worked with him on several research projects relating to students of Color. Over the years, James and I developed a sort of rapport, meaningful enough for us to join the same fantasy football league and share a few laughs along the way. I was so thankful that I knew someone I could sit with.

"James!" I exclaimed, approaching him in the aisle and shaking his hand.

"Hey there, young man," he replied, "Good to see you."

We sat together and waited for the event to begin. I looked through the program and was excited to see that Peniel Joseph was giving an address before Rich's panel. Peniel Joseph is a professor in the LBJ School who has written several award-winning books that speak in support of the Black community in the U.S. and against the history of minoritization that these people have faced. In short, Peniel Joseph is a very big deal, and I was fortunate to be able to see him speak in person.

The first speaker took the microphone and introduced herself—she was an older Black woman, and she spoke with a measured patience and tenderness that really conveyed the mood of the event. She identified herself as a Precursor and launched into a series of memories of her time as an undergraduate at UT Austin. She mentioned specific people, places, plates of food, and the cafeteria staff who served them. The woman talked about the music of the day, where the Precursors would go to dance, and the time when a White man in a truck threw rocks through her apartment window. She spoke as if 1968 was yesterday. When she introduced Peniel Joseph, there was almost an exasperated thankfulness for his presence. Her effusive praise and appreciation for Dr. Joseph really made me think about what kind of difference I was making and for whom. What had I done of any importance? The tone of the woman's voice conveyed a sense of passing a torch to the next generation of Black intellectuals and leaders who continue to move our collective society toward equity and inclusion.

Peniel Joseph has a stage presence and a delivery rarely experienced. Equipped with a wireless microphone, Peniel spoke with his hands and from his heart about how 1968 seemed like just yesterday. He sketched an image of a country torn across racial, religious, economic, and political lines. He articulated the ineffectiveness of the executive leadership in the United States in bringing folks together instead of tearing people apart. Drawing on his background as a public policy expert, Peniel quoted facts and figures about police brutality against Blacks, the socioeconomic discrimination faced by Blacks, and the inequitable public policies that have been largely responsible for the subjugation of the Black community within the broader United States society. Like the rest of the audience, I thought Peniel was talking about 1968.

"These aren't statistics from 1968. They're from 2018."

There was a collective gasp that arose from the auditorium and escaped through the exit doors near the stage. When Peniel concluded his address, the audience clapped in unison: the feeling of collective understanding of Peniel's words was palpable. I clapped but also knew that I had no right to associate myself and my limited societal oppression with a room filled of people who knew societal oppression all too well. This phenomenon is still something I struggle with—what does it mean to be a White ally? As problematic as the term "ally" is, as it connotes a status and not a progress, what would it mean to be a supporter of people of Color and mentors like Rich? Extending the analogy of my particular circumstances, should White people clap too? Although I am still learning how to be a supporter of Black people and people of Color, I was glad I was sitting in the Bass Lecture Hall on that day.

The older woman who had introduced Peniel Joseph took the podium, thanked Peniel once again for his address, and introduced a group of Precursors and Dr. Richard J. Reddick. To drive the point home, I assume that Rich needs to pay the folks who print UT Austin business cards a bit extra because I believe his title would qualify as a novella in some literary circles. Rich is an associate professor of *this*, holds courtesy appointments in *that*, serves on a committee that does *this*, and works as a program coordinator doing *that*. He also finds time to be a possibility model for countless Black kids who aspire to be him one day.

A few of the Precursors rose from their seats, and there was a brief silence as Rich approached the podium. In the row in front of where James and I were sitting, there was an elderly Black woman and a young Black boy. The boy had pulled a Jolly Rancher from his pocket and was feverishly fiddling with the plastic wrapper. The sound that a Jolly Rancher wrapper makes is immediately recognizable and infinitely annoying. A few seconds into the epic struggle, the elderly woman snapped the piece of candy from the boy's fingers, slipped the candy from the wrapper with ease, and pointed the boy's head toward the stage.

"You put this in your mouth and listen to him. He's the man."

Entranced, the boy sucked on the Jolly Rancher. His eyes barely blinked as Rich introduced himself and encouraged the Precursor participants to leave their seats and join him. As each Precursor was introduced, the boy's eyes did not divert from Rich. Although it may have appeared strange, I couldn't help but watch the boy watching Rich and witness the present and the future in one fleeting but profound moment.

Leaning back in my chair, I began to understand why Caroline Turner has been writing about faculty of Color for so long. Young people of Color deserve possibility models, and the way the young Black boy looked at Rich was all the evidence I needed to confirm that. In my three decades of life, I had never seen a young man of Color in awe of an older man of Color. This lack of cultural experience is my shortcoming, as I grew up in predominantly White environments and had never thought to crack the window open and take a look around. I should have opened the window years ago.

Inadvertently, Rich had taught me something about mentorship. Just as the audience had openly expressed their admiration for Peniel Joseph just minutes earlier, I had learned how I needed to actively explore more opportunities to witness the wonder of a young person of Color admiring another person of Color. And instead of asking Rich questions about race and culturally responsive curriculum, I needed to engage in spaces of Color to mitigate the cultural taxation that folks like Rich and Peniel Joseph likely pay on a daily basis working at a predominantly White institution.

Of cultural taxation, Joseph and Hirshfield (2011) wrote:

> All faculty, not only faculty of colour and white allies, must concern themselves with diversity-related issues to create cultures of inclusivity in academia. Understanding how cultural taxation affects faculty of colour is an important step in that direction. (p. 137)

Being an aspiring supporter of people of Color, I needed to immerse myself in racial discussions more often. In the months since the event, I have thought about the young Black boy and hoped he would find more possibility models. But daily, more Black boys enter this world. For me, this means that being a White ally is not a status, stage, or level. Just because I had attended the "Celebrate 1968" event did not mean I could check a box reading "White ally." Allyship and being supportive is an ongoing process, and seeing the young boy and Rich was an inspirational moment in my development.

Rich's panel discussion was wonderful. When time was up, time was not up. Although the Precursors were scheduled for thirty minutes, everyone wanted more. The discussion couldn't stop. The stories needed to be told. There is a metaphor in there, somewhere. Eventually, Rich thanked the panel and so did the audience. As we applauded, I saw a White woman three rows and two aisles across from me. I also overheard Spanish behind me, and I turned to see two Hispanic folks with their heads leaned toward each other. The space was more diverse than I thought, and perhaps I had seen what I anticipated: A predominantly Black space with a small dot of Whiteness. For the fourth or fifth time in a few hours, I was wrong. All kinds of folks had shown up.

I navigated the aisle and turned to the rear auditorium door. I looked back and saw Rich hugging one of the Precursors, and the young boy pulling another Jolly Rancher from his shirt pocket. Raindrops fell on my shorts and t-shirt, but I was okay with that.

Findings and Critical Reflections

I have deliberately chosen to keep these sections brief and to the point. Each theme is disparate but equally illustrative of my experiences: anticipating difference but not discomfort, paying analytic and holistic attention, and eliminating cultural taxation.

Anticipating Difference, Not Discomfort

Throughout the events of both personal narratives, I experienced difference, which I had confused with discomfort. I was not uncomfortable at the Alumni College event—I was surrounded by a privileged, predominantly White group whose outward appearance suggested wealth and membership to a community of which I did not feel a part. Similarly, I anticipated having my presence questioned in a predominantly Black space, leading to discomfort. Instead, this situation was different for me, not uncomfortable for me.

From this experience, I learned that individuals seeking cross-cultural mentoring and related experiences should enter into relationships and social situations anticipating difference, not discomfort. Granted, certain cross-cultural relationships and social situations may feel uncomfortable, but one's

mindset should be as optimistic and open as possible. As long as cross-cultural interactions are perceived as learning experiences, anticipated discomfort can be mitigated by the excitement of an increased understanding of people from all walks of life.

Paying Analytic and Holistic Attention

Had I not paid analytic and holistic attention during both events in the aforementioned personal narratives, I would likely not have made as many meaningful connections between the two events. For instance, observing specific focal objects (e.g., the "Hook 'Em" statue or the young Black boy's Jolly Rancher) alongside my acknowledging of holistic moods and the overall feeling of the environment really improved my ability to reflect. I will never forget the statue or the Jolly Rancher. As a result, I will never forget the presumed family taking a picture in front of the statue, nor will I ever forget the young boy in awe of Rich, which changed the way I see mentoring relationships.

Mitigating Cultural Taxation

My physical presence at the "Celebrate 1968" event did occupy a physical seat. However, I was not "taxing" Rich, nor was I levying a tax against any other person of Color in the audience or on the stage. I benefited greatly and learned much simply by being present. Supporters of people of Color—specifically White people—need to explore opportunities to mitigate the cultural tax that academics of Color pay on a daily basis. These opportunities should include White people seeking participation in audiences or cultural events during which people of Color are positioned in ways that educate and enlighten. Eliminating the cultural taxation of people of Color must include a White willingness to learn from people of Color in ways that do not burden this community. Both personal narratives in this study include descriptions of such events that, when attended by White people, can help foster a sense of cross-racial understanding and societal change.

Concluding Thoughts

A sage is someone who has attained a level of knowledge rivaled by a philosopher or deep thinker. When Rich wears his Harvard University graduation garb for his "History of Higher Education" course, he looks like a sage. He looks learned. He is. I will not forget the two stages on which this sage stood and demonstrated how a Black academic can influence and educate both predominantly White and Black audiences. Thinking of sages, I am reminded that many ancient Greek and Roman philosophers were also artists. In some ways, I don't think I will develop the sort of intellectual artistry that Rich has developed. But, I will try, and I think this quasi-autoethnography is one effort toward becoming a better person and one who will make a difference beyond tapping white computer keys and seeing words appear on a black monitor mere feet from an open window.

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