

Prologue

My Culture, My Color, My Self

Nineteen years ago, as a young African American college woman, I began what was to become a significant cultural journey. College came to serve as an extension of a life filled with cultural growth and learning. It was almost impossible to imagine life without the rituals, activities, and values that had come to frame my existence from a very young age. But what was different about my cultural experiences in college was that, for the first time, they were coupled with deep intellectual engagement. I was not only being exposed to information about my culture; I was also being asked to write about it, reflect on it, and recreate it for my college peers. As is the case for many current college students of color, the college experience became an innate part of my personal story—one chapter in my journey of cultural growth that served to shape and influence the person I was to become. But this journey began with my family.

My family is made of three generations of black people, all shaped by the era in which they lived: colored, Negro, and African American. I do not mean something as simple as what we call ourselves. No one in my family has ever referred to himself or herself as “colored” or “Negro.” What I am talking about is a mindset, a social outlook on the world that is influenced and shaped by certain time periods in our nation’s history. The bottom line is that the three living generations of my family came of age in very different worlds. And we all continue to live in our own era. My grandmother continues to live in a colored past—though, at ninety, she has survived to see a new millennium. Her beliefs are the same, her house remains the same, and even her meals resist today’s fast-food form of dining. Similarly, my mother still holds on to beliefs born in a past of perceptions of racial inferiority; evidence of her beliefs appears when her voice changes while talking to a white person or, in many cases, even to an

educated black person. I have never lived the life of a colored girl or a Negro one, but because my mother and grandmother still hold on to those times, I have always been exposed to the culture of a “colored” or “Negro” yesterday.

At some point in my childhood, I started going to my grandmother’s house during the day. Her house was my six-hour entrance into a colored world. The morning actually started with the rooster’s call at daybreak. Soon after the ring of nature’s alarm clock, Grandma’s kitchen was filled with the peppery scents of fried liver pudding and grits. In her neighborhood, we did not play with any white children; in fact, we never saw children of other races. This was a common community experience among black folks of modest means in South Carolina. Their lives were, literally, full of color, and there was a sense of both physical and psychological safety in that fact. Rather than involving being bruised by the blows of racism or becoming frustrated and tired by the stresses of knocking down walls and breaking glass ceilings, having a “colored” existence meant largely appreciating the loveliness and bountifulness of blackness. Though this type of passive acceptance is unimaginable in a contemporary world, I still appreciate the bits of value that I have extracted from our “colored” past.

When we were at Grandma’s, my cousin Pedro and I played in the old tool shed, or sometimes we would dare to go mess with the dirty, screaming chickens. Then we made our way back to the house to eat dinner with the family. Many days Aunt Susan, Aunt Elsie, or Uncle Jerome would join us. And what was cooking? Stewed chicken, mashed potatoes, fried onions, June peas, and gravy to pour over it all. Afterward, the adults would sit and talk in the dimly lit “back room” or out on the screened-in porch. I don’t remember what they talked about; all I know is that they had good times, and it seemed like it always ended in a prayer meeting. I’m sure this wasn’t a daily routine, but this is how the memories of my childhood come together to form a story of my past. Those early morning breakfasts, playtime with the old farming tools, southern dinners, hearty laughter and conversation, and strong religious practices provided my first insight into “colored” culture, which provided the foundation upon which I could build my life with confidence.

Just as my grandparents’ “colored” faith serves as the frame for my confidence, my parents’ “Negro” determination supports my motivation to succeed. Being Negro meant working hard and wanting more. My father worked three jobs for more than thirty years. Many days he would leave at 4:00 P.M. and work continuously until 7:00 the next morning. As I reflect on my life, I realize that I was taught my work ethic not by a school or an employer but by the professional model that my father provided. How can I refrain from working hard when my father has worked three times as hard to provide the opportunities that I have today? My parents and their siblings worked to advance the family both socially and economically. They all moved away from a largely rural life environment into cities near and far. Despite coming of age in a separate and unequal experience, they all advanced the family’s educational and professional achievement. They graduated from high school, worked the jobs that

were available, bought homes, and saved. But they still wanted more for their children. And they got it.

The major difference between my parents' education and my own is that I have always been told that I was superior, whereas the members of my parents' generation were constantly told that they were inferior. Though, within my familial community, loving black peers and elders surrounded me, my educational experiences have been largely white and my professional experiences significantly multicultural. For as long as I can remember, I have been labeled "academically advanced" and have been thrown like a dark pebble into crystal clear waters. When I began kindergarten, I took reading and writing classes with the first grade. After a few months, the school suggested that I skip kindergarten altogether. Skipping a grade in school was probably my first achievement. From there I went on to academically advanced classes and all A's at each report period. Each year, when we took the CTBS and BSAP standardized tests (the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills and the Basic Skills Assessment Program Exit Examinations), I scored in the 99th percentile, or higher than 99 percent of students throughout the country. The first time I took the SATs was in the sixth grade; my scores qualified me for college. When I eventually entered the university, I spent all four years in the Honors College. I have no personal experience of what it's like to be treated as if I were not capable. After sixteen years of being told I was smart, my intellectual self-confidence was pretty strong. But I am aware that in both our past and present society too many black children know that feeling of educational exclusion all too well. For my parents, who graduated from a segregated school system, my educational experience seemed amazing. They were always encouraging me. Their pride was apparent as they sat at the open house nights side by side with white parents, whom they would not have been permitted to even look at or talk to twenty-five years earlier. They were finally equal. As a young black child, I understood very early the meaning of my achievements. When I won the spelling bee, scored in the 99th percentile, made the principal's list, or started receiving recruitment letters from Ivy League colleges in the seventh grade, I knew that I was spelling, testing, studying, and achieving for my Negro parents, who had not had that chance. And so I fully embrace and take advantage of all that being a free and educated person involves. Why shouldn't I? My family has already paid for it in so many ways.

School-based education comes easily for me, and so I see it as simply a foundation. I appreciate my formal education. I just don't privilege it. My more broad, deep, and meaningful learning has been a result of self-education—reading books, watching documentaries, traveling for educational purposes to more than thirty countries, learning from community leaders and activists, hearing the stories of people's lives, and consuming some incredible forms of art. This comment reminds me of a statement that Carter G. Woodson once made about education: "Philosophers have long conceded . . . that every man has two educations: that which is given to him, and that which he gives himself. Of the two

kinds the latter is by far the more desirable. Indeed all that is most worthy in man he must work out and conquer for himself. It is that which constitutes our real and best nourishment. What we are merely taught seldom nourishes the mind like that which we teach ourselves" (1977, 126).

Yes, indeed. There are some things about the past that I will never understand. I cannot imagine taking a bath in a tin tub in the middle of the floor as my mother did growing up. Nor can I imagine living without my own television as my grandmother did. Whereas both my mother and grandmother grew up in houses where only gospel music was allowed, I have always been permitted to play the music of my choice. Hip-hop music would never have been tolerated in Grandma's house, and yet it frames much of my self-identity. In a lot of ways, my generation is now above living the humble lives of our grandparents. We are removed from the days of outhouses and entertainment from radio stories and family talent shows. Some of us have forgotten the importance of spending time with one another, breaking bread together, and the simple joys that come from activities like family conversation and storytelling. Many uneducated black grandmothers and grandfathers taught us to tell a good story on a porch or a stoop. They served as the catalyst for great writers like Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison.

Colored traditions have followed me throughout my life. Through God, colored people found the acceptance that they were not given by the world. Though I am now much more spiritual than religious, I would still experience this strong faith in my grandmother's fifteen-minute grace or whenever she brought out the small brown bottle of anointment oil and painted a greasy cross on my forehead before she let me leave. The strong whispers of "Amen" and "Yes, Jesus," "Thank you, Lord" and "Hallelujah" have always arisen from the circle that my family forms as they pray. In my parents' home, we must pray together before going on trips, taking exams, and applying for jobs. Every time I drive out of my mother's yard, I see her standing in the kitchen window waving her right hand in the air as she asks the Lord to watch over me.

I cannot help but appreciate all these experiences. Although I would not feel right saying, "Hush yo' mout'," or laughing those big, healthy laughs that have always filled my parents' home, my mother probably would not feel comfortable holding them in. I can feel the passion in those laughs and the richness of those expressions, but my educational experience took me away from their use. Those laughs and conversations make me feel at home. When I am home and I hear my mother and her friends talking and laughing as loud as loud gets, I know that this is where I belong. Even now, when I come to work at the university and hear my students laughing and talking hard and loud, I remember home. All of the elements that made my grandmother colored and my mother Negro make me African American. Only powerful feelings could allow me to perceive the defiance of the Afro that I never wore. In our "colored" past, our pride kept us from even wanting to go where we were not welcome. Still, our "Negro" era was marked by a stubborn determination not to be denied what we knew we

deserved. One of the most important gifts my mother brought from her Negro past was a satisfaction with and an appreciation of our culture. To her, our culture is not lacking—it is more than enough. In fact, it is all we really need. She has taught me that being African American is not a title—it is not merely what you are called; it is what you are. Whether the accepted term in society is “colored,” “Negro,” or “African American,” we should feel comfort and pride in the African culture and history that it includes.

Thanks to my parents’ Negro beliefs, I am strongly committed to making an effort to learn those aspects of myself that have been denied in my education. How can a people with no connection to their past, who cannot trace their point of origin, feel stable in a society that gives them a new label every few decades? The quintessential question of a young African American is “Who am I?” I have traveled to several African countries, and I have been treated and have felt like a foreigner, more American than African. Africa is undoubtedly deep in our blood and, for many of us, in our hearts and spirits. As an African American community we hold fast to our roots, which are planted in the African soil that many of us can’t even afford to touch. And for those who do make the sojourn, the economic realities of colonialism’s lasting oppressive hold on many African communities makes the dollar that we represent much more meaningful than our black skin, even if we are called “cousin” when we are approached for money. And within some, not all, privileged communities in Africa, it is the distorted and stereotypical media images of African Americans that our country sells to the world that frame the lack of respect that can be seen in the eyes of Africans. But, yes, we have much to share and much to learn about one another—we are both distant and foreign cousins, partial and perfect strangers. And that is the truth, regardless of how hard and unromantic it is to hear. The question “Who am I” for the African American is a hard one; in many ways, we are on the outskirts of both societies—African and American—that we claim in our name. Learning my family’s history changed me in some way. The more I clearly visualized the struggles of not just the race but also my own mothers and grandmothers, fathers and uncles, the more I was able to find my place in moving that foundation forward.

I have, through the years, absorbed books and learned about the historical, political, and socioeconomic events that affect populations of people throughout the world. I think the family rituals of watching *Eyes on the Prize*, *Roots*, and Black History Month PBS specials as a child motivated this knowledge in some way. I have, in my career, picked up in learning about my culture where my family’s storytelling left off. And I know that I am where I am right now because I believe in my mother’s idea that something was lost in desegregation—something that you can’t get from any white restaurant or store and something that many educational institutions continue to struggle with today. It is a spirit, a pride, and an ethic of love that can be given only through cultural heritage. And giving this gift to my community through education is what I have vowed to do with my life.

As my community's daughter, my sense of cultural responsibility is strong. It resonates in all that I have become and in all that I do. It flows through every form of expression, including my poetry:

The needy
 Aren't some distant image
 A black and white snapshot,
 A 30 second media spot
 They are my community . . . some are in my own family
 I don't need to search to find the poor; they come through my back door
 For every family gathering . . .
 Serving for me isn't always about helping someone else . . .
 My family needs help . . . my people need some self
 Motivation—economic elevation—judicial representation . . .
 I need to take my education and feed the foundation
 Of my little block . . . I need to push so hard my ideas stir and rock
 The soul of the neighborhood . . .
 I need to transform it and make suburbanites wish they could
 Live the same . . .
 Make my students reexamine their professional aims
 It's not okay to search for a success that looks like anything opposite of from
 whence you came . . .
 Being so pressed to get away that you'll change
 Address, phone and name . . . to get on the first plane . . .
 The hell out of the hood
 If we don't care about our own block, please tell me who should?
 Who should work harder than me? Who should be the constant gardener
 but me?
 Planting the seeds of change . . . pulling the weeds of pain
 Giving it light and water
 through cash flow, education and improved bricks and mortar . . .
 Assuming my role as the community's daughter . . .

I am armed with the choices and the confidence that make me African American because I carry inside the colored pride and the Negro will that is the *essence* of my culture.

What Culture Means to Me

For me, culture has always been much more of a life foundation than a collection of rituals, symbolic practices, and artistic expression. Culture is the mental strength and confidence that allows me to look in the mirror and love my black skin. My healthy and positive sense of self is undoubtedly an appreciation for the culture that I represent—I love being an African American woman.

I am energized by the audacity, strength, sassiness, humility, and diligence that being an African American woman embodies.

Through traveling, learning, and worshipping in many houses of God, I know that the soulful and deeply spiritual belief in a higher being is cultural. I have felt as much at home in mosques in Turkey, Orisha Yards in Trinidad, temples in Egypt, and Hindu shrines as I felt at Brown Chapel, our family's small Christian church in South Carolina. And, yes, I guess culture does involve music and art in some ways for me. Hip-hop culture, as I mentioned, has framed much of my cultural identity because I reached my teen years in the mid-1980s. At the same time that I was beginning to grow as a young woman and form a real identity, so was hip-hop. I align hip-hop with my cultural identity because it is an art form that respects, appreciates, and borrows from other genres of music. Hip-hop has always been eclectic—it's a love of blues, R&B, funk, soul, disco, jazz, rock, and folk. It represents those of us who refuse to live our lives in boxes and seek to bring all of ourselves into the work that we do. But it is not just the music. It is the essence of hip-hop culture that tells a true story about my generation.

Hip-hop culture is about unapologetically speaking the truth. Regardless of how hard it is to hear or how raw it comes out, it is a dedication to being real and true. So, unlike other generations in my own family, I refuse to be anything other than myself. And if others cannot handle that, whether they are friends, colleagues, or employers, I now live in a world that allows me the freedom not to care. If I cannot be true to myself, it will not be possible to serve and represent my community in an authentic way. At a more basic and simplistic level, this boldness and audacity that are so much a part of my culture even manifest themselves in dress. I laughed to myself one day as I looked around a conference room to see most of my older colleagues dressed in suits and "business attire" while I was sitting at the table wearing a Kangol. I am who I am—that's hip-hop. And I have carved out a career that allows me to be me—that's also hip-hop. As the hip-hop group Outkast suggested, we must make and bake our own piece of the American pie. I'm not waiting for it to be served to me, and I refuse to accept someone else's recipe. As a Gen-X woman, I've found that this ideology serves as the foundation of my culture in many ways. But I know that I can see my purpose in life clearly because of the sacrifices that my family made to wipe life's window clean for me.

Laying Down a Cultural Legacy

Because my family laid the foundation, culture has always been tied to family. So I think of culture when I reflect on my belief that it is the responsibility of our entire family to help raise my sister and brother-in-law's three children. They aren't just *their* children—they are also *ours*. We are all responsible. What I know for sure is that I have inherited a value for motherhood, family, and culture from the mothers who raised me. Our lives were starkly different. My

grandmother was a wife in her midteenage years, my mother was wed at age nineteen, and I am still unmarried. By twenty-eight my grandmother had five children, by thirty my mother had two, and at thirty-six I still have none. My grandmother worked domestically, making as her career the cultivation of five lives; my mother has been a stay-at-home mom and has also worked as a housekeeper, as a factory worker, and as a teacher's aide. I have worked my entire adult life, have earned a Ph.D., and have made my professional home the university—an environment that neither of my mothers ever knew. Each generation of women in my family has known a different experience inside and outside the home. But I have made a firm commitment not to choose between the life that I have created for myself and the cultural legacy that I have inherited from these incredible women. As a professional, educated woman, I value domesticity. I value the importance of a clean home and a healthy environment in which to live. So I am also domestic. I value the meaning behind cooking a good meal—the reward that we feel when we (literally) nourish our loved ones and they enjoy it. I appreciate the peace that I feel in preparing the meal and the rush I experience from unleashing my creativity right there in my home. So I cook, and I do it well. But most important, I understand deeply the incredible genius, sacrifice, humility, selflessness, and discipline that it takes to shoulder the responsibility for another person's life. This sense of commitment to family is cultural for me.

The women in my family have set an incredible bar—they have in many ways sacrificed their own lives, deferred their own dreams, and worked themselves into a lifetime of exhaustion just so that I could achieve my goals and live my life fully. They have taught me that love is not a sentiment; it is an action—every lesson taught, every room cleaned, every meal prepared, every disciplinary action made, every value imparted was an act of love. The responsibility of sculpting and molding another soul is quite intimidating. Though I have three degrees, the only education that I have received on motherhood has been the model set by the women in my family. In many ways the role they have played as educators in our family has been an important one—they educated us about how to *be* a family, how to create what family is. Our families teach us valuable lessons from the day we are born. On our day of birth, the first lesson is unconditional love and self-sacrifice—only sheer love can drive the will to tear one's body apart to bring a child into the world. I want to build on the foundation set by my mother and grandmother. I want to lay down an even greater legacy for my children and my community to inherit. And so I wait. I wait until I am humble enough, selfless enough, and wise enough to be the mother that my mother was to me. I wait to find a partner who embodies what I will need not just to be happy (only I can create true happiness in my life) but also to create a legacy. Years of being single have probably made me much more certain of what I want in a life partner than my mother and grandmother were as very young women. But, at the most basic level, we all just wanted good men. I learned from my mothers to love laboring men and from experience to love

educated ones—I'm truly happy with either, and I actually prefer a man who is both. My goal is to be able to build a foundation together—to make the world a better place as a result of our partnership. I read somewhere that this is the true meaning of a soul mate. I am looking beyond someone with whom to simply plant the seed and toward someone with whom to sow and grow the state of our cultural pedigree.

And I think that goal is at the core of what is really important to me. I do want to conceive. But what I hope to conceive is a cultural ethic of love, as a wife, as a mother, and as an educator. I don't want to just be married—I want to conceive synergy. I don't want to just have a baby—I want to conceive a family legacy. I don't want to just gain professional status—I want my success to be inextricably bound to the success of my community. And I don't want to just “give back” to my culture—I want to raise up the community that raised me. I want to be the woman, the mother, the wife, the sister, the social servant, the teacher, the activist, and the nurturer that my mother taught me to be—not through her words, but through the loving act of raising me.