**Exploring our Racial Consciousness:**

**Racial Autobiography**

Many of us, whether we are White, of color, or indigenous, are inhibited when conversing about race and racial issues. This is due in part to limited awareness of our own racial experience and the experience of others who have different racial backgrounds and perspectives. (Singleton, 2015). Below, you will read two racial autobiographies written by Andrea Johnson and Melissa Krull. While reading through these, pay attention to when the authors become aware of their race, and how they describe their racial experiences. After reading, we will discuss the pieces, as well as our own personal experiences.

**Andrea Johnson’s Racial Autobiography**

I am a proud *Sista girl* from Detroit. I was born and raised in one of the many middle-class neighborhoods of northwest Detroit. Mine was a staunch, White Catholic community in the 1940s and early 1950s and then became a largely White Jewish community in the late 1950s and early 1960s. By 1965, redlining waned, and Black families like mine peppered each block, one or two families at a time. Our home was a beautiful three-bedroom brick Tudor with a fireplace, a breakfast nook, and a screened back porch. In Detroit, in a pattern that differed from that of many cities across the country, when the Black folks moved in, the White people did not move out – at least not right away. Throughout most of my formative years, I lived in a *real* integrated neighborhood.

The Black middle class was alive and well throughout my youth. We had a Black mayor, Black accountants, Black doctors, and Black lawyers. The superintendent of schools was Black, as were many of the school board members, police officers, and a growing number of fire fighters. The people who worked on the assembly lines in the auto factories made a middle-class wage and lived right beside us in beautiful single-family brick homes with a backyard and a two-car garage. Everyone in my peer group was college bound, and most of our friends’ parents had gone to college.

Our elementary school had a Black principal and both Black and White teachers. One of my teachers, Catherine Blackwell, had a profound impact on me during those formative years. Mrs. Blackwell was Black. She travelled frequently to various countries in West Africa and brought back artifacts to share with her students. Some students, Black and White, including me, would wrap her brilliant fabrics on our bodies and heads in traditional style and learn African dance, while others of us played rhythms on her authentic African drums. Mrs. Blackwell had all of us memorize and recite the poetry of Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, and other Black poets as well as the poems of White poets such as Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot. She taught us about American jazz and European classical music. We listened to and had to identify “great” composers like Coltrane, Ellington, and Miles Davis as well as Mozart, Haydn, and Tchaikovsky.

Each time I have reached into my memory in an effort to recall my first experiences with racism, my recollections have gone deeper into my younger self. At first, I dusted off an incident from my early 30s. I accepted this memory as a “first,” because it was the first time I’d lived in a predominantly White community in a white-collar suburb of Detroit. I was followed by the police while driving our very suburban-looking minivan to the bank. As I pulled into the parking lot, a second police car arrived as “reinforcement,” and I was given a ticket, because although my driver’s license had an expiration month of September (and it was September 9th), my actual birth date was the 4th, and therefore the officers determined that I was driving with an expired license. The officers also questioned me about how long I had lived “way out here” and wanted to know what I did for a living. The traffic stop, the reinforcements, the charges on the ticket, and the questioning were all pretty bogus. As a Black woman who’d lived most of her life as a member of the “majority race” in Detroit, I had never experienced such racism before – or maybe I had.

Next, I remembered experiencing racism as a 13-year-old when a White ballet teacher told me that my body wasn’t “suited” for classical ballet. As humiliating as that was for me, the memory allowed me to begin delving further into my psyche to explore the deeper nuances of the ways in which race and racism have impacted my life. I’d always accepted the narratives of my family that positioned us as property owners, thus able to leverage accumulated wealth, buy our way into the middle class, and acquire education and additional property.

My parents met as college students at Wayne State University in Detroit. Both of them came from families who had financial means. My dad’s family-owned farmland and businesses in a little town near Tallassee, Alabama. Education was very important to the family, and my grandmother, the lightest complexioned of her siblings, was sent to boarding school, where she completed the 10th grade in 1925. My mom’s family-owned land in Warrenton, Georgia. Her parents moved to Detroit in 1924 and bought a four-bedroom home with an indoor toilet on the city’s near west side. Eventually they had a two-bedroom addition built onto the house, and during some rough times, they rented out one of the additional rooms for extra income. As impactful as this narrative is, it doesn’t explain the price that was paid for this entry into the “greater society.” Each time I would ask my grandparents to tell me about the generations that came before them, they would say “we don’t talk about that.”

Recently my aunt (the family matriarch) passed away. My mother handed me a binder that held the key to the missing annals of our family’s story. There were primary source documents in the binder: pictures, letters, deeds, and other artifacts that connected our family to the white slave masters who owned them. I learned about my great-great-grandmother, Nancy Roberts, who was a blind cook on the Roberts family plantation. Mr. Roberts frequently raped her, resulting in the birth of my mixed-race, fair skinned great-grandmother Annie. According to the documents, Mr. Roberts left a parcel of land to Nancy and Annie when he died. This began a legacy of landownership in our family. This also illustrates the legacy of racism in our family, a legacy composed of truths that were held as secrets, interracial racism that comes with light skin and light eyes, shame passed on to my grandparents, and a price paid for our progeny to prosper. My memories are forever changed as I honor and share this painful reality, so the next generation will not be shackled by it. Today, I ponder which of these stories am I sharing and which secrets am I, perhaps unconsciously, withholding from my three children, my nieces and nephews, and other family members of the millennial generation.

**Melissa Krull’s Racial Autobiography**

As a white child growing up on the lower west side of St. Paul, Minnesota, I have vivid memories of life within a family of seven. For some of these early years, we lived in one half of the duplex my parents owned along with my grandmother. When I was really young, mom stayed at home with the kids and dad worked long hours in real estate. Money was never abundant, but somehow, we all got what we needed. Our community would best be described as middle to low income. Our neighbors and school friends were largely white and Latino. We lived in an integrated neighborhood, and no one really had much in terms of money. Large families were common and living among our friends of color seemed natural to me.

From first grade through eighth grade, I attended St. Matthew’s Catholic School. We were a practicing Catholic family. We attended church on Sundays and once during the week at school. I remember having to wear a doily on my head when attending church and having to bring my prayer book. We wore uniforms, went to confession, said the rosary, and walked through the Stations of the Cross. Our teachers were nuns, and our school leader was the monsignor, who was a holy, staunch, and robust man of Catholic faith. All of these school leaders were White in spite of the fact that we were a diverse neighborhood and school.

I have memories of socioeconomic differences among us and of our racial differences, but they were not enough to cause me to think much about race. The racial slurs that were bantered about by White kids and by our classmates of color were commonplace. We affectionately and playfully accepted the use of racially derogative nicknames for our friends of color. Kids of color seemed fully immersed in the school culture with us – well-liked and included, so we thought.

Many of us moved on to the Catholic high school together. I don’t remember thinking about another option, and yet there was a public school near our home. My siblings had gone to the Catholic high school, and I knew that I would follow that path. Going to a public school was not really a consideration. I had no teachers of color, only Christian brothers and sisters and lay teachers. All White. As a high school student, I lived, learned, and socialized with more White students and fewer students of color. My racial identity, then, was something that I was less than conscious of through my 12 years of schooling. While my Catholic upbringing became the lens through which my life decisions and actions were framed, the fact that there was an absence of racial understanding through those formative years is now disappointing and disturbing. Today I understand the lasting and injurious effects of a moral compass devoid of racial justice.

**Small Group Discussion Questions**

•What are your reactions to the readings?

•How are Andrea Johnson’s and Melissa Krull’s early experiences of race similar to yours? How are they different?

•At what age and under what circumstances do you remember becoming aware of your race? What were your feelings

about this discovery?

The following link from the Southern Poverty Law Center has valuable suggestions for responding to everyday incidents of racial and other forms of bigotry. Please keep and refer to at your leisure.

<https://www.splcenter.org/20150125/speak-responding-everyday-bigotry#everyday-bigotry>