

Abstract

COME ON DOWN TO SEE FOR YOURSELF: SOUTHERN RAILROAD TRACKS AS  
RACIAL SEGREGATORS—THE CASE OF GREENVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

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Throughout American culture and through varying mediums, railroad tracks have been depicted as tropes of socioeconomic repression, technological development, and even bountiful migration. For instance, Joseph's Millichap, in *Dixie Limited* (2002), details the symbolic use of the railroad in Southern literature and culture; he details the work of various writers such as Faulkner, O'Connor, Wolfe, Ellison, and Welty. Darcy Zabel, in *The (Underground) Railroad in African American Literature* (2004), also focuses on the symbolic use and meaning of railroads in literature but specifically to literature garnered by black American writers. There has also been discourse on the broad concept of the "railroad track syndrome." They are usually in the form of nonfiction narratives. In them, the "syndrome" may also be referred to as and/or correlated to the concept of "the other side of the tracks." The train tracks in West Greenville that intersect 5<sup>th</sup> Street (formerly Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive) serve as the focal point for this area-specific illustration of the railroad track syndrome and the other side of the tracks. The aim here is to exemplify, through a collection of creative nonfiction essays and photographs (all photographs can be viewed at [www.latasharjones.com](http://www.latasharjones.com)), the obvious divide demarcated by Greenville's train tracks, the implied and explicit impacts that the divide has had on the communities in question, and, finally, the personal connections that I have drawn from it all.

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by

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## CHAPTER 1: PREFACE

This project started for me in the early months of 2007. It is 2010 now and the leaves are changing colors rapidly, falling swiftly to the ground. It is autumn. The air feels like a walk-in freezer some days, like a sauna on others. The sky is layered with fluffy white clouds and when rain is not impending, it is the absolute epitome of “Carolina blue.” I had to turn my heat on last week; it’s just October. This is supposed to be my last semester in this graduate program; I am supposed to be a master of English come December. The only thing standing in my way is this—this collection, this project, this thesis. I chose it for myself before I ever applied to the program. I named it and I made it so. And still, I have had the hardest, most trying time writing it, turning things in on time, owning this *thing* and making it really and truly *mine*.

I was inspired, mostly, by my uncertainties. I had just graduated and was starting a temporary position with the University. I had no real idea where I was going with my twenty-two year old life. At the time, I thought I was meant for law school...or maybe an MFA program. This up and down, back and forth meandering lasted for the greater part of six months. I went to work, went home, volunteered on some of my days off. I did not want to be a complete waste of life. I eventually (after being hired as a permanent, full-time staffer) took it upon myself to not sit idly. So, I used the resources that were in front of me, took the GRE, and applied to the English Department’s master’s program here at East Carolina. (I also applied to the MFA program at Wilmington. Obviously, I did not get in, and yes, I am still relatively embittered.) My application for the creative writing concentration necessitated a portfolio and my portfolio was the jumping off point of this venture that waits in the subsequent pages. I titled it “Paying Attention,” then.

The tracks in West Greenville that intersect 5<sup>th</sup> Street (formerly Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd) served as the focal point for writing about the “railroad track syndrome.” The syndrome, by and large, is a social product and condition that is marked by the matter of railroad tracks

separating two racially divergent sides. One side tends to be made up of a majority white population and the other side is made up of a majority black population. I was driving down Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd four years ago and it hit me all of a sudden: how different, how starkly different the West side was and looked in comparison to the surrounding areas. The areas that were, essentially, East Carolina University, Uptown Greenville. The manicured lawns and streets. The painted freshly renovated and painted buildings. The men—the city employees—in their uniforms in trucks and on feet picking up loose garbage, blowing leaves in to piles. This isn't unique to Greenville, to Eastern North Carolina. It's not unique to university towns, either.

I set out to confirm something that I did not really need to be confirmed. I already knew what I needed to know, saw what I needed to see. So, what did I need in order to affirm and support this idea of segregation by railroad tracks? Did I need a long list of scholarly, peer-reviewed articles with their statistics and figures, their charts and their arguments? Not so much. What I needed, I thought and think, was to figure out a way to make what I was writing about, the railroad track syndrome, interesting or compelling enough for someone else to want to read and learn about.

During the 2009 spring semester, a friend—a police officer who grew up in Greenville and who I no longer keep in constant contact with—asked me, “Why? Why would you want to keep bringing up the past and remind people that they have been slighted?” With this very simple question, I almost put this thing, this interest that has both inspired and bothered me to a halt. I started to question my intentions and my ultimate goals; I asked myself the very question that was posed to me and for a while I was truly unable to answer his question with justifiable clarity.

*Why was I writing this?*

What I finally realized was that though the past has passed, it is still something that we have to deal with, it is still affecting the present. Black and white, as racial groups, are still



separated and segregated. Some of it is by choice, but most of it is done via seemingly pragmatic legislative processes. We know as human beings that nothing can be done to change what has already come to pass. This is merely, then, a matter of learning and awareness. I started this project, simply, by writing what I saw, what I observed day in and day out. This written observation turned into nearly a dozen pages and led me to where I am now—about to graduate from graduate school, attempting to illustrate the railroad track syndrome through works of nonfiction and photographs. You will find that in reading this, though, that I eventually step outside of writing about the residential and racial divisions of Greenville, and fall right into very personal matters that may or may not deal or pertain to “southern railroad tracks as racial segregators.”

In order to stay true to my discipline, I decided to not delve too deep into geography or history or economics even. Not yet, anyway. This project is meant to be almost entirely creative and wholly true. I see and I write; I saw and here is what I have come up with thus far.

## CHAPTER 2: THE START: PAYING ATTENTION

*It happened like a God-ordained epiphany. Driving down 5<sup>th</sup> Street in West Greenville one day, after recently graduating with a Bachelor's in English and Political Science, after starting a full-time job, after moving in to a townhouse with my sister, I noticed everything. I noticed everyone. I never paid any attention to the street I traveled, to the homes, to everything that everyone lacked visibly. I never paid attention to these young and old and unemployed, to these black people. And could I...how dare I ignore anyone, ever?*

*Early 2007*

A chill creeps up my legs and down my arms; a persistent breeze passes through and around me. The draft comes from the door being opened and closed all day long. The doubled-doors creak and clank when opened, bang and bump when closed. They let me know when someone is coming or going. They are new doors. They should be quieter, silent, soft spoken. But, they are loud, raucous, attention-seeking.

It is more than chilly where I am sitting. It is cold. I am certain that the heat is on, but only because it is winter. The system must not be working properly. One minute I am freezing, the next minute I am ready to strip out of my business-casual attire.

Brightness fills the expansive space, even when it is dark outside.

It's not the kind of brightness that you'd need sunglasses for or the kind that makes you squint your eyes in disapproval or irritation.

It's an artificial brightness.

Fixed into the low-hanging ceilings are fluorescent lights that shine lightly on the top of my head. Thirty two spot lights beam down and add to the lighting's lackluster intensity. The overbearing sun peers in through the array of windows. It seems to glisten in sync with the

glossy light bulbs. Shiny glares bounce off of shiny cars in the parking lot and harass my myopic eyes.

The walls are off white and dull. I stare at them so often and sometimes imagine that they are merely covered in primer, waiting for a fresh coat of purple or gold or both. There's no color, no character, no excitement. A lone black-rimmed clock hangs in a central place on the dull wall directly in front of me. Two poinsettias rest on the high, front desk countertop. A yellow one sits to the left of a black mechanical pencil sharpener and a red one to the right. Four rectangular computer tables sit out on the reference floor and hold sixteen black Gateway computers. They are new. But many of them encounter some type of malfunction on a daily basis. They are supposed to be on-hand to make life easier; however, their endless streams of problems are enough to drive you crazy. They are enough to make you want to pull out a traditional card catalog and typewriter.

The carpet bears a strong resemblance to a woven basket or maybe even a hand-stitched quilt. It is unattractive and a poor choice in aesthetic design. Different shades of gray, hunter green, white, and a hint of purple make up the gloomy ground cover. It looks like it can hide dirt well. It does, in fact, hide dirt well. I've spilled plenty of Pepsi and orange juice to know.

There are oversized lounging chairs all over. Some face each other. There are others lined up against the windows on the reference floor. The arrangements suggest a good place for group study or discussion. Some chairs are placed randomly about outside of the bathrooms. These grandiose furnishings display the assumption of comfort and coziness. But they are far from being comfortable or cozy. They are hard blocks of reinforced concrete. Somewhere sometime, someone jotted down on a piece of paper that they thought these chairs would be lovely additions to the library's décor. So, I am going to suggest that that person get slapped twice on both sides of her face. They need a quick meeting with the back of a hand for tricking so many innocent

people into thinking that they were about to sit comfortably. They would've been better off going to a thrift store and picking up thirty or so old couches and recliners. And all they would've had to do was buy new covers. There definitely would've been a nice chunk of money left over.

Three glowing green exit signs dangle from the speckled ceiling and direct mindlessly brainy people to a stairwell, an elevator that malfunctions on a regular basis, and the main entrance and exit. Large glass windows make up about forty-three percent of the building's exterior. This, too, should be considered a poor design decision. It will surely be regretted when and if there is a stampede of hurricanes or overly aggressive wind storms. We are, after all, in Eastern North Carolina—a place where the weather cannot be accurately predicted—a place where the weather is consistently in conflict with the season.

This library building is a mammoth part of a much larger three-structured complex. It is quite new and hasn't been open for a full year. It's a wanton monstrosity that was built without any common-place practicality...it's a giant labyrinth...it's a tangled web. It looks pretty on the surface, but doesn't really function like a library should. More attention was paid to visual appeal than it was to usefulness. This building is proof of the University's overall growth and progression. It was built without consulting those who'd use it the most, and instead, it was likely built because someone couldn't come up with a better way to spend free money and needed a brag-worthy extension of their phallus.

It was built in a competitive effort to trump rival institutions.

It was built to expand the University's territory.

It was built slowly and opened in haste. A lot was not finished. A lot has since then broken and even more has gone wrong. A lot of time and money have been wasted. Outdoor building signs were just recently put up, and until that day, I'd sit back and watch people wander around with worry and fret scribbled in between the deep creases of their furled brows. They

always looked as though they were aimless and adrift. Most were late or lost for an engagement and everyone else was simply frustrated by how confusing everything was.

I graduated barely a month ago. Then, life was exceptionally easier. The real world is real, and I wish I would've known that it was waiting to sucker punch me in my chest and gut. I wish I would've known that once you conquer one obstacle another one is waiting patiently for you just around the corner. It is smiling a devious smile, prepared to hold you back...prepared to repress your youthful optimism and confidence and replace it with chronic cynicism and doubt. I've been working here for close to a year. I started out as a student. Now, I am a temporary staff member doing temporary and sometimes useless tasks, working forty hours a week, preparing my mind for graduate school. I had to buy a parking pass that was four dollars shy of a hundred. I was given a key to the Library's main entrance, and I got my own desk and one of those mischievous black computers that sits in my cubicle that barely has two walls. But, I'm not important enough to have my own telephone.

I work five days a week—Tuesday through Saturday.

Five days a week, I sit in a newly bought office chair that refuses to recline.

With a computer screen and keyboard always in front of me, I stare out blankly for the greater part of my eight-hour day. I watch people come in and out. I watch groups of students huddle around the printer while they all wait for the same documents to shoot out. Sometimes, I'll get up to walk to the bathroom; to fix the printer or correct a copy machine jam; to open the cash register and give someone a wrinkled dollar bill for four silver quarters.

I am usually bored. Certainly and almost always unchallenged.

My unwritten job description is simple: assist and be available. I help higher-paid people help even higher-educated people. I am getting paid to answer a phone and questions that would not have to be asked if people knew, first, how to help themselves. I am getting paid to direct

groups of medical students to a computer classroom where they will learn how to search, browse, and use electronic journals and other research databases.

I am getting paid to be patient, punctual, and pleasant.

I am getting paid twelve dollars an hour to sit here.

The people that I've encountered have been unique. Some are nice. Most are rude, confused, and always needy. Most, but not all, of them do not look like me. Whereas I am black, they are red, yellow, brown. Some come from California—others from India, South Africa, Korea, New York. They are smart, I know, scoring exceptionally high in the standardized test arena. Just about all of them are aspiring doctors, nurses, and professors seeking a terminal degree. You'd never guess that they were any of the above. They act like they are unable to read clear-as-day signs and simple instructions on simple pieces of paper. And some, strange as it is, have an exceptionally hard time using a computer. I know they are studying to perform critical procedures, and I know that I may need one of them to save my life one day. But what I do not know is why they act so, unaware, so oblivious, so clueless and remiss.

Most of them just walk past me.

A lot of them don't, won't, and will not speak.

They are better than me, they think.

I am just here to help them, they know.

They expect me to know everything about anything. I'm a savant in the ins and outs of the notorious University parking and transportation system. I'm supposed to know every library service rendered, how to use every feature of Microsoft Word and PowerPoint, and how to fix copy machines, printers, staplers, and hole-punchers. I'm supposed to know vending machine locations and how to transfer phone calls to the post office and Women's Clinic. I am expected to find people in other departments, at other institutions, in different states. I am expected to find

books and journals that don't even exist. I am even, sometimes, expected to know how to pronounce outrageous words like *adrenoleukodystrophy* and *agammaglobulinemia*.

I remember all their faces. I try to remember all their names. The same people come through the cold-carrying doors every day. And every day I see someone new.

I smile.

Say "Hello."

And if they don't beat me to the punch I ask, "Can I help you?"

Of course, I can.

And I do.

They always need help. They require it.

This library, like all the others around here, is open to the public, and the majority of the public patrons live up the street. Most of them look like me with varying shades of chocolate skin. Some are caramel, some are vanilla, and some are the shade of lightly toasted bread sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. Some have wooly hair twisted in braids, dreads, or relaxed and destroyed by lye. Others sport loose coils and curls that show clear signs of a multi-racial ancestry.

Up the street, the poorest district in this small but ever-growing city resides, and I am sure it's the least funded. Up the street, some of the most underprivileged people that I've ever known, seen, and driven past are sheltered and abandoned. Up the street, the roads are raggedy and rugged, the buildings run down, and I see swarms of people who look just like me. I see boarded windows, condemned shacks pretending to be cozy homes, orange and black signs that read NO TRESPASSING, and grass growing from concrete parking lots because of poor maintenance...because of no maintenance. I see people who are living in low income homes and driving around in high-class cars with deeply tinted windows and spinning rims. They drive

around high on life, weed, ignorance, and naivety. I see their bodies bent awkwardly toward a half-opened window with their seats reclined as far as they'll go and a fitted cap sitting right above their eyelashes.

To them, they look cool. To me, they look uncomfortable and silly.

I see baggy pants and extra long tees. I see clothes that are too tight. I see children—young ones, older ones—out alone when the sun is long gone and the moon is on show. I see old men riding around in wobbly wheelchairs in the middle of slow moving traffic. I see young boys and men riding around on hot pink and pastel bikes. Young girls push strollers carrying undersized babies. The underlings flail around in weariness and indeterminate distress while a tiny tot or two trails a few steps behind them. I see stray dogs. I see stray cats. I see stray people who have been lead astray. I see Muhammad Mosque #79, a Baptist church, Club Fuzion, Flanagan Funeral Home, and St. Gabriel's Catholic Church. There is a barbershop. There is a gas station. It uses an inverted number five as a substitute for a missing number two to show how much regular unleaded gas is: \$2.24. There is a haven to save the misguided and troubled youth. They are the ones who are much too close to being completely out of control. If these kids are a living emblem of society's fate, then I'd say that the future is bleak, bitter, and unpromising. There is also a center to keep the less problematic little ones. It is yet another ineffectual after-school sanctuary enclosed with high metal fencing.

I drive up this street in the morning. I drive down it in the evening...sometimes. I am timid to come either way when the night falls. I am leery. I am guarded. I've read, learned, and come to believe that poverty and deprivation give way to systematic anarchy and aggression. I've heard stories about this street...about its inhabitants. I've heard about gunshots, drugs, prostitutes, and ever-present police cars. I've heard that on this street, you are on your own. And when the night falls, I take a different street. I find a different route.



This street is full of massive cracks and pot holes.

This street is named after Martin Luther King, Jr.

Right around this street—right around its sharp bend, two aging fraternity and sorority houses stand. They are maintained and well-manicured. They are like large pink elephants in an over-populated room of black swans. Right up this cracked and pitted street there is a shabby railroad track that needs to be replaced, mended, or just taken better care of. Once you cross the active tracks, the tattered street no longer commemorates a Civil Rights leader.

There is a quick name change and a sharp turn. It seems to be an ironic foreshadowing for the sharp changes that waiting at its end.

It becomes Fifth Street. It becomes Downtown.

The pot holes end.

The cracks are non-existent.

It looks like someone loves and takes good care of this part of the street. The sidewalks are even, and there aren't any signs of wayward grass or weeds struggling to grow from long-ignored, old, and eroded concrete. And right up Fifth Street, where the bushes are trimmed and the leaves raked daily, the University resides in relative peace.

The “syndrome” does exist here.

The Railroad Track Syndrome, that is, was introduced to me in my Black Literature course. My professor, a toast-colored, burly black man told the class all about it using this exact street as a live example. The syndrome is simple. It is a shame. There are two sides of the tracks and they are polar opposites.

One side is the epitome of prosperity, affluence, and low-level greed. This side is Fifth Street. The other side struggles to stay afloat, lives in a less-than condition, in friction, in visible destitution, inequality, and disproportionate funding. This side is named after a peaceful activist.

This syndrome is a condition. It is alive and well.

It is a living example of misguided and misspent tax money.

It is an example of racial segregation. One side is lumped together in actual and above average comfort, surrounded by lavish gardens and foreign cars. The other side is a consolidation of the have-nots, the never-wills, the misfits, and all the other illusory minorities who are really the numerical majority.

The syndrome breeds systematic repression.

It thrives. It is overlooked. It is ignored, disregarded, and placated with malt liquor, Newports, and rims. Just like these chocolate-skinned people. Just like this bruised and battered street. Every day I drive to work. Every day I coast past their problems. I watch these people, my people, mosey up and down this street, hands in pocket, face forward, with no place in mind to go. They walk in front of my moving car. I reduce my speed. They take their time. I watch old men wave their arms in the air exposing their ashy elbows and ruined teeth, holding conversations with only the thoughts in their heads.

I see these people every day.

Some of them look in my car window when I stop at a red light or for an inattentive pedestrian. Others keep their poor eyes to the front of them. The men look utterly lost and hopelessly forsaken. The women just look, stare, and roll their eyes at me. They scrunch their perception devices tightly, tilt their heads which ever way the wind and their attitudes happen to be blowing, and frown a serious frown.

They look at me like they are mad...like I stole their last three dollars. I look back at them, but not for long.

Sometimes these same women come into the library and up to the front desk for help. They don't frown at me, but they do a short and quick roll with their frank eyes. These women

look past my physical presence and snarl to themselves. They start with my hair, end at my neck, and do a slow but blatant inspection of my visible torso. They peek over the high counter top to try and get a glimpse of my outfit. They look back in my face.

They are cold.

They have bitterness in the pits of their pupils.

They hold resentment on the tips of their tongues.

I am no different from them, I think to myself. I am just sitting behind a desk with an unabashed smile waiting to help when they are ready to ask.

The people who come from up the street don't know me, but they act like they detest me. I can tell...they don't try to hide it. If they aren't rude, they are sure to be short tongued and carry their thoughts on their faces. I smile, but it is hard for them to smile back. And just like I do with everyone else, I say "Hello" to them. They look baffled at my pleasantries. They look perplexed. They are always reluctant to ask for help. But I offer it anyway because I know what it's like to hold on to foolish pride with a vice grip—with the ferocity of a crazed pit bull.

I'm a threat, I guess.

I am different than them, they think.

I am. I am not.

I see their struggle—it's written all over their faces, and I can see the depth of their poverty and destitution. My boat floats in the same shitty creek as theirs does. Only, we are paddling in diverging directions. Our struggle is different. Our struggle is the same. They do not see mine. They do not hide theirs. They are far from rich, forever and a day to be exact, and so am I. They work pay check-to-pay check. We are the same.

While I know that we are different, I know that we are not.

I know life dealt me a different hand. I got more diamonds and hearts. I am figuring out how to manipulate the hand I was given—the hand that I chose for myself. They were defeated and folded early with one too many lying jokers and jaded jacks.

I do not have it all, but I have enough. I do not know it all, but I know how to find out what I do not know.

To them, I am an enemy.

They think I am out to get them...to out shine them...to out smart them.

They do not know me.

They do not like me.

They ignore my smiles, and they think that I am different.

I do not know them. But, I know their struggle. Their visible and unavoidable plights puncture my too-sensitive heart each time my five-year-old engine pulls me up their street. My chest fills with useless pity and hopeless compassion.

They look like me.

And we are different.

But we are the same.

They do not see it and they do not care. They only see me driving up their damaged street that the city won't fix, sitting behind a desk in an extravagantly ineffective building, smiling. They only see that I have a crease in my shirt and a twinge of pep in my step—most days.

I am a threat, they think. But, they do not know what's lurking behind my pep and smile. They do not know that though we are different, I am like them. They do not know where I grew up or how I grew up and how much my mother struggled. They do not know that my father was not much of a father to me...just a donor of half of my DNA. They do not know that, right now, my bank account is less than zero, that I'm behind in paying bills, that I owe over thirty thousand

dollars in student loans—all for an education that generated poor study habits and poorly average work. They do not know that I am living without health insurance, needing to get yearly check-ups, needing to get my remaining wisdom teeth pulled. They do not know that I, too, have wanted to love men who did not want it...men who would not love me back. They do not know that, like them, I've been naïve and destructively unrealistic. They do not know that my struggle is their struggle...in a different form...in a different context.

But it does not matter.

I have a degree. I have a job. I have a car.

I have a greater dose of potential.

I have a smile—more often than not.

I have *something* that they lack.

They frown at me.

They do not know that I am here to help.

They are not paying attention.

*July 11, 2007*

As I was driving down Memorial, on my way to work, I noticed something to my left. I was stopped at the intersection between Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd and Memorial. It was a red light. I spotted two men, two black men taking down a street sign. Sitting there, just was a red light keeping me from crossing the hurried intersection, from passing the Mexican restaurant—Mario's; the pest control guys—Clegg's; Section 8 Housing Authority; city-owned buildings used for official-type business; Treybrooke apartment complex; Southern Living Assisted Living facility with some of the saddest looking old people I've ever seen. It was just a red light. I sat there, the first car behind the thick white line, heading farther west down what was

still MLK. I sat there and watched those men do their job. I watched as long as the red light kept me there. I watched and I wondered. *That's right*, I mused on to myself. *They're changing MLK to 5<sup>th</sup> Street. But why not the other way around?* I thought some more. *Well, I hope, anyway, that they pay more attention to it. I hope that they show it some love, too, now.*

I was almost certain that nothing positive would happen. I was certain that West Greenville would stay ugly and ignored. Everything would stay the same. The street would remain full of holes, cracks, trash. What else could, should I have expected? It *was* the black side of town, right? The ghetto, the hood, a hot-spot for Section 8 housing. Who really cared?

The light turned green and I crossed the intersection. I passed the Mexican restaurant and Clegg's and Treybrooke. I parked my car in the same parking lot I had been for the last year; I walked through the thick summer air and into my dull workplace. I nodded a benign and emotionless gesture of hello to coworkers too upbeat for their own good. I sat down in my drab cubicle, in front of my personal computer and keyboard. All around loomed a hum of chatter and gossip and more chatter. Someone passed my three-walled space (since another cubicle was added behind mine, my two walls turned in to three), making noise with the copy machine behind me. I ignored them as best as I could. I stared into the nothing that was the bare, beige wall behind my computer. I rubbed my chin. I scratched my head. I decided, with nothing else pressing, to do a little research. I wanted to see how much coverage this seemingly minimal change was getting. Who's idea was it, anyway, to have the same street be named twice? *Who let that shit pass in the first place?* I needed to see who was bothered by it, who was sponsoring it, and who didn't care. Google was my first stop. Into the little white rectangle that is the mecca of instant answers, I searched: west greenville nc, fifth street martin luther king blvd.

I found a bunch of nothing. The search engine sent me straight to the local newspaper, *The Daily Reflector*, and I wasn't surprised. I did another search on the newspaper's website. It

brought back two-hundred hits. And of these, only seven of them had any reference to this. I checked them all. Two of these articles weren't really articles, they were letters. It seemed strange to me. Only seven stories? I had to check again. In doing so, I found one more letter and four more articles. So, that put me at twelve references.

That was three years ago. Today, I know better. I know better than to trust Google's results, and I know that Google barely scratches the surface. The much more polished graduate student and library employee that I am now found better ways to search for what I wanted without having to mill through irrelevant results that had more to do with hair loss, penis enlargement, online dating.

Today's search starts with Joyner Library, with E-Resources, with a newspaper-based database. I was able to search *The Daily Reflector* with a 2007 limit and with an even better limit of "west fifth street." Granted, I got 974 results which needed more vetting. But the first ten, the ones that showed up on that first page, all hit the spot. With headlines like "Process begins to rename West Fifth Street in honor of King" from 2001; "Letter: West Fifth has heritage in its name" from 2006; "20 people protest change in street name" and "Council to revisit MLK street naming" and "Council meeting racially charged" from 2007; "EDITORIAL: Two names—Greenville street makes statement on race" from 2003; and "Residents take a peek at plans for West Fifth Street's makeover" from 2008. I found that this...this issue, it wasn't just on my mind and it wasn't going to go anywhere. It went back as far as 1998 (Batchelor, 2001) or 1991 (Chambers, 2005) or maybe it was 1990 (*TDR*, 2003), and it was still a pressing issue in 2010. It was with *me*, at least.

I am always surprised by how much I learn from keyword searches as simple as "west fifth street" and "west fifth street rename martin luther king." *The SCLC lobbied successfully in April 1998 to change the name of West Fifth Street to Martin Luther King Jr. Drive from Evans*

*Street to Memorial Drive in honor of the slain civil rights leader. But the SCLC, a civil rights organization founded by King, said their ultimate goal was to rename all of Fifth Street. [Bennie] Rountree (he was the state president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference) said his group took the different tack (the tack that didn't rename the entire street; just part of it) after it conducted a survey of residents that revealed "the people down in east Greenville were not ready for this." ("This" being a street named after a peace-loving black man.)*

*Martin Luther King Jr. Drive extends through a section of Greenville that is predominantly black. East Fifth Street, which begins at Evans Street, is mostly white. (But, this we already know.) Some of the resistance was attributable to "older citizens who have not embraced the new philosophy of coming together across racial lines," [Melvin McLawhorn] said. (And this, too. We already knew this.) Martin Luther King Drive and Fifth Street together form a popular and significant thoroughfare, one that shows the promise and hope this city holds. (And here's an important, though painfully obvious, conclusion.) But the division sends an incongruous message about the progress the city has made in bringing different races, different cultures and different backgrounds together. Honoring Dr. King with only part of a street may be where Greenville stands. And if it is, that is a telling statement. But citizens should consider the meaning of a street with two names, running through two different communities. And they should question whether it accurately epitomizes progress, and the prevailing view of commitment to equality ("Two Names," 2003).*

I found it most interesting, though, that this street renaming/changing issue only goes as far back as 1990 or 1991. It is interesting that it was not until 1998 or so that the issue was actually addressed. I've been assuming that it'd been a decades-long matter, that MLK had *been* MLK for longer than I'd been alive. I guess it's not that big of a difference; 1990 and 1984 are only six years apart. I guess. Would it have mattered if it happened in 1964, 1984, 1994?...2004?



Was the initial resistance even an issue of race like I want to believe and think and have assumed?

In my article reading and searching, I found the latter was only possibly the case. The opposition was maybe, then, a matter of practicality and, of course, money. An evil that may be greater than hate itself. *Business owners who opposed previous renaming proposals cited the expense of modifying items such as stationary and street signs... "Businesses don't like the bother and expense of changing their addresses (...). There are always some folk devoted to the history and significance of the old name. But in the scores of skirmishes, one also catches a glimpse—or an eyeful—of deeper white resistance and, in the intensity of the reaction, a bracing reminder of the real King, the man with edge and meaning, and not simply the dreamy King of grammar-school coloring contests"* (Chambers, 2003).

We know that nothing is black or white, just one thing or the other. So maybe the renaming issue does, indeed, have a variety of layers and dimensions. I won't dare, though, let *that be that* and ignore what is, what was. I mean, let's not forget the point of all this: the fact that there's an "other side." The other side denotes a divide which denotes a problem that manifested in something as (seemingly) simple as a street name. Let's not forget that.

Little did I know, as I sat at that red light, watching those men work on the street signs, that changes were in the works. Three years later, after the street name change, West Greenville would experience even greater, far-more extensive changes. Imagine houses torn apart, empty lots in their places, new constructions, renovations. Fast forward to 2009, to 2010, to now.

If you should ever turn off of 5<sup>th</sup> Street, into the heart of these 'hoods, you'll see an amalgam of stuff. Churches and schools and restaurants. Empty, crusty warehouses. Yards trimmed neatly and accented perfectly by fresh, hydrated pink and orange and purple impatiens. A community garden. Rows and rows and rows of shotgun homes; they are shaped like train cars.

Drab rectangles with no character, no charm, no appeal built entirely too close to one another. I'd swear if you stuck your arm out of one window, you could touch the outside pane of your neighbor's. Every sixth house or so, though, is two-storied and relatively well-maintained; it might even have a standard, wire fence. *The old people*, I've suggested to myself. *They are the ones who lived these in these nice houses. They cared, obviously.* They understood the value in property. *They love their houses*, I've thought. *Clearly, they have pride and claim ownership.* These manicured houses, placed in between boarded huts heated with heaters of the kerosene variety, are occupied by those who never thought, perhaps, to leave the enclave by the tracks and abandoned warehouses.

The West Side is full of older and elderly men and women. It is sprinkled heavily with juvenile 20-somethings who do not seem to care to aspire or dream or prioritize. "Don't these people have jobs?" they will ask of me every now and then—in class, at work, at a restaurant. "Always standing around not doing a damn thing. It's not right and it's not fair." *Am I supposed to have an answer?* I think. *And what do you mean "these people"?* I am impassive, though. I shrug my shoulders with a dismissive and uninterested disposition. I offer a quizzical expression, as if to suggest that "I do not know." I change the subject.

The West Side was and still is under heavy redevelopment. Houses are being demolished every day. Lots are being cleared; new grass is being planted, grown, nurtured. I have wondered how the West Siders felt and did they have a choice in any of this. The area, the neighborhoods on both sides of West 5<sup>th</sup> Street (formerly Martin Luther King Boulevard), have clearly been disregarded by the people who occupied them and the city and private sectors who, I think, should have intervened long ago...maybe. Many of the houses and vacant buildings looked like they wanted to be saved, not dismantled. *How long have they been here? How many years? How many times have older ones been uprooted and replaced in the name of "Urban Renewal"?*

I thought that, perhaps, all of the newness was a good idea. It showed the city's concern and awareness. But, as I drove around West Greenville and saw new, fresh houses in the middle of shacks and garbage and boarded homes, I thought and concluded otherwise. These new houses seem like mere patches. The same scanty people stand on the curbside and did nothing. The same groups of young men rode around on bikes, weaving from one side of the street to the other.

People tell me that I am pessimistic and they are right. They say, "It's good what they are doing. Can't you see that?" I see it, but it took them how long to make that effort? And how many more years until we see an actual shift in mindsets and class divisions? West Greenville "is predominantly African-American, and the legacy of racial discrimination and the impact of urban renewal programs in the 1950s and 1960s still loom large . . . Residents in the community are concerned that the planned changes will not benefit them" (Neely 77); "they have voiced opposition to the plan. Many remember Greenville's earlier efforts at 'urban renewal' and do not trust that contemporary efforts will produce positive change for them or their families" (79). History speaks for itself. How can I not be?

I honestly thought the rectangle-shaped dwellings needed to be restored and given some love, and care tenderly. They needed new owners, new tenants. They needed new ordinances. They didn't need to be removed. *Has that ever worked? Has uprooting or forcibly renewing a community ever amounted to anything positive?* The sidings of the houses were warped, covered in dirt and mildew. This, a fixable problem. Windows were broken, busted out with rocks and fists. This, too, fixable. Trash, debris, leaves—they could be picked up. I thought it was that easy; it *was* that easy. But every day, construction workers moved about swiftly, confiscating salvageable parts, heaving heaps of garbage in to large bins. Every day that I drove to work and back, something was different. Signs in yards told passersby that forty-five blocks were being changed, altered. Forty-five blocks were being not necessarily revived, but removed.

It was happening all over Greenville, really; historic landmarks were being preserved and rejuvenated. “The original downtown, now called “Uptown,” [was] in the midst of redevelopment with new specialty shops, art galleries, restaurants, nightclubs, concerts, and festivals. Different historical and architectural groups, along with the city, [were] trying to save what remains of Greenville’s great past for future generations” (Krammerer 1).

Were West Greenville’s oblong homes not historic sites, too? They didn’t look *that* old, that worn. The whole area, in fact, was worth preserving. It was worth saving. It was worth helping. Removing its history, its artifacts would just be a band-aid to assuage the people that were merely passing through. The issue that needed the most attention was not aesthetic repair or urban renewal; it wasn’t even the pathetic state of the shitty infrastructure.

The people.

The young people lost in their own minds and worlds; they were *the* problem that needed fixin’.

Misguided, ill-focused, defiant, no real sense of pride.

Has the city proposed a solution, a plan of action for the people?

The young and old people who inherited a ghettoized mentality.

The young and old people who inherited poverty and anger and a fuck-it attitude.

The young people who take on the erratic life of a delinquent out of sheer boredom and sometimes, I guess, out of need.

I get into this argument a lot. I am bombarded with, “How can you help someone who doesn’t even, won’t even help themselves?” I’ve long argued for the incessantly impoverished; I’ve always pumped my fist at The Man, wagged my finger in discontent because he wasn’t playing fairly. I’ve argued that the crime and violence and disillusionment were not self-inflicted or self-promulgated; they were bestowed, imparted, force-fed. The struggle and angst that came

along with the history of systematic discrimination, segregation, greed—that was the culprit. These people were the tangible upshots of decades of shit. Some were able to crawl out, some did not want to, and some just remained, there where they likely lived their whole lives, dormant. What has history told us about holding a people down, about pushing them around, kicking up dirt? They react, eventually.

Blatant anger. Violence. Organized crime.

Though I have never had to live in a ghetto or project, I take on the anger of others. I take on their frustration. I side with them. The ones who commit the most crimes, kill each other, hate the world, seem so damn hopeless.

How can I not?

With shit like *de jure* segregation, Jim Crow, government enforced Urban Renewal, Freedmen sharecropping, being loaned debts that could never, would never be paid back, slanted laws stilted to stifle everyone but the affluent and the white...

How can I not?

If I could see West Greenville in its prime, when it thrived, when it was “jumping”... I would pay to see that. It is hard to imagine, to see these blocks as anything but what they are—broken. I am not from Greenville, but I have grown attached to it. And as such, I have become extremely critical of it. I often tell people that I *hate* Greenville. A lot. I tell them that this is the most backward place I’d ever been. I tell them that coming here felt like regressing to the tense times of my grandmother and great-grandfather. I tell them that Greenville, eastern North Carolina is where you go to stop growing, stop thinking, just *stop*. I exaggerate, yes. But it’s only to make a point.

I asked Mayor Pat Dunn and other City Council members (Kandie Smith and Marion Blackburn) the other day, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010, “What comes next? After the houses are built, what

is next?” All three women sat across from me; Madam Mayor was bent to her right with one leg crossed over the other, looking as if she did not want to be there. There was the *Kickin’ It With The Council* sponsored by the Center for Student Leadership & Civic Engagement. I was there to kick it and ask questions if I had a chance, if I had the nerve. And I did at the very end, after two solid hours.

It was as if my question, the audacity of such a question, was a damning reflection of her, Mayor Dunn. For a moment, I felt bad. I felt ashamed for asking something, anything that was so clearly sensitive. For a moment, I wanted to crawl under the table and hide from them and the fourteen other eyes that belonged to the seven students sitting around the table with me. I’d been wanting to ask someone for so long, though. After everything that I’ve read in the last two years, after everything that I saw, it just came out...like some funky diarrhea. *When would I have this chance again?* I thought. *Here’s your chance to get an answer from, arguably, the best sources possible.* Still, the space under the table is where I wanted to slither.

What I got from Mayor Dunn was expected; I have come to learn, from hearing her speak at other community engagements, that she likes to hear herself talk. On and on and on...*blah, blah, blah*...no pausing, no breathing, making strong gestures with her wrinkled hands and fingers, furling her eyebrows, squinting her teeny eyes hidden behind corrective lenses, speaking with a recognizable eastern Carolina drawl. When she spoke, she did not look at me, though I was the one who asked the question. She seemed to be looking past me. This is why I assumed I’d offended her. I stared at her intently as she talked and blabbed. I stared at her and I thought, I realized that maybe her eyes were askew and she couldn’t help it.

Mayor Dunn recited a rehearsed, paraphrased statement that I later saw in another form on her website: “The project involves revitalization ... The purpose is to remove blight, improve housing conditions, make a safer community and increase home ownership. Nathaniel Village ...

Police sub-station ... Intergenerational Center ... It takes time and must continue” (Pat Dunn). *But what, I asked, comes next?* I thought, nodding and “mmmhmming.” She didn’t tell me anything that I didn’t already know. I’d read the literature provided by the city. I’d known, for the most part, what was happening. I wanted to know what the literature did not really detail: what came next.

Kandie Smith. She cut in on Mayor Dunn’s speech with all the confidence and poise in the world. West Greenville was a part of her district; she was attached to it. She had an affinity, like I did, for the inhabitants. Kandie Smith carried a swagger that I cannot really verbalize. Let’s see, she reminded me of President Obama, Michael Jordan, and Angelina Jolie all in one—an odd combination, but that is what she was. Odd. When she introduced herself, she ended with, “I’m just cool.” And she was. A basketball coach. A forest green suit and matching green socks. BlackBerry hooked to her hip.

She understood where I was coming from, where my question came from, what I meant, what I wanted, needed to hear. She looked me in my eyes; she talked to me from across the table. “There’s only so much that we can do,” she started. “You know, it’s really all about ‘How can we get people to claim ownership, responsibility?’ It’s about changing the mindset and attitudes ... The problems didn’t happen overnight and the solution won’t either.” I nodded and nodded and nodded.

That was the exact question I’d been asking of myself since Martin Luther King Boulevard was renamed to 5<sup>th</sup> Street, since the first signs of revitalization, since 2006. *What about the minds of the people? Who will revitalize that?* And another question that has to be asked: Who can? Who can complete such a task? And who is responsible? The City, the parents, the State, the community, the mayor, Councilwoman Smith, me? How do you change a person’s mind, way of thinking, outlook?

The youth who just do not care.

The adults who reared them.

The policies and forced changes that created these beleaguered adults.

How will, how can these things be rectified, made better?

I'll offer the most clichéd, overused, but applicable phrase: You can lead a horse to water... and you know the rest.



### CHAPTER 3: THE ME: INTERNAL, EXTERNAL, MENTAL DIVIDE

I remember at work once, someone (one of my coworkers) made a joke or what she thought was a joke. As is the daily case where I work, my coworkers were standing around the service desk and I was sitting at a computer. On this particular day, my coworker remarked that she'd hoped that a patron who frequented the library—a pure-looking, white patron named Doug who didn't ever arrive by car, but by foot—did not ever walk home up *that* street. You remember *that* street. It was the other side of the tracks. The other side of the university. It was the poorest district with raggedy roads, rundown buildings, swarms of people who look like me...some with wooly hair, others with loose coils. The street with ever-present police cars, massive cracks, pot holes.

“Could you imagine?” My tactless colleague started, “that perfect little white boy.”

I nodded a motion of agreement. “Yeah. I wouldn't even walk down there.”

*What in the Hell?* I thought. *What in the Hell was I saying? What was she saying? And how dare I?* I knew exactly what she meant. Down that street with the slumvillas full of Medicaid recipients, EBT card carriers. She meant that Doug, “the perfect little white boy” wouldn't, didn't stand a chance among all those crazy, colored roaches. He wouldn't survive prancing about among the carefree black boys and bored, jobless men. They'd eat him alive. They'd strip him of his North Face jacket, his brief case, messenger bag, and red lunchbox. They'd take his brown loafers, black socks. Bust his supple pink lips, mar his flawless ivory skin. Turn his clean face black and blue and purple. That is what she meant. Doug didn't stand a chance up that street, among relentless, ghetto vultures. And what was my first reaction? To agree with her.

There is no place I would've rather not have been. There's no place I've judged more, held the most contempt for, rolled my eyes at with the most disgust I could ever muster. There's

no place that I would have rather blown up than try to fix. There's no place that made me as sick, made me hold my breath as long. The place where, when I drive through it, I am prone to keeping my eyes ahead, facial expressions unchanged. The ghetto—where the rules are different and the faces quite the same. The faces are the same as mine. Dark and light and creamy and ashy. I've grown and learned to hate a place that I do not really know.

I'd long accepted the notion that I was better than that place, and everyone and everything in it. I was right, right? I didn't think twice about blurting out my agreement to what my coworker was saying because, well, I knew what she was saying. And I think, I'm sure, that I felt the same way. The way she saw Doug is the way I saw myself. I didn't have his particular type of supple pink lips or a black North Face jacket or a red lunchbox. But I was, I am an outsider. There are a host of significant, racial implications to what she said. And even though I saw her point, I was still disturbed that she'd had the audacity to, first, say it aloud, and second, to say it in front of me. The part of me that agreed overpowered the part of me that was offended. Because I was, after all, both. I felt like a traitor, but it was easier to nod and smile. It was easier to be agreeable as opposed to being an angry black woman. And even if I did agree (to whatever extent), I wasn't supposed to let her know about it.

Still, though, it's clear to me (and always has been) that I didn't and do not belong where Doug was walking every day. Everyone looks like me, yes, but they aren't *like* me. We come from divergent socio-economic backgrounds, and as far as I'm concerned, we think far too differently. My daily thought pattern consists of printers, book receipts, poems, dog food, veggie burgers, LSAT preparations, gas prices, food prices, jazz, higher education, job applications. I do not know what theirs consists of because I am not a mind reader. But, nonetheless, I gather that their pattern looks nothing like mine. And that makes us as different as peas and carrots.

I will be the first to admit that, since I've been in Greenville, I've been increasingly aware of (and oddly ashamed and abated) by my blackness. More often than not, I am alone in the crowd, the single (naturally) dark face with kinky hair. I spend my days at work being the sole black face, the sole representative of an entire group of people. All of my immediate colleagues are white. White men and women of varying age groups. I sit at the front desk and I smile and nod, and I help people. I consider myself to be the most efficient among my coworkers. And though I have a personal work ethic standard that requires me to do and give my best, I don't have the option to be any other way. I already feel like I'm constantly on display, always having to prove and disprove something. I sit at the front desk, in my cubicle, and grin and bear it. I'm not as comfortable as I seem; I've just learned to fit a mold and fit in. I feel the weight of my skin on my shoulders and am incessantly aware that I am alone and quite possibly unwanted.

In class, I was lucky to see another person like me, even though there were hundreds of other black people on campus. Those times when there was more than just one black person in class, we never acknowledged each other's presence. We never sat next to one another, we never greeted or said "Hi." We never even shot each other blank smiles. And you'd think that we'd sit as close as possible and unite our forces. Not so much. Sad it all seems looking back. We could have been more to each other. It's as if there wasn't enough trust or understanding. Or maybe, it was just me. It was me bringing my past experience within the the black world and culture that hindered any connection being made in the classroom.

All eyes land on one of us whenever "black" (black pen, black shoe, black bean; it didn't matter what it was in reference to), the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, or Martin Luther King, Jr. were mentioned.

"Can you tell us what the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment did, " a professor would start, "and how you feel about it now?"

“No. But I can tell you what the 2<sup>nd</sup> does and how I agree with it.”

“Can you give us the black perspective? Tell us how you *all* feel.”

“I can give you *this* black girl’s perspective and tell you how she feels.”

As if every white person in class could name and tell you about the other amendments, Mr. Professor. As if the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified 10 years ago. As if it’s all I think about all day and all night. As if...*as if*. I hardly ever rose my hand, though I always sat in the first or second row. I was myopic and could not pay attention anywhere else. I sat there not to be called on to speak on behalf of all the colored folks in the world, but to learn. Even when I was courageous enough to raise my hand—which wasn’t often—I was rebuffed and ignored. (This, I’m sure, is why I now have a problem with interrupting people. I do not wait until they are finished. I just interject at my earliest convenience.) I can count on one and a half hands how many professors and instructors who were contrary and called on me. And I can count even fewer who knew me by first name. Dr. Butler. Dr Evans-Case. Jennifer Sisk. And there’s that one visiting Political Science professor who came from Yale or Harvard or somewhere. He was new and was teaching war in the modern age. I liked him.

Black Student Union (BSU). Talib Kweli. Common. Mos Def. Black Star. Sister Souljah. I came east to a historically and predominantly white institution and became, almost immediately, pro-Black. I was all at once no longer interested in mingling with everyone, with just anyone. During my first semester, freshman year, I attended a conference with BSU in Mississippi that was meant specifically, if not solely, for black college students. It was one of the largest convergences of young, educated black people I’d ever been to, that I’d ever seen. I bought a t-shirt that read: “Got Melanin?” I was embarrassed to wear it in Greenville, though I was excited at the thought of doing so when I bought it. I sat in on speeches and talks and presentations by emphatic and verbose black men and women. Some were dressed in African

garbs, others in business attire. During one of the presentations, a young man urged us to read a book by Hitler, though I cannot recall the title. I turned my nose up and furled my brows.

“Why!” I snapped to someone sitting next to me in the large lecture hall.

“Because,” she started with a look of utter pity and commiseration. “He was a great leader.” They wanted me to never mind his atrocities and his ignorance, but to read about his style of governance and his ability to lead. “That’s what was most important,” she’d said. I still haven’t unturned my nose, and I still haven’t read the book.

I was either a sophomore or a junior at East Carolina and I remember thinking I was going to change my major from English to Ethnic Studies because I felt like I wasn’t enough. I wasn’t doing enough. I wasn’t immersed enough. I thought I was going to read and be about all things ethnic and colored. I was tired of being in and among peckerwoods. My mother told me once that that was a bad word, peckerwood. It was derogatory. She told me that my father, in fact, used to say it. A lot. Perhaps that is where I got it from. I don’t know.

Anyway, I read about the Black Arts Movement, Harlem Renaissance, Black Panthers, SNCC, Martin Luther King, Hewey Newton, Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka, Freedom Rides, Frantz Fanon, DuBois, Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, June Jordan, Phyllis Wheatley. I read and I read and I read. There's so much and, still, there's so little of which I'm aware. I try to absorb it all, to immerse myself and bathe in it. But my efforts seem fruitless; the moment I learn one thing, I realize that I know nothing. I realize there are one hundred other somethings that I need to know, and even more somethings that I will never get a chance to know about.

Growing up, my circle of friends had no boundaries, no lines, no barriers. Not really. You just had to be halfway intelligent, maybe play a musical instrument (preferably a clarinet like me), or we had to, simply, “click.” There was Emanuela. She was Italian and Puerto Rican. She looked white with nothing especially different about her except her abnormally long nose. But,

she clung to the Puerto Rican in her like you wouldn't believe; it made her different, I guess. There was Priscilla. She was Korean and Puerto Rican. You would never know or guess that she was anything but Korean. Her eyes were as slanted as a politician is crooked. She, affectionately, referred to herself and other Koreans as “chinks.” She used to *think* she was black because her father was “un negro.” (That's what his family called him since he was the darkest in the bunch. He was lighter than me.) Faustina. She was black and Korean. Han Sol. She was straight from Korea. South Korea. By the time I'd met her, though, she'd been almost completely Americanized. There was Conchita. Mexican and white. She was one of my closest friends by the time we graduated high school. Sad, when I think about it now, because we weren't *that* close. There was Shawanda and Dahdreian and Shantelle. All Black.

Now, there is Gina. A forty-something white woman. There's Olivia. She just turned thirty and has always been white. I wouldn't call her a bona fide friend, but she's close enough and has tried to be. Gloria. She's black and considered “red-boned.” She is the person who I've called my best friend for the last five years, though we barely talk to or see each other. I've had remarkable and long-standing crushes on and relationships with guys who were everything but what I am. Andy, Shane, Billy, James, Justin—a total and complete amalgam of race. The United Nations in my heart.

But anyway, my point is that I never made it a point to dissociate or segregate myself or ignore “other” people...not even white people. I always loved everyone and genuinely so. I saved room in my heart for anyone who wanted a spot. I could be friends with anyone. I could get along with everyone. Gay. AIDs-stricken. Bipolar. Socially-challenged. Older. Obese. Immigrants and migrants, too. A variety of people were drawn to me, though I never understood why. I always made a good impression—an impression contrary to the preexisting preconceptions.

Since I've been living in Greenville, since 2003, I've become markedly...bitter, nearly racist, almost a Goddamn bigot. I used to say that the only things I hated were litter and birds. But, in the last six years I've formed...I've started...I mean, I think that I hate white people. If not hate, I've come to dislike them. Before you call the Governor and alert the media, let me explain. I have lived in Greenville for seven years, and I remember my first semester, my first four months here. I was transplanted from Fayetteville, an area that was still considered to be eastern North Carolina, a city as diverse and open and alive as New York City or Charlotte, to the most ass-backwards and blatantly segregated place I'd ever been. Ever. I moved farther east and barely two hours away, and the atmosphere and climate changed dramatically. It was as if time didn't go forward here; it stood still and things regressed while minds voluntarily deteriorated. The campus community and environment was markedly dank, markedly closed, markedly separated. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get a sense for inclusivity or acceptance. It seemed as if the locals hadn't ever warmed up to being forcibly integrated; they hadn't ever understood why doing so made sense. In the dining halls, white sat with white, black with black, Native American with Native American, Latino with Latina. It wasn't ever said that you had to or that you should. You just knew. Like stuck with like. And that's the way it was. But growing up, that wasn't the way it was.

In high school, for instance, during my senior year, I sat with whoever I felt comfortable with in the cafeteria. At the time, who I sat with wasn't based on who looked like me; instead, it was based on who accepted me, appreciated me, thought like me. This included, but was not limited to Conchita, Kristin, and sometimes Han Sol. Conchita and Kristin were in HOSA (Health Occupations Students of America) and the medical science program with me. We wore royal blue scrubs on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Conchita was Mexican and white, a military brat. Kristin sat next to me in Mrs. Roper's class, and we battled for first chair in concert

band. She brought me cappuccinos in the morning. She was as white as snow; she couldn't tan. And Han Sol. She was Korean, an immigrant. Her family had moved from South Korea. They owned a dry cleaner near Fort Bragg, across from the Jersey Mike's I worked at my senior year.

There were some exceptions to Greenville's backwards rules; everyone on campus didn't fit into the implicit parameters. There were people who defied the silent conventions. Bridget. "White Rob." Bekah. Lindsey. Mia. A black girl who "acted" white. A white guy who didn't "act" black, but did, instead, join the oldest historically black fraternity. Two white girls who were similar in demeanor and disposition to "White Rob". They acted the way they were "supposed" to (outside of only dating black men), but also joined historically black organizations where they were the minorities. And a Muslim girl of Palestinian descent who flaunted and paraded her curvy physique with skin tight jeans and low cut tops while always taking the time to announce and remind everyone every chance she got that she was, actually, still a virgin.

While an undergraduate, I didn't have or make many friends, but the ones that I did have looked like me. My first residence hall roommate, Lindsay, was white. I didn't interact with her outside of our room. When we passed each other outside of the dining hall or outside of the Bate building, she was timid and reluctant to speak. She was, it seemed, afraid of me. Why? I do not know. She probably thought all the stereotypes were true. I wasn't rude or disrespectful; I didn't go out of my way to make her uncomfortable. When one of our neighbors blasted Vanilla Ice with her door propped open during exam week, who went next door after enduring it for an hour? Me. She would've sat there all day and all night, listening to "Ice, Ice Baby." Lindsay was meek and sweet. I never heard her raise her voice above a low chortle or giggle. She bought me chocolate and a card on my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. We had a lot in common, actually. A lot. I just wasn't interested, anymore.



Lindsay played guitar, was a vegetarian, and a dance major. I'd watch her get ready in the mornings. She'd tiptoe from her bed to her closet in the dark, and I'd watch her, with harmless envy, as she stretched black and pink leotards and tights over her thin, slight body. She walked around the room with a bath towel wrapped around her wet hair, with wet flip flops on her feet, and a towel around her torso.

I watched her as she worked and molded new ballet shoes, ripping them apart, twisting and bending them with her hands. I watched her scribble notes and clefs on blank music sheet paper. She was an artist, too. Visual and verbal. She displayed a selection of her high school projects on her side of the room. I examined them closely when she was at class or dance practice. I came in from somewhere one day and saw her crocheting. My heart smiled. I wanted to jump beside her on her bed, join in, and ask her to have a crochet party. I didn't know anyone else, outside of my family, who did or could do it. I rode the bus out to Wal-Mart a few days later and bought a new size J hook and some yarn. I made a red, black, and green scarf with fringe and all. I made sure she saw me making it.

Lindsay did everything that I'd always wanted to do, that I always wanted to try. When she went home to Virginia on weekends or for breaks, I'd pull out her guitar, sit on the thinly carpeted floor between our twin beds, and pluck the strings as best as I could. Though I knew she was far away from our room, far away from Greenville, I was always afraid that she'd walk in at that very moment and catch me. She never did.

From as far back as I chose to remember, I had a black friend, a white friend, and an "other" friend. It started in kindergarten, Spring Lake, NC. The outskirts of Fayetteville. Mae Rudd Williams School, before it was an "alternative" institution. 1990. I don't ever recall feeling an inclination to only play with people who looked like me. I'd walk across the street, when we still lived in the Over Hills subdivision, and waltz leisurely through a mesh-screened porch. A

white girl lived there. I don't remember her name, but I remember she was my friend. We'd sit on her carpeted deck floor, playing whatever games we liked that day. I remember that her father brought us a snack, once. Cinnamon graham crackers. I still love them and always have a box in my cabinet. I don't care what the brand is, so long as it has cinnamon and graham flour.

Then, when I was done playing with her, I'd walk in the opposite direction, about five houses down, to another house. Asia and Shalisha. Sisters. Bad as hell. They were troubled. They were black. I romped with them in their back yard, in the street when it rained. We ran up and down Collinwood Drive on rainy summer days. The sun peeked through thin clouds; the street was full of steam. The heat would sting the bottom of our bare feet. Their house smelled like moth balls and musty water. They smelled like moth balls and musty water. I learned quickly to convince them to play outside or at my house. They always looked a touch dirty and grubby. We played with fire a few times. We got caught once by some woman who happened to be driving by. Asia and Shalisha fought older white boys on a regular basis. They were rough and unkempt, but they were my friends, too. Ashy and dirty with short, short hair that'd been fried off by too many cheap relaxers and too little care.

And finally, there were my "other" friends. In retrospect, I know they were Native American. But back then...who the hell knows. I probably thought they were just mixed or something in between. I got into a fight with one of them, Maria. My first and last physical altercation with anyone outside of my family. My sister was, and I say this with love, a bully. She did what she wanted when she wanted. If you didn't like it, she'd man-handle you until you cried. She was bossy and meant what she said. We were only 17 months apart, but she thought she was my other mother. Sometimes, I couldn't stand it. I'd hit her back. I'd hit her first. I'd call her names. "Fat cow." "Fat bitch." She'd put me in headlock. She'd call me names, too. "Bald eagle." We'd wrestle on the living room floor. I'd run into her torso with all my might, wrap my

arms around her waist, and push her to the floor. No matter how hard I tried, how much effort I gave, how much I grunted and groaned and grumbled, I always lost. I always huffed away, with my bottom lip pursed out, tears flooding my eyes. Angry. Fed-up with her bullshit.

Think of a rooster fight. Maria and I tussled and wrestled in the middle of a circle formed by a group of much older neighborhood kids. My sister was there. I remember her being in my corner, egging me on. I pulled Maria's long and deeply wavy hair. I swung her around like a ragdoll. It was a hot day in the summer. The air was dry; everyone was bored. I remember the sky was a clear sea blue, the sun was bright like a yellow highlighter. I was doing great until Maria bit me on my right thigh. I had an ugly discoloration with neat bite marks for weeks that I was afraid to let Mom see. I cried and ran away to my babysitter's house. I lost. As per usual.

That's how it went. Some white, some black, some other. I was *aware* that I was black and I knew we were all different. But, back then, it never *really* mattered. We were all relatively poor and didn't see the world outside of Spring Lake. I remember clearly and vividly seeing Confederate Flags, hearing the word "nigger" and blatantly racist jokes. My sister and I played with a white girl who lived behind our babysitter, Mrs. Bonnie's, house. That girl had a little brother and lived with her mother and a father who I hardly, if ever, saw. They had pet snakes in their house, beer cans, and these strange flags that I knew were different from the ones I saw in school. Her hair was always dark from grime, her nails caked with orange dirt. Mrs. Bonnie told my sister and me that we could only go to that girl's house when her father wasn't there. "He doesn't like black people," she said once, curtly as if we were adults, as we stood in her remolded kitchen eating dark purple plums. We knew enough to know not to climb the wire fence when we saw his dingy white truck in the carport.

But still, it hadn't much affected me. Black, white, other—so long as they were poor, we could play together. So long as they had free lunch, they could sit by me in the cafeteria. So long

as they understood and recognized what a food stamp was, we could horse around on the playground. The only divide that I remember was between dirt poor and kind of poor. Oh, and there was also a division between the Spanish-speaking students— who had not yet learned English—and everyone else.

Mrs. Bonnie—a pudgy white woman with two miniature Pinschers that always had fleas—was one of the neighborhood sitters. She was our—my cousins, my older sister, and I—sitter. Her house was a makeshift daycare and a place for neighborhood kids to huddle, consort, and plan our next adventure. She had two grown children—Timmy and Robin. They were totally white. Two teen-aged children—Andrew and Cindy. They were biracial—black and white. Everyone lived in the same house with just three bedrooms. Mrs. Bonnie always had a full-house. Always. She had too many children under her care. When inspectors would come, she'd hide a bunch of us in Cindy's room after we all helped her clean the house inside and out. Mrs. Bonnie had a husband. A big, bear-like black man. Dark as night. Elusive, quiet, aloof. I think I heard him talk twice. He worked nights and slept during the day. He'd come out of their bedroom at some point in the morning for breakfast. He wore a deep-blue robe, with the scruff that was the remainder of his aged chest hairs poking out the opening at the top. His toenails, I remember, were freakishly long and yellow. He was—a monster.

I thought I would come to East Carolina and be at home. I thought that I'd be friends with a variety of people, just like I was in Fayetteville. I thought I'd sit in the dining hall or Wright Place or Mendenhall with whomever. But that was hardly the case. Now, I don't want to necessarily paint a picture of 1940s Greenville, Jim Crow, and Whites Only, and I know that I write this as though I am living 30 or 40 years ago and I know that I am not. But, it may well have been. It felt like it to me, like 1940 had been rejuvenated and given a face lift. It would've

looked like 2003—implicit and covert and sneaky. It would've looked like Jim Crow, Jr. I cannot and will not deny that though times have changed, though time has pressed forward, we are still living in an era that neglects the previously oppressed and those who are still uniformly and systematically affected by the past.

The President is black...kind of. We are many, many decades removed from slavery, from involuntary segregation, from the Civil Rights Movement, from *Plessy*, from *Brown*. We, black people are today in a position far greater (though, I'm sure some may argue for the contrary) than our predecessors, far better than our parents. We have more, need less, know more, read less. We have everything we need to be great, to do great. And still, we are continuing to make strides. We are still making strides to do first this and that. We are still working to press our way upward, to move outside of parameters of organized hate. We are still fighting to *be* black.

We fight to own blackness, keep it, love it. Once upon a time, not long ago, “black was whack.” It was not something you aspired to be, to have, to look like. Black was evil. Black was wrong. Black was rotten and spoiled and abject. Now, black is still whack. But, only if you're black. Black features, black characteristics, black qualities—big lips, kinky hair, wide hips, round butt, thick thighs, poetic expressions, soulful intonation—stereotypical “blackness” is acceptable. They are tolerable and admired and revered. They are highlighted and underlined. But only, of course, if you are *not* black.

I knew shortly after coming to Greenville that I wasn't home. I wasn't anywhere I wanted to be for long. I'd pass an older white couple on the street, in the mall, in Food Lion. They wouldn't make eye contact, wouldn't acknowledge me, wouldn't nod or smile. I'd be ignored. I was standing in line at State Employee's Credit Union on Charles Blvd. I was the next person to be waited on, with about six people behind me. An old man, somewhere between 60 and 70, stood uncomfortably close to me. He inched further and further to my elbow, to my arm. I

thought, *I know this old fucker isn't trying to get in front of me.* Just like that and in broad daylight? With all these people, all these witnesses, all these eyes? "Can I help you," a teller called. Sure enough, the old-timer makes a move to bypass me.

"Excuse me, I'm next," I said with the deepest repugnance I could muster.

"She's next, sir," a lady behind him chimed in.

"Oh," he said with a smile. "I didn't see you there."

Me with my big ass afro and my burnt orange sweater. Me with my yellow and white framed glasses. Me with my blue and white cell phone in between my thumbs, finishing an email. *You, sir, you didn't see me? Really?*

Then, there were those older white people who, if they did look at me, if they did see me, it was with the coldest contempt I'd ever seen. I got used to that look, that feeling. I got used to being overlooked and ignored and disregarded. What choice did I have? The old southerners, clearly, were not fond of my presence. I could've encountered farmers and old money and poor trash. The reaction and interaction was, generally, all the same. The reaction, the revulsion was always the same. To say that I felt ugly or dirty or *wrong* wouldn't be enough. It wouldn't do my feelings justice. To say that I clung to my blackness...that would be even more of an understatement. I said early on that I think, that I thought that I might've cultivated a real hatred for white people. But in reality, I do not, cannot, and probably won't ever. I don't hate anyone. I pity them, white people, more than anything. I only hate that they hate me. That is what I hate. I hate the fact, the sheer idea that I'm hated and dislike and dejected for something so simple.

I am not a bigot, though sometimes I wish that I was. I wish that I could *really* return the loathsome sentiments, detest white skin, white hair, everything that is stereotypically white. But I do not possess that quality, that useless emotion, that debilitating trait that might assuredly eat me alive. Even though noses are turned up at me on the street, eye contact is avoided, and money

thrown on the counter when my hand is waiting to take it. Even though my brother is stereotyped and type casted, my happily nappy hair (and no, you cannot touch it; stop asking) is detested. Even though Confederate flags are brandished and called “pride” and “tradition.” Even still, after all of this and more, I cannot hate anyone.

Earlier in this section, I mention not being able to always connect with my fellow black classmates. Growing up, I was comfortable with mostly everyone, but it had a lot to do with necessity. It had a lot to do with not being accepted by my black community. Because I talked “right,” I was considered and called white. Because I wore silver instead of gold, because I did my homework and went to class instead of skipping, I was white...and I was weird. Because I was marginally different, I was white. Because I didn’t have or embody enough black stereotypes, I was white and usually ended up having to find friends elsewhere. Hence, Kristen, Conchita, Han Sol. From the start of middle school in 1996 to the close of high school in 2003, I was lost. I wasn’t black enough, and I definitely wasn’t white or “other” enough. I was too quiet, I was too pretty, I was too smart.

They told me that I talked *white* because I talked *right*. They told me that I was white because I dressed the way I dressed. Because my fashion sense did not always reflect the latest hip hop culture trends. They were more like that of *Clueless* (1995) or of a professional. I was always ahead of my time in thought and appearance. They told me I acted white because I was quiet, shy, studious. They told me I wasn’t black. They? Black people. *My* people.

I am 25 years old, and I am often reduced to feelings of monumental bitterness, and I sometimes feel lost. Relatively ashamed (and always overwhelmingly aware of myself) sitting in a room of white faces. Uncomfortable to stand in a circle of black people, not quite fitting in, not quite sure I pass. “Black people don’t like me,” I’ve said to my mom and sister a dozen times in the last years. Sounds crazy, right? You’d think that after *all* we’d been through (“we” being the

all-inclusive collective of black folks), black people would have enough sense to, at the very least, stick together. To uplift and encourage and support each other.

“I wish I was a white man,” I joked once. Only, I wasn’t joking. I have often wondered what it feels like to possess all that we understand power to be. George W. Bush. Bill Clinton. Steve Ballard. Mike Easley. *What does it feel like, I think, to be looked at and feel no shame for the color of your skin?*

I watch the news and read the paper. All the villains, thugs, and outlaws I see look like me. The rapists, the thieves, the gang-bangers, the evil-doers, the liars. I sit at a computer station on campus, log in, and start to read emails. Emails from my mom, from my sister, from my cousin; emails about class assignments, registration, when to drop a course without penalty; emails from my boss, from my boss’ boss, from my asinine coworkers; emails from Victoria’s Secrets, Hallmark, PetSmart, Bev Perdue, PETA, Facebook, moveon.org. My inbox is always full and ripe with things unread. I peruse the ceaseless correspondences and I am annoyed by pop-up notifications informing me of the latest assault on or near campus. The assailant, nine times out of ten, is a black man between 5’7 and 6’2, 145 to 200lbs. He is always wearing a white t-shirt, dark baggy pants, and occasionally, a black hoodie to conceal his dark face. This is my brother, his friends, my 17-year-old cousin, the men that I date, the men that love me. I’m afraid for all the black men and boys in the world. They are the monsters that go bump in the night. They are the Devil’s spawns, the descendants of slave masters, owners of human chattel. Black and ugly and full of evil. Right?

I know more black men who have never broken a law or laid harm to a cat or dog. Maurice, for instance. He was among a group of guys I met in 2003 through Sam and Anthony. I’d known the duo since elementary and middle school. We ended up at East Carolina together and, surprisingly, in the same dorm. We were freshmen; it was our first semester away from



home and we were imparting on a new freedom in eastern North Carolina. We were all on campus, all moved and settled in; but, classes hadn't started yet. We *really* were free; I think that was one of the best weeks I'd have away from home. We'd—a group that quickly grew to 10 or 12—sit outside of Aycock Hall in the dusk, chatting about nothing in particular, laughing feverishly at people who could not parallel park, reminiscing about home.

I was sitting in a rocking chair on the porch of Aycock. The sun was setting. The sky was illuminated with a deeply reddish pink tint, much like the heart of a grapefruit. The air was warm but not sticky. It smelled of freshly cut grass, cigarette smoke, and a mannish sour musk that emanated from the first floor dorm rooms. I sat in one of the oversized rocking chairs, using my legs to rock me front and back, front and back. The evening was marked by a cool enough breeze. I watched students as they came and went, unlocking the front door with the biggest of the set of keys we'd all received. I rocked back and forth, daydreaming... writing.

Maurice came up the steep steps of Aycock, unafraid and fearless. He sat across from me and struck up a conversation. He was cocky, in a way. Not shy or awkward like most guys our age. He looked comfortable and collected. Red basketball shorts, white socks, slide on sandals, an ominous white t-shirt. He was dark. Dark like he was straight from Mother Africa with soft and silky skin that looked like it'd been marinated in shea butter. He asked me what I was doing. "Writing," I said. He wanted to know what I wrote and why, exactly, I was doing it. "I don't know," I said with a passive shoulder shrug, shy and totally unconfident. Unsure of what and why I scribbled in a composition notebook that I'd decorated with red, silver, and green plastic jewels and random magazine cut outs. It was just what I did. It's what I'd been doing for as long as...for a long time. I always had a diary or journal. Some were simple white and black composition notebooks. In 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I had a spiral journal decorated with a bright sunflower print that I picked out at Cato. A black suede diary and a small purple diary adorned with a white

dress on the cover—both given to me by my aunt who struggled with breast cancer and lost that same semester. I had one with a lock and key that could be pried open with the right amount of force. When Mom brought home our first computer, I was in middle school. I turned to mostly typing my poems and thoughts, and printing them out in colored ink. I wasted, Mom says, a lot of paper.

I thought about it to myself and realized that I wrote poems and idle musings and wish lists. I wrote about my latest crushes, my first boyfriend, my ever-there desire to simply be happy. I was embarrassed to and did not tell him what or why I wrote, but he'd gotten me to think, for the first time really, about me, an 18-year-old freshman, as a writer. He was a profoundly thoughtful guy, even then. He's what we call an "intellectual black." His aim, usually, in any given conversation was to get you to think, to form an opinion, and to be firm in it. I know him today. I talk to him occasionally, more often than not. His intellect has exploded and multiplied. He is on the verge of being a Black Panther, infuriated with the "man, "with weak-minded, no count black people, with insolent white folks who don't give a shit about anything but themselves. He still challenges me and whoever he encounters to think, to reason, to question. He makes me laugh, makes me mad, makes me smile. Sometimes his opinion is so set, so fixed, I think him a narrow-minded asshole. He says everything tersely. He calls it honesty; I call it insensitivity. He has a thought about everything—relationships, politics, religion, reading, writing, race relations, cars, hair, popular culture, history, food, sports, exercise.

I had a dream about him once; I told him about it. "Now," I started, "don't think I'm weird and promise you won't laugh."

"Okay," he said. "But, people think I'm weird, too."

"I'm not sure how it started or what happened, but you were definitely in my dream. You told me that I wasn't 'deep' enough."

“Wow,” he said, as if I was the one who insulted him. “That’s...*deep*. Thing is, I would never say something like that.”

He was bothered. He would not have said something like that to anyone, he told me and definitely not to a female friend. I didn’t tell him, but I knew that dream was just my perception of his possible perception of me (and probably nothing more). The dream was my insecurity manifesting in my idle but active mind. I didn’t think that I was sharp enough to think with him, to talk with him, to be with him. His brain-power intimidated me. His thoughts alone are commanding and formidable.

Chocolaty, soft-skinned, asshole Maurice quails the monster-image of black men that the media has so painstakingly and derisively constructed. He isn’t a monster. He isn’t a goon. He isn’t the usual suspect. He’s still as dark as he was six years ago. Brown skin like a fresh Hershey Kiss, lean and toned. Not tall, but tall enough, standing somewhere above my five feet and seven inches. When I see the ashy-faced criminals on the screen, in the paper, I think of Maurice. I need him. I use him to assuage my fear of black men.

I am afraid of black men, and I am afraid for them. When I see a young man the size and shade of Maurice, strutting with his pants below his ample butt cheeks, his swagger obnoxiously scary and marked by a looming defiance, my first instinct (and possibly my only one) is to go the other way. To cross the street, unlock my door faster, get in the car sooner. My idea of the Boogie Man *is* Maurice in baggier clothes, black pants, black shoes, dread locks, maybe, or overgrown hair that resembles tiny black beads or pebbles. The Boogie Man looks like my brother, not like my boss, my professors, the police officers who leer, the lawyers who lie, the FedEx deliverers that deliver. The Boogie Man doesn’t look like Jim Crow would if he had a face. He, because he is a man, doesn’t look like Jesse Helms, Strom Thurmond, John McCain, Dick Cheney, Nixon. Black men carry the unwarranted burden of being *the* ultimate scary thing.

That thing that goes bump in the night...the first one suspected when “they” are looking for a thief, a vagabond. Strange, ironic even...this—a paradox. Black men are the assumed evil-doers, while white men are the long-time evil-creators. Think about it.

Still, I wish always, constantly, that I was a white man. Maybe not forever, just for a day or so...maybe a year. See what it feels like to be socially carefree, to have a chance to *really* rule the world, to be unsuspected and revered, to be the judge and the prosecutor. I would never, ever, ever tell Maurice about this wish. I’d never admit to him that if I had my way, in my next life, I’d be a snow-colored, penis-clad brute with eyes the color of the sky, hair the color of the sun. I couldn’t tell him that I wanted to be a white man in America, anywhere in the world really, with cotton-colored skin, eyes the color of mint leaves, hair the color of vanilla beans. Be the epitome of dominance, security, virility, untouched esteem. I cannot tell Maurice. I cannot tell him that though I adore his nose and lips, the way his bright smile is made brighter by his dark, shadowy skin, I would rather he be white so he’d be taken seriously without any pretense or agenda. Honored and respected despite a lifetime of evil-doing and treachery. I cannot tell him that his dogged fixation on the elevation of black minds and souls makes him worthwhile *and* insignificant, all the same. *You’re fighting an uphill battle, you know?* I cannot tell him that I fret at the thought of bringing a black boy into this world. *He doesn’t stand a chance*, I want to tell him. *He’s not even here yet and the world is already against him*. But, I’m sure, Maurice is already aware of this. *Have you ever wished it, too?* I think to ask him. *Do you ever ask God “Why?” Why am I despised, detested, loathed for something that I cannot help?*

I think that...no, I **know** that white men have all the power in the world. Can press a button and start a war. Pound a gavel, abuse the law. They are what Maurice is not, what I am not. They do not have to worry about being looked over because they are black with breasts or nappy hair. They do not have to worry about anything except being sunburned and even I have to

worry about that. They do not have to worry about being good enough; it is assumed. I wish I was a man with milk for my skin, carrots for my mane, celery for my eyes. Demanding respect wherever I go, bombarding my way to the front of the line because I have the God-given right to do so...because it was my destiny manifesting. Calling black men boys, stopping them in their cars because fitting a nondescript description is a crime. Addicted to a blind hate that I don't even understand.

Yes, Maurice, some days, I cannot help but wish that I, that we were frail-skinned white men. Sometimes, some days it is hard to bear the mass assumption that I am inadequate, incapable, inept...always having to prove myself...always having to prove and disprove something. Always acting accordingly so as not to set black folks back even further. Sometimes, some days, I do not want to smile. And sometimes, some days I just want to know what it feels like. Do excuse me if I seem intolerable. I know you cannot stand self-hate. Excuse me for sometimes feeling instantly degraded because I have a high dose of melanin. Excuse me, Maurice. This is just me hating myself.

*Why does this black woman fear me?* I imagine Maurice asking himself. *Am I not her partner in this struggle? Are we not fighting the same foe?* I cannot, however, imagine him understanding; I cannot imagine him tolerating my...self-hate. He would tell me that I was hating the wrong thing, that my fear was misdirected, misguided. He would tell me that I should, really, hate the snow-colored monsters. There was absolutely nothing about being white that was worth wanting for myself. There was nothing about being white that was worth striving for. *I don't understand*, I'd say. *What do you mean?* He'd give me his copy of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Tell me to get my mind right. Read all the annotations he'd made in the margin. Pay particular attention to the paragraphs and sections marked in a yellow highlighter. We'd discuss Malcolm and Fanon and DuBois. We might read about Marcus Garvey, the Black Arts

Movement, Gwendolyn Knight. We'd paint pictures of black families with acrylic paint sitting on the peaks of mountains, at the top of the moon. We'd exchange intense emails after midnight about the state of black America, about the mockery that is the United States Justice System.

He'd tell me stories of him being pulled over in Albany, New York, as he was on his way somewhere. Never mind that he wasn't speeding or that his tags were not expired. He would've been on his way to class, working on his Master's in Africana Studies. Or maybe he was on his way to work to one of his jobs. He'd tell me how the police officer, undoubtedly a white man with eyes the color of mint leaves and hair the color of vanilla beans, questioned what he was doing, where he was going, and who he really was. He'd get a \$200 citation for speeding, though he never does. He'd be infuriated as he told me, as he relived it, because it would've been the third time he was profiled in a month. *A month!* he'd yell. *Fuck the police!*

*The Boogie Man is white, you know? So is the Devil. And if we had to classify hate into an ethnic group, it'd surely be white, too.* How do you know this, I'd say. *Look at the history of time, of life, of the world. The oppressor, the divider, the conqueror, the lyncher, the taker—what do they all have in common?* They, I'd say, are all white. He'd smile his bright smile, proud that he'd reached another mind.

My skin, brown like hot chocolate, is lighter in the winter and darker in the summer. It reacts to sun in way that used to annoy me. My face would be glow and shine with a sheen that only a black face could reflect. But now, I relish it...I adore it. In the summer, my face gets as dark as Maurice's, my freckles even darker. I love it. I have something that the people who hate me, the people who mock and deride me, the people who've worked to keep me back. I have something that they want: a natural tan.

I imagine Maurice telling me that my skin'd been kissed by the sunshine, by God. It'd been soaked in the Earth's compounds, in rich minerals and oils and gold. My skin was the result

of everything. It was the product of life, the zenith of time. All the colors of the world mixed together, all the hues, all the tones, all the versions—all together, they make me. Black, but brown. Dripping with the Creation Story, with the beginning of the World.

I imagine Maurice. I picture him at the front of a class room. He was a pen or a pencil in his hand. He shirt sleeves are rolled up to his elbows because he's been working all day; he's trying to be comfortable more than anything else. He is standing at the front of his classroom full of middle schoolers. Professing to his students. Teaching them about their history. Testing them on their culture. I imagine him. Dark-skinned Maurice, disappointed with a little black boy who reminds him of himself at that age. He is angry because that little boy does not try and does not care. After class, Maurice'll pull him to the side, put his hand on the boy's shoulder and ask him, "Son, what are you doing?"

I imagine Maurice. I juxtapose him to the black Boogie Man with beady hair and baggy pants and blue-black skin. I am reassured, if only for a moment, that black is beautiful, black is okay, black is not synonymous with wrong.

I read about the Black Arts Movement, Harlem Renaissance, Black Panthers, SNCC, Martin Luther King, Hewey Newton, Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka. I read all these books and articles and accounts. I see pictures and paintings and drawings. And I wish. I do not wish that I was a frail-skinned white man or that my skin was depleted of its precious color. I do not care what anyone says. I disregard the black people who confine me, the white people who hate me, the institutions that were made to keep me bogged, pushing against a constant current.

I look at me in the mirror, see my eyes, my nose that grew long and not wide, my freckles that defy my Negroness, my lips, my cheekbones, my smile. I look at me and see...I see me. Black girl lost one day, found the next. The beauty queen, the potential center-fold, the

academic, the writer. An aspiring mother, a daughter, a niece, a sister. I look at me. Twenty-five years of growth and deterioration and re-growth. Where do I go from here?

Wherever .

Never mind you, America. Never mind that I wanted to hate. Never mind that I was on my way to hating *it*, to becoming the very thing, the very person who I pitied. Never mind. I read Giovanni's *Prosaic Soul* and I am thrilled. I am excited. *Someone else gets it. Someone else got it.* I read Giovanni's *Prosaic Soul*, and then I lose hope. I lose hope because she wrote about a world that existed thirty and forty years ago. She wrote about a world that *is* today. All that's *really* changed, well not much has changed. Has it?

When I came to East Carolina, I was immediately immersed in a whole new world. Take that for what it is. Eastern North Carolina is like no other place I'd ever been. I was shocked, culturally. I came from a place that I thought was diverse, to a place that was stagnant in too many ways. I came to Greenville and became increasingly hung up on race. I was hung up on the color of my skin, the connotations therein. I came to Greenville, to East Carolina and understood that no matter how much progress we made, no matter how many strides were strode, no matter how many challenges were overcome, there would always remain a divide.

I wish I could say that I had hope, that I thought the future was promising, that I foresaw a remarkable change in the future. Most days I don't...I cannot help not having hope for people. If it wasn't race, it'd be something else.

Straight and gay.

Rich and poor.

Fat and skinny.

Tall and short



Something. It'd be something. We'd find something to separate people and make them feel uncomfortable. I don't have any expectations for change. If things move forward, fine. If not, I won't be as disappointed. Why should I be, anyway? What have we learned from the years before us, from the experiences of others, from the history of history? What have we learned? Time moves forward and nothing changes. War and poverty and rape and murder and pilfering. This world is ugly. It always has been. So long as it is occupied by people with all their neuroses, it always will be.

## CHAPTER 4: THE NOW: IT WAS A MONDAY, IT WAS A SATURDAY

### *A Monday*

My plan for the day was to go down there and find something to write about. I wanted to find a strikingly inspirational *something*—a person, a building, a tree. I'd take pictures of it, writes pages and pages of notes, and vague thoughts, and end up with a story to add to my collection in slow progress. It was hot, muggy, sticky, nearly unbearable. But, I planned to suffer through the discomfort to unearth an inspiration. At the time, I hadn't been writing much of anything...not really. I was aching for a rushed, romantic urge to write and write and write.

West Greenville is where I headed. The West Side, the wrong side, the ugly side. The side with its own police substation. The side with houses that've aged horribly and are decorated with cracks and holes in their siding, steps, driveways. The side that the locals have dubbed as a ghetto, a project. *Ghet·to [noun]*: a section of a city, especially a thickly populated slum area, inhabited predominantly by members of an ethnic or other minority group, often as a result of social or economic restrictions, pressures, or hardships. *Proj·ect [noun]*: a publicly built and operated housing development, usually intended for low or moderate-income tenants, senior citizens, etc. West Greenville.

They say you shouldn't be down there, that it's dangerous, that that's where the last murder in Greenville happened. They say that there are drunk men and senile women dressed in too little and soiled clothes, bantering and raging and musing aloud. They say that the youth, the ashy black boys and the sassy black girls, are troubled and disrespectful and wanton. They'll cuss at you as you drive down and pass them on 5<sup>th</sup> Street. They'll walk in the middle of the street, ride their bikes on the yellow lines with no regard for anything or anyone. All they seem to care about is themselves and where they are going at that moment. This is the West Side. This is West Greenville. Blatantly a 'hood and a project.

It was a Monday and I set out with my cousin to the West Side. I brought her along to carry my camera bag. I brought her along so I wouldn't have to walk around strange, dodgy streets alone. That's what they were, after all. Right? That's what they say. She didn't and couldn't really provide any type of protection; she was barely 120lbs and hardly 5'6. I figured, in any case, that two people were much more of a deterrent than one. Two people would be too hard, I thought, to approach, assault, harass. Those streets had a reputation that preceded them by miles and miles. Of course, I hadn't experienced anything firsthand, but rumors usually come of some truth. I wasn't going to take any chances.

It was a Monday—one of the two days I usually had off. A day when most people were at work, suffering the blues. A day that the average, working person endures in order to get closer to the Hump and then, finally, Friday. I lived on the other side of tracks and had since moving to Greenville. I stayed near ECU's main campus, within walking distance of the Tar River, of the Greenway and off-leash dog area. Loud, sometimes live music, late night screaming, lone beer cans in my driveway, orphaned, sullied socks in the street—I was in the center of “woo hoo” lane (what it has come to be known as). Undergraduates fresh from mom and dad's clutch, and in more ways than one, free.

I'd been telling myself that I wouldn't be able to write or come up with anything substantial or anything that I'd like to write about unless I talked to people. This was no good. I was just getting to a point, at 24-years-old, where I was comfortable. I was just beginning to be *okay* with talking to people conversationally. I mean, I didn't *do* small talk. I couldn't. It's silly. I hadn't really considered the fact that I'd need interviewing or journalistic skills. I thought, I assumed I would just write without much forethought, drive up and down the broken streets as ideas and words came to me. I thought, I assumed it'd be easy.

I went out to West Greenville and drove around until I found a parking lot in which I could legally and safely leave my car. I needed to figure out a starting point from which I could move away from methodically; I needed to find that *thing* that would serve as my inspiration, my tangible muse. Also, it'd have to be somewhere close to the parking lot; I wasn't trying to walk far. I chose a street that was close to a set of tracks. Albemarle Avenue. It looked like an old warehouse district, and I pegged it as such in my mind and in my notebook. There was a building—which really wasn't much of a building anymore—that'd been mangled and disfigured by a fire the day, April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Barack Obama came to town. (I still think, and will tell anyone willing to listen, that the two incidents were related.)

Rumors were abounding even before the fire was completely stifled, even before Obama ever left eastern North Carolina. I heard that the (previous) owner started the fire because it was scheduled to be demolished. I heard he was pissed, and those flames and clouds of thick, gray smoke were the outcome of his anger. I haven't, however, heard what the final report was. In all the years that I'd lived here, there hadn't ever been such a large fire...not that I'm aware of. I was comfortable with adopting that conspiracy as my own; the irony was just too much.

The barely-there building, the Imperial Tobacco Warehouse, was “located in ‘Tobacco Town’ off Dickinson Avenue, [a] three-story plant of the former Imperial Tobacco Company of Great Britain and Ireland Ltd., [...] once the largest buyer of tobacco on the Greenville market for the export trade, according to research written by local historian Roger Kammerer. Most of the structure was built in the early 1900s. The company left Greenville in 1978, leaving behind the building covering two city blocks” (Abramowitz, et al). The building was *supposed* to be saved. It was *supposed* to be restored. A building that housed and cured and protected a deadly and addictive substance was going to be restored. It'd been bought by Tom Taft and was a part

of the “\$5 million bond issues for the redevelopment of West Greenville and the Center City.

[People] hoped the tobacco facility would be a star attraction of the effort. (Abramowitz, et al).

Atlantic Avenue. Six buildings in my short lines of vision. I drew a map of the area as best as I could. The tracks, Alley Street, Atlantic and Albemarle Avenue. Buildings A, B, C, D, E, and F. Structure A, the Imperial Warehouse, highlighted by orphaned strands of yellow “caution” tape still hanging around, was an eyesore. There were mounds of plump baggies mixed and pouring out of the rubble. They were full an off-white substance. I joked that they were drugs...crack, perhaps. There were so many. *What could they have possibly been?* My cousin told me not to touch them; she said my fingerprints would be left behind and I’d be implicated, and whoever they belonged to would come after me. Not likely, but I did err on the side of caution and didn’t touch them.

There was a white man driving a pearl-colored Buick SUV picking bricks out of undulating mounds and heaps of debris. He tossed them, one after another, into a flatbed trailer. His face was flushed, covered in sweat and dust. His t-shirt was muddied with flecks of brown, black, and burnt orange. You are sure to see a lot of that around here—men picking out usable pieces of rubble to use, surely, on the construction of some other structure.

Imperial was falling apart, bricks scattered everywhere. Charred and burnt chunks of material that used to hold the building together couldn’t be distinguished from one another. They were lumped together; they looked like mush. Small puddles of water and trash rested where smooth pavement used to be, should’ve been. Beer cans, cigarette butts, arbitrary waste. Imperial looked as if it was being prepared for complete demolition. What was left of it—the frame, the skeleton—would soon be no more. I knew that without having to be told. I wanted to take its picture before it was forever gone. Large pigeons flew overhead and flapped their loud wings

from building to building. I thought it strange to see a pigeon there; I always associated the birds with big, urban cities.

The air smelled. It reeked of something burnt, of something that never stopped burning. It smelled like boiling rubber. If *old* had a smell, that was it. Mothballs, an unaired basement, sweaty gym socks left in a locker room. Sticky and hot—it felt like summer in the middle of July. Like summer in the middle of South America, somewhere much closer to the equator. North Carolina is notorious for unbearable summers, but, I am sure, that was the hottest day. Ever.

I took more pictures than I care to number or remember. It was somewhere in the 200 range. I wanted to have a memory, a record of every inch, of every single thing that I saw. Especially since there was so much renewal and restoration and development taking place. I wanted to stay out there for as long as it took me to fill up the pages of my brown leather notebook. But, it felt like my skin was searing. I fought the nagging urge to leave. (I had a feeling that it'd be a long while before I came back.) Uncomfortable and clammy. Annoyed because my cousin had a permanent and palpable expression of displeasure; she wanted to leave and fast. She stood a few paces behind me with her bottom jutting out and her skinny arms folded across her thin chest. She'd been practicing that pout for 18 years and to ease her impatience, I produced an impromptu photo shoot. She was the only model.

The air, thick and visible. I could see silver heat waves heaving in the distance, hovering over the tracks. A mirage of water. I could feel the waves rippling over my coffee-and-cream skin. Gray clouds, no breeze, a drab, solemn sky. It was going to rain. I couldn't smell it, but I could tell. I could feel it coming. I walked up Alley Street and Atlantic Avenue; I walked back down. I wrote notes, swatted bugs, took pictures and memories, wiped sweat from my nose and forehead. I crossed the tracks, going back toward Albemarle Avenue; I wished it was a nicer day. I wished I planned it all better.

Walking back to my car, I heard a man's voice yell out, "Hey, you a photographer?"

After I found where the voice was coming from, I responded.

"No, I'm doing a project for school."

We held a brief, choppy conversation across an open lot full of deep grooves and thick green, grass. In the time that it took me to work up the nerve to walk to where he was—never-minding the prickly weeds rubbing against my bare legs—he'd told me that that building there, the building painted white and purple, was the first black theatre in Greenville. The Roxie, he called it. He told me that that street over there, Albemarle Avenue, used to thrive with all black-owned businesses. I told him that I was writing a story about West Greenville, about the "other" side of the tracks.

"Yeah, man," he started. "They tearin' down everythin' that used to be ours. They tearin' down all the black buildings." He told me broken pieces of history as he remembered it. He told me about landmark buildings that used to stand where open lots, dilapidated structures, and empty, shelled warehouses now stood. I was perplexed, I must admit. The only thing that I could tell ever thrived there was the police presence and poverty.

"How long have you been living here?" I asked.

"All my life," he said. "Forty-four years." Jimmy Halloway was his name. He talked without provocation or question.

"It's good someone is gonna make a documentary about the area before they tear everything down." He knew a lot of older people, he said, who could share information with me about the area. And no, he grinned, he wouldn't mind sitting down to talk with me sometime.

"Can I have your telephone number," I asked. He obliged. I knew that he would. Mr. Halloway talked and talked and talked. In between the slur of words coming out too fast was a twang and a drawl that *was* the South. He reminded me of my father... what I can remember,

what I've been told. Talking fast, fast, fast. Thoughts moving quick, quick, quick. Stuttering because of excitement. Gibberish to an untrained ear. My sister talks like our father, too. When others are telling her to slow down, looking at her mouth in astonishment, I've already absorbed every word and responded. I understand her better than anyone. I understood Mr. Holloway with no problem.

After awhile, he called another man over, a man the color of coffee beans, skin ashy and worn and flawless all-the-same. He joined in with Mr. Holloway and was equally verbose. Seeming to ramble, his drawl was thicker than Mr. Holloway's. He told me that that old building over there, pointing behind us, "The one that was on fire?" I asked.

"Yeah, that one," he said. "It used to be a tobacco warehouse, and after that it was something else." But, he couldn't remember. He mentioned D.D. Garrett as the first black realtor in Greenville.

Neither men seemed to have an imminent stopping place. So, I let them continue. Unprepared, with just a pen and notebook, I wished that I had a tape recorder. I kicked myself in my mind, but didn't dare walk away. I tried to scribble as fast as I could, flip the pages, and keep eye contact, and all while still never-minding the tall weeds, the heat, the bugs. My cousin—who I purposely disregarded—was sitting in my car incensed. I didn't care.

The first black movie theatre.

Roxie Theatre.

See a picture for \$0.06 or \$0.15.

First black hotel.

Roundtree Restaurant.

Elks High [sic] burned down in the 70s—"a lot of successfulness came from that school."



C.M. Eppes.

Mr. Halloway was excited about what I was doing, excited by the thought of someone recording the remaining history of West Greenville before “the white people destroyed it,” glad that I could take the pictures and write about them.

“They are tearin’ down everything that the black people owned and pushing them further and further back toward 3<sup>rd</sup> street.” *Look into that*, I thought to myself.

“It’s some history here, sista.”

I had to cut him off somewhere; it was starting to rain. I knew it’d come sooner or later.

I asked, “Can I take your picture?” He let me. He seemed proud and pleased by my asking. He suggested that we meet at Carver Library. I told the two men, Mr. Halloway and his friend, “thank you” and that they’d be seeing me around. I hoped that Mr. Halloway would answer when I called and meet me like he said he would. I asked him to try to bring some other people that he knew, too. He said that he would. I hoped that he’d keep his promise because I would be calling and I would be around.

I never called and so he didn’t have a chance to keep his promise. After I drove through the rain and back across the tracks, I didn’t know where to take the story; I didn’t know how to approach it. I didn’t know what to focus on. There was so much and I was overwhelmed. Should I concentrate on the racial and socioeconomic divide or maybe the impact of tobacco commerce on the area? Did I want to change my negative perspective into a positive one? Should I focus on the good that *used* to be, that could be, that was hoped for? I didn’t know what to write or where to go.

## *A Saturday*

Another day that started with me driving south down 5<sup>th</sup>, and ended with me driving north and back home. I was heading to work, to the library. In the yard of St. Gabriel's, I saw a sign: West Greenville Neighborhood Meeting at 6 p.m. It didn't specify a day, so I hoped and assumed that that day was *the* day. I got off work at 5 p.m., so it wouldn't be hard or a problem to attend. *What was I going to do once I was there?* I didn't really know. It seemed like a perfect opportunity to jump in to. If nothing else, I could take pictures.

I hadn't been back to West Greenville on foot since May, so that day was as good a day as any. I sat in my white Cavalier in the parking lot behind St. Gabriel's Church and thought about how I'd introduce myself, how I'd approach people. *No, I didn't live in West Greenville and no this is not where I'm from. I'm just here to observe and record.* I just wanted to sit among the people and take pictures while they talked. I wanted to see what it was that people talked about at these meetings.

The evening was just getting started, though the sun was still very much on high. To say it was hot, well, that wouldn't be enough. It is quite difficult to verbalize North Carolina, eastern North Carolina, Greenville heat. It's not just "hot," it's humid. Your skin becomes like the outside of a chilled water bottle sitting under a lamp. You drip with sweat. I'm not one of those people, one of those women who don't perspire. I do and I do a lot. The top of my nose is always the first place on my body to form little beads. Then it drips down from the top of my head, down my temples, down my neck. After that it starts to collect under my arms, behind my knees, under my breasts, inside my bra.

I sat there. Even though my A/C was blowing fairly cool air on my torso and forehead, my windows were up, and I was parked in a shady spot under a canopy of trees, I was still sweating. Two older black men crawled out of a maroon pickup truck—the only other vehicle in

the parking lot—carrying gallon jugs of iced tea, bags of ice, foil pans full of food. I watched them. I watched them intently and soon, they started looking over and watching me. They had a reason to be there; now, what was I doing? We were staring at each other; I'd look away out of respect. It's not polite to stare, after all. I figured it was going to have to be my responsibility, my task to make the first move and introduce myself. Nervous and clammy, I turned off my car, stepped out with my camera, leather notebook, and pen.

My stomach was churning—I was hungry and nervous. Hungry because I didn't eat lunch; nervous because I knew what I had to do. Approach them, introduce myself, ask the right questions to get the right answers. I asked the tallest of the men, the oldest, if there was indeed a neighborhood meeting that night.

“No,” he told me with a smile. “That was last night.”

*Shit.* I thought and I noticed him glance down at my camera dangling around my sticky neck and back up.

“Are you some kind of reporter?” he asked.

“No, I'm doing a project for school,” I said sticking out my right hand. “I'm sorry. I'm LaTasha Jones. I'm a graduate student.” I gripped his hand as firmly as I could and looked him square in the eyes. There's nothing worse than a flimsy, floppy handshake and a visibly timid first meeting.

“Oh, you're a Jones?” He smiled. “I'm a Jones, too. We could be kin.”

I laughed. Just about every person that I've met who shared my last name has said something like that. Especially the ones in eastern North Carolina. It is possible, but not likely. I'm a Jones via my father who is out of Texas. I am also a Gross via my mother is out of California whose grandparents are out of Louisiana. Perhaps we are, indeed, kin since we originated from the same vat of life and substance.

Jimmy Jones. Tall with what looked to be a solid beer belly, a baseball cap on his head, Carolina blue pants and shirt. I didn't have to probe him. He just talked. He made it easy for me. 6 Vance Street; that's where he lived. Though I didn't ask for it, he told me to take his telephone number down in my notebook. He wondered if students could still get software at a cut-rate. *Yes*. Could I get Windows XP? He'd give me the money for it. *Sure*. Come back by sometime soon, he advised me.

Intergenerational Center Advisory Board—he sat on it.

The Center opens at 8 a.m.

Gracey Vines.

Lucille Gorham. 201 Tyson Street.

I wrote as fast as could. Of course, though, I still hadn't invested in a recorder. My short-term memory isn't...well, it's not all that great. Mr. Jones talked and talked and talked. The same way Jimmy Holloway did. I always imagined West Greenville as an unfriendly, hostile, sinister place. I wasn't sure if that was really the case. From the outside, from the hearsay, from the media, it's comparable to Hell. It's comparable to the grimmest place you could imagine, where the sun don't shine and the grass don't grow and rabid dogs are chained to cinderblocks.

"They renovated the church," Mr. Jones started back up. "And took out all the statues and made [it] so that anybody could come."

"Go on in there," he said, pointing to a set of stairs at the back of the church. "That'd be a nice addition to your story."

I expected something that was not what I saw. I anticipated old and worn and dank. I expected cavities filled with the wrong shade of caulk. Folded chairs—the old, gray kind that rasped when you collapsed them. I was greeted by purple, ivory, rich russet, yellow, orange, red. Color popped out everywhere I looked. Rows of browned pews. Walls as white as snow. A row

of lamps hung from the ceiling, leading to a stained glass window with the image of a golden sun and a brown hand holding a rainbow. There wasn't anything bad or disparaging that I could say about St. Gabriel's. Nothing at all. I felt quite ashamed of myself; I had my mind made up based on word of mouth, second-hand reports. This feeling seems to become a thread of mine.

Inside, a group of thin and gawky young men were setting up instruments—a drum set, an amp, a trombone. They were the musicians and I recognized all of them. I'd seen them in passing before on campus...or maybe in the library. I'd be going one way and they the other. All frail and thin and the color of milk chocolate. All three mild-tempered and seemingly meek with a permanent, gentle smile. They each wore glasses; they each looked like they might've been the objects of adolescent cruelties. I watched them move about lightly from the back of the church. They didn't raise their voices above a low murmur; they place the instruments and parts down as lightly as possible. I snapped pictures when they were not looking. The church was empty except for them, me, and a hunched over, slight man sitting at a tiny black piano adjacent to the altar. His fingers moved without effort, his body rocked slightly front and back, side to side. Swaying.

“Do you mind if I take your picture,” I asked.

“Not at all,” he replied, not missing a note or looking up at me. He told me his name was Michael. Frail with oversized glasses, a green t-shirt on top of a white one, khaki pants, a salt and pepper mustache. He reminded me of somebody's grandfather; he seemed docile and kind. Pressing the white and then the black keys, he played from memory. I saw him some months later driving the car of D.D. Garrett with a cigarette in between his lips. I saw him standing on the porch of Garrett's house in the rain, waiting for someone, for something. I saw him walking up 5<sup>th</sup> Street.

I took pictures of Mr. Michael, the young men setting up instruments, the auburn pews, the stained glass window, the picture and biography of Lucille Gorham. Walking up and down

the aisle, I could feel the floor thump under me. It was hollow and light; it didn't feel sturdy. I went back outside to leave or find Mr. Jimmy.

Mr. Jimmy told me he was "here to help me in any way" that he could. He said that he was "here to make me successful." This man who I just met not even 30 minutes ago, this man who might be kin to me...he hopes the best for me. That...that I wasn't expecting. I think he thought that I was writing an article...writing about St. Gabriel's and the Intergenerational Center solely. Mr. Jimmy invited me inside the Intergenerational Center, told me I could walk around and take pictures, ask him any questions that I had. I wasn't prepared.

Community Learning Center. Computer Lab. To provide onsite education, [a place] for meetings. The mission of the Center: "Failure is not an option." I smiled at the sight and thought of that mission; it was the same one that my high school principal, Mr. Smith, espoused every day, in every announcement, during every assembly. I thought, *Maybe he was on to something.* Maybe failure isn't and never will be an option. I thought to myself and jotted in my notebook, *I need a tape recorder. I think I've been going about this the wrong way. There's more positive than there is negative. I've been focusing on the negative.*

No doubt West Greenville oozed a very visible and perceivable pessimistic aura. You could not miss the cracked and pitted streets littered with beer bottles. You could not ignore the old men high or drunk, their minds no longer theirs. You saw the broken windows, heard the loud music, noticed the heaps of trash on almost every corner. You watched young children walk the streets idly when they should've been in school. You shook your head at the teenage boys wearing their pants below their butt checks showing off their underwear.

But what about the houses with trimmed yards and gardens and bushes? What about The Little Willie Center? The old, black men and women who never wanted to leave...who stayed in the same houses that they'd always lived in? What about the carwash on the corner that is always

full and always alive? What about the weekends? The weekends when the empty lots of abandoned buildings are full of people so jovial, you want to stop your car, say hello, and share a smile with everyone in eyesight. Frying fish. Selling fish with white bread. Selling unused items and vegetables from the back of a truck. The Mosque. The Mosque with the members who you've seen handing people food and shoes. For free? Does that really matter?

What about all of that?

Mr. Jimmy told me I could stay for the service. So that's what I did. Honestly, I didn't even know that the church was still a church. I assumed that it'd been gutted and was now used for something else. The banner outside on the gate read: Women's 2009 Conference, August 14-15<sup>th</sup>, 6pm, Theme: There's a Story Behind my Praise, Old St. Gabriel Catholic Church, \$10 Registration. The service I was staying for, the service that Mr. Jimmy invited me to was a two-day conference. *How can he invite me to someone's conference and I haven't even paid the registration?*

I went back into the church and looked for someone who looked like they were in charge. Mrs. Whitehead. She was friendly, as if she never met a stranger, never thought ill of someone. Dressed in a long black skirt, black and silver blouse, modest earrings, a watch, sweat on her forehead. I didn't know who or what she was, but I approached her, anyway.

"Hi," I said. "I'm doing a project for school; would it be okay for me stay?"

"Sure," she smiled. She handed me a conference packet, had me sign my name on a list to be included in the drawing of a gift basket. She told me I could sit anywhere I'd like, move around, move to the front, take as many pictures as I'd like. As a token of my appreciation, I told her I would send her the pictures as soon as I was near a computer.

Music, that was very distinctly "church music", was being played on the piano by one of the young men. Wearing a purple vest over a white shirt, he looked at the keys and fingers

through his glasses. I sat in the back. Then, I moved up to another pew. And then, another. I wanted to sit close enough to see, but I didn't want to act as if I was supposed to be there. I was just a visitor.

I took pictures as people walked in unhurriedly. I asked before a snapped, but they still looked apprehensive and bashful. I sat back down in the row and pew I'd chosen, and by then it was already 6:35. *Wasn't this supposed to start at 6?*, I thought to myself. More people came in with the same leisure. All of the women had on dresses or skirts. Me? I had on the clothes I'd worn to work. White, fitted t-shirt, charcoal-colored pants, white "slippers" adorned with variegated flowers. I felt weird in my pants. Even though I was, technically, an outsider, that really made me feel like one. According to them, I thought, women didn't wear pants. I've always wondered what sect of Christianity called for women and girls to wear skirts only. And why? Seemed archaic, if nothing else.

I was hungry. My chest was hurting. It'd been tight all day...the same nervous tightness that I'd always get...that I'd been getting for the last few months. The doctors I saw didn't know what it was or what it was from. All they knew was that I wasn't having a stroke or a heart attack. They signed me off with heartburn as my diagnosis. The pain was debilitating, shooting up my left arm and into my neck. *Does heartburn do that?* I didn't think so. I was out of school and work for a week, relegated to my bed, couch. I laid around all day, doped up on Percocet, sleeping as much as the pain would allow. The prescription drugs made me feel worse. On top of not being able to breathe normal, lay flat on my back, stand or sit up without intense discomfort, I felt high and dizzy and nauseated. I stopped taking them after a day or two. I took something else; I don't remember what it was...it was something that the doctors in the ER prescribed me.

6:45—things began to start. *Typical.* I thought to myself.



People were praising and worshipping like I'd never seen before. Jumping, screaming, running and turning in circles, waving their arms in the air, head thrown back, eyes closed tight with tears. I didn't grow up in church like most black North Carolinians. I'd just recently started attending a local, nondenominational church—Koinonia—because I thought that was what I was supposed to do. I thought that as a young adult in the south, attending a church regularly was expected.

Well, I had actually seen the screaming and running at Koinonia; it was something that you just never get used to. *Are you kidding me?* I'd ask myself every Sunday for almost a year. *Seriously?* Women would roll around on the floor, babbling like babies, speaking in tongues. "They're filled with the Holy Ghost," is what I've been told. *How does someone get filled with that? Does it happen after being saved? Because I ain't ever, have yet to have an urge to scream.*

That's how the people were in St. Gabriel's. With the start of the keyboard, each person stood up as if prompted by something or someone that I could not see. They didn't let the music ring for a few seconds, for a minute; they just jumped right into the jumping. It came up out of them like...I don't know what. Everyone was on the same accord—the little girls, old men, women in skirts like Mrs. Whitehead—everyone was doing the same thing. And there I was, thinking, *Seriously?*

A woman they called "Apostle" was directing the sermon and the makeshift choir. "When you scream and holler, the enemy doesn't know which way to come after you," she blurted in the microphone. The longer I stayed, the more my chest hurt. "I don't know about you, but I'm glad I'm here. You're where you're supposed to be." My chest was hurting bad! "I'm glad that I'm here tonight." And I am actually, too...more than I thought I would be. In between shouting from the congregation, "We're not here on our own; we're here on assignment." *God*

*gave me this event*, I thought. “If you heard it more than once, it’s for a reason... You can’t hide or hinder my praise. I can say that I haven’t got tired yet.”

*Thank you, God, for today...for sending me here...for showing me here...for it all...for my pain...my courage...for my anxiety and fret...It fueled my will and pushed me here, though, I was afraid to come...and they’ve been so welcoming and open...I wish I would’ve known because I would’ve dressed accordingly.*

“Turn your heart not unto me, but unto the Father.” *They treated me as if I was one of them.* “Leave me alone; I’m doing what I can... You don’t have to be a big show-out when you’re doing the work for the Lord... Lord, put me back in tact... Know your place in the Lord... Don’t expect more out of anyone than they can give... I’m talking real... Teach today’s word from the original text... The only part of Jesus operating in us is the Holy Ghost... Evil and good is always present... Find the good that I have and leave that little spot alone... Honor the work that she’s doing... Looking back will make you weak... I love you as a person but not what you do... Don’t marry anyone who isn’t equally yoked... A man that findeth a wife, findeth a good thing.” *I don’t think I’ve sat in hardwood pews in very long time, since I lived in Spring Lake some seventeen years ago.* “Let go of that show-off spirit; use what He gave you and do what you can... Be real or be nothing.”

After the very non-linear sermon was over and the people commenced to pant heavily and fan themselves with what energy they had left, Mrs. Whitehead went to the front of the church and announced that it was time to draw names. A bunch of door prizes that everyone had a chance to win. Everyone who signed in and registered got their name written on a piece of paper and thrown into a hat. My name was among the others. There were several small prizes, but there was one grand, large prize. Mrs. Whitehead drew names for the small prizes. She came to the last prize, the big one... “LaTasha...”

She called my name.

I almost cried.

She called my name and I knew. I knew that God *really* did send me there. He wanted me to be there, to do what I was doing. If that wasn't a sign, I didn't what else could be. I felt like I was on stage again in high school, waiting for my name to be called in the pageant, as the winner. Nervous, afraid, wondering why I'd even bothered to put myself in that position. Hoping my name was called and it never was. But this one time, my name was called. Mrs. Whitehead told everyone that I was a student, a photographer.

"No, ma'am," I interrupted, barely able to hear myself talking. My ears were popping and clogged from the too loud music and screaming. "I'm a writer." Everyone's face lit up. They beamed at the thought of me writing about them. Mrs. Whitehead told me to write about it, about that night and the conference because it was history. She, like Mr. Jimmy, assumed I'd be writing an article or something. They had it in their minds that I was a reporter. Maybe. Maybe I'd write an article.

Now standing at the front of the church by the young men playing instruments, Mrs. Whitehead handed me the tall gift basket. Everyone smiled. Everyone clapped. I went back to my pew in the back. I couldn't believe it...I didn't understand...*Why was my name called?* Sure, it's not like I won a hefty lump sum of money. But, I won the prize. As if it was a reward for being there, for staying.

*This is bigger than me, I thought, and this is bigger than you. I'm preparing myself for everything and all I ask for is strength enough to do it right and to do it well. My story may seem fake or phony. It will seem...unreal. But is all real and true, and it's all mine. From God to me to you.*

## CHAPTER 5: THE WEST SIDE, LOW TIDE: WHY THE DIVIDE?

“So, what is your thesis going to be about?”—the question I am asked on a very regular and sometimes annoying basis. It has been coming up much more frequently in the last few months as I have been telling people—coworkers, family, friends, classmates, strangers—that I am set to graduate (and hopefully, God willing, move far away from Greenville) in a few months.

“It is going to be,” I start, “a collection of nonfiction essays about railroad tracks as racial segregators. You know, like the whole idea of “the other side of the tracks”?” Greenville is a perfect example.” And every time, without fail, the person on the receiving end of this sketch has a tangible “Aha!” moment. They know immediately and exactly what I am talking about without me having to offer much explanation. They could be from eastern North Carolina, any part of North Carolina, the deeper south—Louisiana, for example—the Midwest. It does not matter and it never, ever, ever fails. They know. They know the way you know something bad is about to happen. They know the way a pet might know its owner is ill.

As I tell people about my current work, they nod with commiseration and squint their eyes pensively. They place an index finger at the side of their temple—thinking, agreeing, realizing. They are always apt to share with me what their hometown, their last city was like. They tell me how they, too, have noticed the prominent divide between West Greenville and everything else. They tell me that they’ve heard the scary stories before, too, and if they are new to the area, they were advised to not ever drive down 5<sup>th</sup> Street. Sometimes, though, they share with me that where they are from, it was not railroad tracks that acted as the divider. Rather, it was some other physical demarcation. A body of water, a street, an imaginary line. This side, that side. The wrong side, the right side. A division was always there and always understood.

I planned to start this section with these anecdotes, move into what literature I found and what I inferred from it, what implications it had in answering the what and the why’s that I

started out with. I thought that maybe I'd just give you my opinion, instead. That's what's important, here. Right? I found over seventy scholarly articles on the idea of residential segregation of all of which are listed in the References section. I started my research for this project over two years ago in the required Bibliography and Methods course. I completed a mock thesis prospectus and a review essay—all on this very idea. Then, I spent most of my semester in that course trying to find an answer, and I wanted to be able to say today that I found what I was looking for. And two years later, I am still where I was then: without a real answer.

My determination to find an answer rested on and was ultimately derived from what I read in Elizabeth Ananat's "The Wrong Side(s) of the Tracks: The Causal Effects of Racial Segregation on Urban Poverty and Inequality." Ananat looks at the effects surmounted from segregation as it pertains to and impacts poverty and various inequalities. She analyzed the correlation between "residential racial segregation and population characteristics." She has based her study on the actual physical division of railroad tracks, the extent to which they were purposely laid to segregate races, and the actual and implied effect that both the tracks and segregation had on black and white populations. Her study does not concentrate on the effects just in the South and is pretty well focused on the time directly after the Great Migration (the timeframe between 1910 and 1930 when black Americans moved north and west in mass numbers).

Her work is deeply rooted in sociology and economics; her work, I think, touches on bigger socio-economic issues than which I want or need to delve. What's important, though, is Ananat's final, concluding assertions that "railroad subdivision" (35) was quite incidental, and the fact that railroad tracks have come to serve as physical dividers is nothing more than an after the fact matter—one has nothing to do with other in terms of purposeful, planned cause and

effect. Ananat's analysis negates the idea that railroad tracks were purposely constructed to serve as racial dividers.

It makes sense, right? I presented this project during the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Research and Creative Achievement Week that is sponsored by the Graduate School. I read a portion of the "Paying Attention" paper, I displayed a PowerPoint with the pictures that I'd taken up until that point, I concluded with the above conclusion that I derived from Ananat. My audience consisted of three or four fellow presenters, two judges, a friend, and maybe a few random stragglers. Both of the judges (and I'll never forget this), chided me for making such an arbitrary conclusion. They were sure, standing in front of their doctorates and egos, that both Ananat and I were wrong. There just *had* to be more to it. They made specific comments on the scoring and suggestion forms. But, by luck, I cannot find them.

These judges, as I remember, were from the hard sciences. Their lives revolved around the quantifiable and the sure. This, I am afraid, isn't either. Why is there a divide? Because there exists a thing called institutional racism. Why are railroad tracks the dividers? I don't know, honey. I just don't. And I wonder, now, if it's really all that important to dig and dig and dig for an answer. You know? I have to quote Natasha Trethewey here: "I'm not interested in arguing the omissions of the past, only the restoration of those omissions in the present. Perhaps not restoration: acknowledgment is a better word." And this is the point of it all, you understand? Acknowledgement of what's there. Acknowledgement of what has not been historically ignored and erased.

Southern culture—its negations, hypocrisies, and pervasive innuendos—has brought me to the point that I am at now: exploring the use, role, and implications of railroad tracks as physical, racial segregators. Growing up in North Carolina has proffered me the opportunity to experience voluntary and involuntary segregation; but I have been most curious and concerned

with the history and upshot of the involuntary type. Varying forms of segregation, though usually ignored in our present day, is a matter that did not disappear with the Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1875, or 1964; it did not devolve with the elimination of the Southern Manifesto. If nothing else, it has developed and expanded into a “necessary” element of American culture. It has been a common thread, in one way or another, throughout my short life. I have been living in eastern North Carolina for nearly a decade, and it has become a matter that I can no longer snub as inconsequential because I drive by it every day, because I am beyond tired of ignoring everything around me.

As a personal matter, I do not and have not ever viewed railroad tracks as symbols of freedom or progression as expressed in much of the existing literary works (Millichap, Zabel). They have been annoying and disruptive skeletons decaying in the street as the majority were not in use where I grew up. Railroad tracks have always been tools and means of segregation: dividing one side from another, dividing one race and class from the other. Excluding the week-long, cross country trip that I took with my mother and siblings some fifteen years ago by Amtrak from North Carolina to California, I cannot recall any positive images of trains and/or railroad tracks. The trip, as I try to remember it now, was an adventure reminiscent of one that would be illustrated on an episode of *Dora the Explorer* or some other Disney or Nickelodeon show. But nothing else resonates. Even the movie *Polly* (1989), a musical narrative based on a Southern town divided by train tracks, sticks out in my mind and continues to be an ever-present image that I have carried with me for over a decade. This movie has stuck with me since I first saw it back in elementary school. I remember the tensions between one side and the other. The movie is set in the 1950s, but I think that the conflict it portrays, to a degree, still exists today.

The point here, then, is the difference, the separation, the gap caused by this seemingly otherwise positive technology. The point is that while we are consumed with the very idea of

change and the overall process of moving forward and progression, we overlook the things that have not changed or progressed. In the time that it took me to realize that this was important and worth sharing, I noticed and noted that West Greenville was being revitalized—shanty houses were being torn down, and new, modern models being put in their places. But, so what? You build (them) new houses and new structures, but what about everything else? What about the mentalities of the people? How will that be revitalized? What will be done to reconstruct the mentality that “this is where I belong,” the mentality of being a minority, the mentality of being a thorn in the foot, side, finger of society?

My point, finally, is meant to focus on the overall disregard for awareness and attention. Sure, new homes are being built, but the problems, the fundamental, historical problems remain. My advisor, Alex Albright, said something to me that resonated. He said, “They erase people’s memory by erasing their architecture.” So, perhaps that is the intention. Erase the dilapidated shacks and you’ll erase the dilapidated mentality.

I pose this question because I do not have the answer or answers. It is amazing, I think, to ponder the very intangible question of *how to change a person’s thought processes*. Is it even possible? Would it involve a combination of psychotherapy, electric shock, and therapeutic drug use? I’m being obtuse here because after thinking and thinking about it, the question seems like a silly one to ask. And I don’t know, finally, what the solution is. Remember that we are talking about centuries and generations of thought habits. How do you fix, alter, change that? I don’t know, but it’s a question and issue to consider upon further.



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