



Progress & Privilege: Blackness, Femininity, and the Evolution of the Talented Tenth

An Externship ~~and Advanced Project~~

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The Seventh Sister: The Strange Meaning of Black Feminity in America

“[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”¹

In the beginning this work was titled, “When Mammy Comes to Class”. My choice to invoke Mammy was deliberate and to tell a truth, manipulative. Mammy is provocative; her presence in this discussion is equivalent to juggling live grenades. Within the context of this project, Mammy’s purpose is to help me do more than just grab the reader’s attention. My aim is to disturb the reader in such a fundamental way as to bring all the deep-seated pejoratives made toward and about Black Women into the foreground. No other character is more appropriate for the task than Mammy. She lives deep within the collective American subconscious as an unattractive (ugly), simple-minded, hard-working and loyal creature. Her humanity, and by extension her feminity go unrecognized. Instead, she is seen as a steady, comforting presence that is satisfied with servility.

In the intervening years since her entry into the American cultural conscious, Mammy’s descendants have evolved into sharp-tongued, neck-rolling, finger-snapping, abrasive representatives of Blackness. Like their progenitor, racism obscures their humanity and their feminity. They too carry the social stigma of being unattractive. They too are marginalized. However, unlike their ancestress who was conspicuously concealed from white eyes in the kitchens and the gardens of yesteryear, the Black Woman in the modern era is a highly visible character in the public square. Today, the Black Woman is both cartoon and caretaker. While the supportive role she plays has evolved from cook to clerk, has progressed from live-in domestic to administrative assistant, the underlying perception of the Black Woman as being of an “inferior order”² remains constant.

At this point I fully admit to painting a picture of Black American Women with broad, sweeping strokes. I do this with specific intent to underscore the “peculiar sensation ... of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”³ In my opinion, the Black Woman’s experience in America is a case study in “double-consciousness.”⁴ Although DuBois constructed the concept of double-consciousness to communicate the stress and constraints of a bifurcated racist structure between Blacks and Whites, I assert that for Black American Women, their consciousness is further complicated by intra-racial expectations contoured by gendered social customs and perceptions. With that said how then are some Black Women able to synthesize their many souls into one, fully resolved entity? Finding an answer to that question opened a line of inquiry that gave rise to this work.

Contained herein are the Externship and the Advanced Project. They are presented here as a pair to demonstrate their synergistic relationship. Both the Externship and the Advanced

¹ DuBois, WEB. The Souls of Black Folk: 100th Anniversary Edition. Paradigm Publishers: Boulder, CO, 2004, 2.

² Irons, Peter H. A People’s History of the Supreme Court. New York: Viking, 1999, 173.

³ DuBois, WEB. The Souls of Black Folk: 100th Anniversary Edition. Paradigm Publishers: Boulder, CO, 2004, 2.

⁴ Ibid.

Project employ the DuBoisian metaphor of the veil to inquire into the relationship between Black Women and academic achievement at the graduate level. I have co-opted the term and made application of it in order to illustrate the challenges of entering the graduate school. The Externship engages the inquiry through the framework of an experiential learning project. The Externship pierces the veil (preparing to enter graduate school) through its use of reflective observation to describe and evaluate the significance of the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). The Advanced Project furthers the Externship, using feminist multi-methods of inquiry to probe behind the veil to describe and evaluate the impact of race and gender on identity formation among Black American Women who have completed graduate school.

As a whole, this work is as much about the conflux of race and gender as it about the conundrum of Black progress and privilege. Both the Externship and the Advanced Project attempt to describe the experience of the modern-day Talented Tenth. As DuBois conceived them, the Talented Tenth were intended to use their education and training to cut a path toward self-sufficiency in behalf of their race. As group, the Talented Tenth was to stand as a bulwark that ensured future Black progress. However, that bulwark had to stand up under the pressure of institutionalized racism. DuBois uses double-consciousness to depict the tenuous line the Tenth must walk. The Tenth does not wish to whitewash their blackness, they simply want to approach Opportunity's door and know that they can walk through.

To see the related Advanced Project, please go to
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Piercing the Veil

The externship will demonstrate competence using reflective observation in two areas:

1. *Can reflect on the learning process and methods used in an experiential project.*
2. *Can use reflective observation to describe and evaluate the significance of the Graduate Record Examination (GRE).*

The externship is an occasion for reflection on the learning process and the methods used in an experiential project. The externship examines learning through two lenses: doing, making, and creating accompanied by documentation and reflection. An experiential learning project is activity-driven. The student learns through action (the intake of the experience) and reflection (the dealing with, or making sense of the experience). Reflection suspends the action of the learning activity and provides a space in which the student can internalize and apply what is being learned.

Fundamental to the design of any experiential project is a working knowledge of the learning cycle and its four points or phases⁵. The learning cycle is an ecosystem for how human beings learn. The cycle has two channels, the way we take in experience and the way we deal with that experience. Contained within each channel are two phases. The first channel of the learning cycle considers the way we take in experience. We can receive experience in two ways, through *concrete experience*, learning through specific experience, or through *abstract conceptualization*, learning through thinking. The second channel of the learning cycle considers the way we deal with experience. We can deal with, or engage experience through *reflective observation*, the thoughtful consideration preceding a judgment, or through *active experimentation*, learning through doing.

Learning can occur at any point or phase within the cycle. Depending upon personality and profession, some phases, or styles, are more developed than others. My preferred learning style combines *abstract conceptualization* (thinking) and *active experimentation* (doing). With these two approaches I can gather information, play with and test that information, analyze the findings to give me what I need to converge onto the appropriate solution. For instance, as a child my mother tasked me with keeping a running tally of the family grocery bill prior to check-out. If you have ever shopped with a professional mother, then you know that the task assigned me was not easy. I kept track of multiple variables simultaneously. Starting with the budget, how much could we spend for the week. I calculated rates of consumption. I used math to determine how many units of an item would last the family for the week or for the month. And worst of the worst, I calculated for tax – *in my head!* My sole reward for all of this effort was seeing my mother’s smile of approval. Over the course of my lifetime I have come to rely on

⁵ The terms “learning cycle” and “learning style” were developed by David A. Kolb, PhD and are contained within the Kolb Learning Style Inventory (LSI). Grounded in experiential learning, the LSI is a 12-point questionnaire that detects preferred learning styles and examines their potentiality in the areas of problem solving, collaboration, communication, and conflict resolution. The purpose of the LSI is to assist individual in revealing and articulating their learning style preferences. See *Kolb Learning Style Inventory*. David A. Kolb, *Experience Based Learning Systems, Inc.*, 2007.

this approach because it allows me to yoke the abstract to the practical. However, the ideal learner cycles through all four learning styles.

My preferred learning styles are well developed; however, the externship is an *occasion to cultivate reflective observation*. Within the framework of the experiential learning project, I constructed a competence statement to leverage the learning experience in such a way as to produce a specific outcome. The intended outcome for this externship is, to demonstrate competency using reflective observation as a means to describe and evaluate the significance of the Graduate Record Examination (GRE).

To realize the externship's intended outcome, I enrolled in a GRE preparatory course run by a for-profit education company. The two primary actors in the for-profit education sector are Kaplan, Inc., a subsidiary of the Washington Post, and the Princeton Review. The Kaplan business model is distinctly outcomes based. The Higher Score Guarantee embodies the Kaplan metric. It is this guarantee that drove my decision to choose Kaplan over the Princeton Review.

Evidence of the two competence statements will be offered through the production of a learning journal followed by a short reflective essay. Appended to these are the test results from the Kaplan GRE Diagnostic (Appendix 1). The learning journal encompasses an eight-month period beginning January and concluding August 2008. The journal documents the experience of preparing for the GRE, the development of reflective observation as a learning skill and, the evolution of my concept of individual identity. The journal, however, is not limited to the bounds of the Kaplan course (the classroom portion began July 10, 2008). The extended scope of the journal is evidenced by the opening entries that show the early formulation of the questions to be used in the Advanced Project's survey.

Learning Journal

Purpose & Intention: The primary purpose of the learning journal is to capture the learning experience as it is happening. This journal encompasses a period of eight months (January through August 2008). It is important to note that the actual in-class experience did not commence until July 10, 2008. The early entries, January through June, document the formulation of the externship and advanced project's overall, guiding concept. In the early entries, there are several references to the Advanced Project's draft survey.

The learning journal has two outcomes; the journal will:

1. document my development and use of reflective observation as a learning skill within the context of preparing for the Graduate Record Examination (GRE); and,
2. describe and evaluate the significance of the GRE in relationship to my concept of individual identity, academic performance (achievement), and the notion of privilege.

January 31, 2008 - GETTING STARTED

Questions for the survey: Need an emotional component. What was the experience *really* like for you? Did you feel the need to be an example of your race? Your sex? What kind of pressure did you create for yourself and your achievement? Were you aware of this pressure? Did you ever find yourself jealous of more affluent students? Did you ever find yourself jealous of the white students?

February 8, 2008 – LEARNING ASSESSMENT

I've taken the Kolb Assessment. I have a converging learning style that means I am about getting things done. I'm not so much surprised by the results as I am startled that the assessment captured me

spot-on. The lingering question is: Is my learning style a result of acculturation and learned behavior? Is my learning style a survival mechanism (strong suit)?

Professionally, I am a take-charge person. I have to be – I am the office manager – I run the office. Though my position is often considered “administrative” I know myself to be an initiator (leader). I am often called upon to take risks, chart courses through unknown territory, and above all else, be adaptable (flexible enough to change on a moment’s notice). I can clearly see the correlation between my learning style (input/theory) and my professional experience (output/practice). Knowing my learning style is helpful because I now have a language with which to articulate and thereby provide me access to a realm of understanding (awareness) of myself and of others. I think it is important that we (those of us who engage in the profession, either inside the academy or inside the corporation) continue to make, and *reinforce the connection between theory and practice*. It is my belief that theory, when known, *informs* and *enlivens* practice. In other words, theory provides the context for the practice. To me, theory is the balm that soothes the inevitable self-inflicted wounds caused by practice; especially when that practice is permeated by the energy of raw talent.

Question for the survey: During your educational experience, did you feel any need to validate/vindicate your family’s race/class (validate the family’s modest background/sacrifice)?

April 8, 2008 – PLANNING FOR THE BIGGER PICTURE

I updated my professional resume (I’m applying for a job in another department). For the first time in my work life I was able to include an Education line: Bachelor of Arts, DePaul University (Anticipated - November 2008). When I looked at the line I was overcome by an incredible sense of freedom. A great weight had been lifted off of me. For the first time, I do not have to over sell my experience (even though my experience is top quality) to compensate for my lack of a degree. I now have access to the world of work (that is until the rules change and entry-level jobs, like a receptionist, begin demanding a Master’s degree). I equate my elation to having spent years wheel chair bound to then, after some incredible medical intervention, be able to walk.

I will never (I hope never) have to endure another interview that ends with, “You’ve got great experience, but what about your education...” When I hear that statement, it is like having been hit with a bat. I have found that in the professional world, experience means nothing. For that matter, quality means nothing. Managers want the candidate from the name-brand college/university, with the smart-looking degree, and a better-than-average grade point average. And when these “golden” children reach the workplace they have no clue how to function within it. For all purposes I am an administrative person (Office Manager/Executive Secretary) and as such, I write more memorandums, requests for proposal, reviews and summaries, than you can shake a stick at. My senior management, by being senior management, is afforded the luxury to sit back and edit my workproduct. And because I do not have a particular piece of paper attached to my name the salary gap between us is as wide and deep as the Grand Canyon. It isn’t fair.

Now follow this: Because I don’t have a degree I’m on the bottom-rung of the office ladder. Because I am on the bottom rung, opportunities to expand my skills and learn a different discipline do not come my way because I am on the bottom rung. To put it simply, the institution does not esteem my position because my position does not require a degree. Ironically, it is my position and the multitude of other persons who hold positions like mine here on the bottom rung, that are keeping big business (and big schools) running. I am not so romantic as to think that my Bachelor’s is a free pass into economic freedom. It is a meager and modest beginning. In today’s economy a worker must have a large cache of tools (skills and experience) to draw upon. If I am going to fulfill on my personal promises and dreams, I need to continue on this education path. The next stop is graduate school.

April 28, 2008 - DOUBT

That’s the keyword for today – doubt. Lately I’ve questioned the validity of my choice to pursue graduate study. I wonder if I am good enough to be in graduate school. Will I have something meaningful to contribute to society? Or, am I going to grad-school to satisfy a need to look good and be impressive? I will admit that looking good and

being impressive are just as important to me as it is to contribute meaningfully to my community. In these lines I can confess that being impressive yields a certain level of personal satisfaction. Am I confusing being impressive with achievement?

May 15, 2008 - NEUTRAL

I received a statement of my projected social security benefits this week. I am mentioning this here because the earnings record portion of the statement took my breath away. The earnings record is a high-level summary of my salary for the past eighteen years (1989 – 2007). For that period I earned a total of \$517,637; that translates into an average yearly salary of \$28,758. The annual quantitative charts can be jarring. As I look at the “Years You Worked” column I think about the jobs I held and the energy and commitment I brought to my work. It’s in my nature to work hard. I believe that my lack of degree spurred me to work even harder (hard work is my way of compensating for the missing bachelor’s degree). Comparing the “Years You Worked” to the “Salary” column leaves me with a really bad taste in the mouth. As the old people would say, “I put my back into it [the work]” and I got a little something in return. But this is just one viewpoint.

Another way to look at this chart is to acknowledge a triumph: I am able to do well in the face of no agreement – being able to work in the corporate environment without a bachelor’s equals no agreement. In terms of experience, skills and knowledge gained, I did well. The money was not there, but I did gain. My time was not lost. The past eighteen years were not a total loss (although, there are times when it sure feels as if I have wasted my time). Looking forward I think that I am better prepared to enter the graduate school. As a working adult, I know how to work independently. I can manage my workload and myself. Most important, I esteem learning.

June 13, 2008 – REGISTRATION

Taking the First Step: I registered with Kaplan to prepare for the GRE’s. The course cost is ridiculous - \$1200. Higher Ed is expensive (obnoxiously so); and the higher up you go, the less likely you are to find funding. While loans are plentiful, I’m not interested in racking up a mile-high debt. The inherent costs are just too great for a working person. I am glad that I only have me to worry about. I can’t imagine how discouraging this process is, or could be, for adults with dependent children or unsupportive spouses. It would be easy to envy the young, single folk whose parents are fully underwriting their education. When I chat with these fortunate folk, they seem to be void of a clear purpose for their graduate study. In many ways, they use school as a crucible within which they clarify their life’s purpose. To me, this is an awfully expensive way to answer the question, “What do you want to do when you grow up?” Even though as I write this I am experiencing some trepidation about registering into this next phase of my life, I am clear that if I do not proceed, I am only cheating/depriving myself of my ultimate goal, which is personal satisfaction.

The books came in the mail today. The math looks foreign. If I could run – I would. The class begins July 8; it will meet twice weekly for a period of five weeks. My hope is to get a better-than-average score so as to look more “attractive” on the application (Patzner 8). Understand that when I talk about the scores, I have no clue as to what I am really saying. Absolutely no clue; but even in my ignorance, I am approaching the test strategically. In my mind, institutions are on the hunt for “diversity candidates” (“diversity” is what I consider to be the new code for minorities and women). I fit the bill on two fronts; though recent Supreme Court decisions (*Gratz* and *Gutter*) prohibit schools from using race and, or gender as the defining variable in the application, I think that my race and gender will play a positive role in the application process. That’s not to say that I believe I will be accepted into graduate school based solely upon my race and, or my gender, but these will surely distinguish me in the applicant pool. At least, I hope they will. Plus, I have a bonus card – I am a returning adult.

Sharpening My Oyster Knife: I have to note my shift in perspective about my race and my gender. From my observations, the discourse (the rhetorical framework/conversation) that holds blackness in America is dysfunction. In other words, blackness is some thing to be overcome. Blackness, or black dysfunction, is a liability. On the national stage, I’ve noticed how Democratic Nominees Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton downplay their respective race and gender. Obama, in his opening remarks, is

always sure to mention his Kansas heritage. By doing this, Obama signals that he is not a typical black man. He is refined, cultured, has experience with whites (can function within their discourse community with fluency) claims a white, middle-class heritage. On the other hand Clinton is not as deft muting her gender as Obama is at neutralizing his race. Clinton uses her fluency (thinking ability) with US policy to signal her preparedness for the job of President. Clinton does not discard her maternal role nor does she make her maternity central to her campaign.

On the other hand for me, my blackness sets me apart as inferior/defective. My inferiority is compounded by my feminity; the discourse, “feminine is inferior” is much older and more pervasive within the conversation of what it means to be human, than is blackness. So here I am – afflicted on two fronts – race and gender. I may be afflicted but I am not chronic. Writer and researcher Zora Neale Hurston articulates my current state of being:

“I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes.... Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world - I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.” ~Zora Neale Hurston, *How It Feels to Be Colored Me*, 1928

I sharpen my “oyster knife” by embracing those parts of myself that clash with the dominant male, Euro-centric discourse community. I embrace my otherness and I use it to my advantage. I think that I am a member of a growing contingent of colored folk who are making the strategic choice to embrace/remake their race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality as a positive asset. My window on the world is distinct. My window is framed by, not only my race and gender, but my class, my family, my workmates and so on. As an individual, I know that my unique perspective on the world and how it works/doesn't work adds value to the conversation of what it means to be human.

July 10, 2008 - CLASS SESSION #1 (THE DIAGNOSTIC)

And I Was Excited? After these many weeks of waiting I am finally here – inside the Kaplan classroom. I chose Kaplan over its competitor the Princeton Review because Kaplan is a leader in test preparation. Kaplan's Chicago center is located in a bland office building in the financial district. The classroom, an equally bland room, is an auditorium that seats roughly 100. As the crowd rolls in I begin to count heads (survey the room). There are roughly fifty-seven students in attendance. Thirty-five out of the group are women (61%). There are only two African-Americans in the room – me and the guy sitting in the very back of the room. I wonder if the class' composition is an indicator of the racial and gender makeup of my future in graduate school. In other words, am I going to be moving in and among a population that is predominantly white and female?

A Pep Talk and the Higher Score Guarantee – A Virgin's Guide to the GRE: On stage (there really was a stage in the room) was an ethereal Celtic vision in the personage of the Center's Training Director. She was lovely: dark-hair, pearl-like skin, imbued from within with a fire for learning. In her opening comments she commended each of us for choosing to invest in our future. She extolled the virtues of graduate education. She commended us for making the “right choice” in choosing Kaplan. She assured us that if we followed the Kaplan method and worked hard (which means to eat, sleep, and drink the Kaplan method) we too would attain academic glory in the form of an awesome GRE score. At this point in the conversation the Celtic goddess began to instruct us on the parameters of the “Higher Score Guarantee (HSG).” The HSG applies to GRE “virgins,” people like me who have never taken the exam. If your “first time” doesn't go so well, Kaplan will guarantee you another run at the gauntlet. However, there are some conditions that the virgin must meet. These are:

1. *The virgin must attend all Kaplan sessions.* If you miss a session you may make it up either in-class or on-line. You may miss a maximum of two sessions.

2. *The virgin must complete all Kaplan exercises.* These include in-book and on-line practices. If, after taking the GRE, the virgin wishes to exercise her right to the HSG, she must offer up her course book as evidence of her good faith.
3. *The virgin must acknowledge that she understands what is expected of her.* The tenor HSG conversation felt more like an induction into a secret society than a review of a standard service agreement. For the amount of money I invested in this little adventure, I had better perform well.

Sometimes Ignorance Really Is Bliss: Pep talk is over. The goddess departs our company. She is replaced by one of the instructors who will proctor the diagnostic. On first glance, the proctor looks way too young to be in the front of the room. I've paid my fare now I have to see this through to the end. The proctor explains how the diagnostic will go. This is a paper and pencil test (the answers will be read by a scanner). The actual GRE is a computer adaptive test. The purpose of the diagnostic is to distinguish what Kaplan calls a "baseline score." The baseline indicates the student's level of performance, identifies strengths, as well as weaknesses. Tonight's test excludes the essays but instead contains two remaining legs of the GRE: the two-section verbal, and the two-section quantitative. How exciting. Each section is timed. The diagnostic lasts for two hours and thirty minutes. The last time I participated in a standardized test was the ACT that I took nineteen years ago in 1989. The nearly two decades, separating my last testing experience and this one, function as a super-important buffer for me tonight. Time has thankfully muted my anxiety. That's not to say that I am in a complete state of calm. I am excited and proportionately anxious to see how well I perform. The real sweet spot of this experience is being aware that I am without any real preconceptions of how this exam is going to go. I can be free with the exam. I can engage the exam the way I would engage someone I just met – with curiosity and a desire to know that person.

The first section of the exam is quantitative. It is algebra – yeah – algebra is one of my strengths and I move through the questions. I am feeling confident as I am in familiar territory. The next section is the verbal – analogies – again, I feel confident because the material is familiar. The class breaks for five minutes and then we are back into the test. The first section after the break is quantitative but instead of my old friend algebra, I am confronted with geometry (we're not so friendly with one another) and data interpretation (charts that are nearly impossible to read). The final section is verbal – reading comprehension – a familiar activity. I whipped through the last section with such energy that I completed early - *really* early. Was this a bad sign? Doubt began to turn its head toward me. I looked at my answers again. Doubt crept toward me. Could I have missed something? Doubt picked up its pace toward me. Did I really understand what I was doing? I got up and I turned in my answer sheet. It was over. The only thing left for me to do was to wait.

July 15, 2008 - CLASS SESSION #2 (PROBLEM SOLVING)

And the Results Are: 400 – Quantitative and 470 – Verbal. I am holding my scores. I barely made it past the mid-point on the scale. The GRE scale range is 200 to 800 points. I felt a distinct thud in my confidence. Maybe \$1200 isn't going to go to waste. Today is the first real class session. There are 25 students in the course with me. To no surprise I am the only African-American in the room (the class is woman-dominant).

First Impressions Count: The class is extremely quiet. Everyone is sitting face-forward staring at the severely under-age looking instructor (did he ride his skateboard to class tonight?). There is no cross talk and everyone looks really, really scared. I arrived late and attempted to cause some thing – a connection within the group. There was a minor reaction and then the silence swallowed the class. My instructor's name is Ben. Ben welcomed us to the course and we jumped right in to the material. Ben is no nonsense and I appreciate his diligence.

Resisting the Urge: GRE Diagnostic report is a detailed breakdown of the student's performance on the diagnostic. The report that the student receives back contains the depth of analysis I would expect to see prepared for a NFL Defensive Coordinator (see "GRE Diagnostic"). At the top of the

page is a bar chart of my “scaled score”. Next to that is a pie chart that details my “relevance and mastery” of the seven disciplines⁶. The diagnostic report tells you everything: Divided into two sections: Quantitative and Verbal, each section breaks down the kind of questions asked, the number of questions in each sub-section, the number answered correctly, the number answered incorrectly, the number omitted, along with the corresponding percentages. Included in the report is an initial study plan. The study plan serves as a guide for my next few weeks with Kaplan. The study guide directs my “next steps,” and tells me where I need to focus my energy. Most important, the study plan provides an insight into the Kaplan method. Kaplan teaches strategy for winning (besting) the GRE. If I am reading my plan correctly, then if I concentrate my energy to improve the areas designated as “middle level” and “needs improvement” then I will be able to substantially increase my scores. The in-book and on-line exercises (these are drills) will reinforce my learning.

July 17, 2008 – CLASS SESSION #3 (ANALOGY)

Toto, We’re Not in Kansas Anymore: The Kaplan Method is a strategy. It’s a method of comprehension. What I am learning is that the question, as it appears is not the question being asked. Another way to put this is: Be suspicious of all questions. Dig down under the surface. The GRE is a timed exam. On test day, I will have 45 minutes to answer 28 questions in the quantitative and 30 minutes to answer 30 questions in the verbal. That basically breaks down to a rate of one question per minute. I won’t have the time to linger with a question. I will need to see the question, evaluate the question, apply a Kaplan method, and answer the question – all within or under a minute. Sixty seconds is not that long. There is a pressure to perform with precision within an air-tight timeframe. This is a new discipline for me and I can feel my heart beginning to pick up its pace. I am not afraid of reacting. I just want to react in a way that consistently produces correct answers. The Kaplan Method is a different way of thinking – a distinct way of thinking. I don’t know if I am acculturating.

My practice tests are getting worse instead of better (doubt is looking in my direction again). I am trying my best to not make my scores mean anything but this is very hard. I want to play this game of taking the GRE like a well-trained athlete. I want to leave everything I have on the field of play but I also want to win. I want to win really big. My training materials are great. The resources are robust. There are exercises, tutorials, and quizzes. There is even coaching available to Kaplan students for selecting “the right” graduate program, finding funding, and writing the all-important statement of purpose. For \$1200 you have access to an entire universe of graduate school application resources. The caveat to all of this greatness is that access to these materials is limited by their electronic platform and by time (as a Kaplan student, I have a maximum of ninety days after the last in-class session to use my on-line resources. For me, the expiration date is October 9).

What really perturbs me is the digitization of all of the supplemental materials. In other words, to be successful in this course the student needs a computer. And not just any old computer will do. The Kaplan course requires a computer with a high processing speed, a top-tier graphics card, a DSL or T1 line so that the student can interact with the material in real-time. That’s a really big assumption on Kaplan’s part to assume that every student will have or has access to a particular caliber of electronic tools. Then again, if a student can afford \$1200 to register into the course, then the technology is most likely available to that student. The out-of-pocket cost and the technology requirements are prime indicators of how education, as the gateway to self-sufficiency, continues to shrink. As the cost of American education increases, the likelihood of racially and ethnically diverse work forces decreases.

July 22, 2008 – CLASS SESSION #4 (ARITHMETIC AND NUMBER PROPERTIES)

Notes from the Yellow Brick Road: I am now entering my third class session and everyone is stock still in the class. No one is talking to any one else in the course. Are we students competing against one another? Is there a run on graduate schools? Is it that hard to get accepted? There is another trend

⁶ The seven disciplines are Quantitative: Quantitative Comparisons, Problem Solving, and Data Interpretation; Verbal: Reading Comprehension, Sentence Completion, Analogies, and Antonyms.

emerging from within my class community and that is active participation. Each student sits face forward, deady quiet, waiting for the course to begin. When the instructor asks the class a question like “which strategy could we use with this problem?” there is a deafening silence. No one attempts to answer the question. Are folk so embarrassed that they refrain from trying? I find it odd that each of us invested \$1200 to be in this course and no one is jumping out of their seat to actively participate. I am also noticing how my participation is changing – I am not as vocal as I was in the beginning. There are two reasons for this: One, I want to move out of the way for others to participate; and two, I got tired of hearing just my voice. A few of the women in the course are on the playing field. It is super interesting to see how the women’s class participation increases during the math sections instead of the verbal sections. During the verbal, it’s the men who are most active in the course – tell the former Harvard President that women really are comfortable with math and science.

Slowing Down to Speed Up: There is a pressure on my neck to perform. In some instances I feel as if I am on *Jeopardy*. I am so anxious to hit the buzzer and give my answer. There’s just one wrinkle in the fabric – my answers are not always right. In fact, my batting average is poor. Once I think I understand a concept (strategy) I immediately go out to work with my new skill. I am so desirous of increasing my answering speed that I am sacrificing my accuracy. In the end, it is the accuracy that counts. I am spending 90 minutes each day with the on-line materials. I review the tutorials. I take the practice tests and my scores continue to drop. I did better when I didn’t know any better. What I think I know is cluttering up my performance. I’m working with this material as if I have everything to lose and nothing to gain. I don’t know yet how to reposition myself so that I can loosen up and play with the questions. Getting it right (answering the question correctly) has to become a game.

July 24, 2008 – CLASS SESSION #5 (READING COMPREHENSION & ISSUE ESSAYS)

When Life Gets in the Way – An Adult Learner’s Lament: I chose to miss tonight’s session. I needed a break in the action. Like most working adults, work got in the way tonight. I am in the midst of closing out one fiscal year (2006-07) opening the next (2008-09). If these two activities weren’t enough I am also planning for the 2009-10 fiscal year as well as planning my department’s annual retreat. My plate is full. The very on-line materials that I complained about in the last entry are saving my happy self this evening. I am 37. I am at my office running reading comprehension drills! If this moment isn’t a public service announcement for staying in school, I don’t know what is.

Amending the Thought, August 18, 2008: The entry’s flippant ending is pregnant with the assumption that each traditional student who enters college does so with a clear plan that leverages the college years for maximum yield. Conventional wisdom would suggest that this is not always the case. The terms “helicopter parent” and “emerging adult” support the assertion that the traditional student requires emotional and monetary support that extends well beyond the baccalaureate’s completion. These terms would also suggest that the traditional college experience does not fit all sizes. Such is the case of the returning adult student.

The traditional college experience does not fit with a full-time work schedule. Nor does the traditional college experience fit with a full-time work schedule further complicated by full-time family demands. These three entities: school, work, and family, oppose and compete against one another. The resulting tension is an amplified version of DuBois’ double consciousness. Instead of being torn apart, the Adult Student maintains her wholeness through an unwavering commitment to the future end result and sheer force of will. Generating the energy needed to maintain one’s wholeness under such pressure is a task that wears the body, the mind, and the spirit.

Relief often comes in the form of compartmentalization. As a working adult I find that I construct my own veil or barrier between work and school. As a protection, I conceal my academic achievement from my workmates. I do this because I do not want to risk my job by being perceived as a transient worker (which is *exactly* what I am). My behavior mirrors my enslaved forebears who concealed their learning (to read and write) from prying eyes and eavesdropping ears. The difference the attaining of the bachelor’s makes in my life is this: I can come out of the shadows. I can now exercise

my *authority* in the matter of my life. I am fast-approaching the point at which I can choose the kind of *work I wish to do* instead of the *work I have to do*.

Earlier in this journal I shared my new-found joy to include for the first time in my working life, an “education line” on my resume. For the first time, I am unencumbered from compensating for, or concealing, my lack of education. I am free to experience myself as having equal footing. The closer I come to completing my degree and moving on to the next step, the more at ease I find myself becoming. A very large portion of how I define myself is being rewritten. I am not as defective as I once thought myself to be. I am moving toward normalcy, well as normal as a Black Woman can be. The original entry began with a complaint about the difficulty of balancing full-time work with full-time school. The amended entry also ends with a complaint that is contoured by exhaustion yet imbued with the desire and energy to finish what I set out to accomplish.

July 29, 2008 – CLASS SESSION # 6 (ALGEBRA & DATA INTERPRETATION)

Greetings From Oz: I’ve commented on my class being super quiet. I think I am beginning to understand why the volume level bothers me so much. First, collaboration is missing in the classroom. There is no cross talk in the class. It’s all students facing front, mute, looking intently at the instructor. Having come from a college that esteems collaborative learning, this is ultra foreign territory to me. For me, learning inside of a group deepens the learning. As a student when you have the opportunity to explain a concept or practice a concept with another person, you are metabolizing (internalizing) the material – you are making the connection between concept and application (or theory and practice). In other words, you are learning on a much deeper level. I do not have the talent to cram for this examination. I never did. I am methodical about my learning. If I learn something I have learned it for life. Maybe I was lucky to have had teachers who were about making the lesson mean something to me personally. Tests were never stand-alone events; they were always a part of a much larger agenda. The test’s role was to measure, and in some ways reinforces, what the student knew of the course material.

The lack of collaborative learning and cross talk (no one in the class is reaching out to connect with other classmates – this is very disturbing), sterilizes this experience. It also leaves me wondering if this Kaplan experience is a foreshadowing of the graduate school experience. Will my future classmates be just as distant? Will the graduate school experience be competitive at every level? And if so, what kind of competition is it? Now that I am beginning to understand what I value in a learning environment, should I use that knowledge as a qualifying characteristic to identify my future program?

Second, at the outset of this journal I established myself as a doing-thinking learner (active experimentation and abstract conceptualization). I tend toward active experimentation. I love the action of the experiment; I could even go so far as to say that I am addicted to the action of the experiment. I love the pacing and the immediacy of experimentation; however, this (the GRE’s) is neither the appropriate place nor the space for that kind of learning. I am two-thirds complete and I need to develop a new learning practice. I notice that I rush to be first. I know where this comes from: In grade school, in sixth grade specifically, the teacher positively reinforced the student who got the answer first. This behavior established the frenzy in the class to be first. The class’ focus shifted from learning to competing. And so it is with me in this course, I am racing with all that I have to hit the buzzer, as if I were the game show *Jeopardy*. The only problem is that I keep coming up short with having the right answer. In the Kaplan context, my racing to answer is treated/approached/discussed as test anxiety. While it is true that the GRE is a timed test, according to Kaplan there are methods that I can practice that will enable me to answer lots of questions in a short period of time with a high degree of correctness.

July 31, 2008 – CLASS SESSION #7 (VOCABULARY & SHORT VERBAL)

The Things I Didn’t Learn In School: I am now clear that I never learned how to test. Kaplan teaches how to interact with the test. Their focus is on learning (and digesting) the concepts/strategies to engage the test. The analytical practices that I am learning at Kaplan will enable me to decipher the question being asked. I am gaining competence in evaluating the questions. Surprisingly, the mechanics of answering the question is relatively simple. For example, what appears to be complex math breaks

down into rudimentary arithmetic. The skill here is to learn (listen intently for) what is being asked. In other words, I am learning the analytics of the exam. This is a new skill. And I feel cheated.

I was educated in the Chicago Public Schools; however, unlike contemporaries (who were predominantly poor and black) I attended magnet schools⁷. Yet, throughout my primary and secondary education career, I never learned how to evaluate/analyze an exam. Now add to the mix that I am an experiential learner so now my ability to interact and engage with the question is limited; and the road signs to unlocking the question's hidden directions remain concealed, leaving me on the outside trying desperately to get in. I learned how to answer, "One plus one equals two" but I never learned how to go beyond to understand that there is a commonality between one and two. In other words, I never learned how to reason with the exam.

Inside the Emerald City: Understanding that there exists a praxis for testing leaves me relieved and hopeful. My Kaplan instructor led a class discussion on test anxiety. As a way to ameliorate the class, our instructor Ben had the class walk-through a diagram in the textbook. The diagram detailed the question tiers on the computer-adaptive exam. Think of each tier as a set of doors with each door assigned the same, specific value. A correct answer gives you passage to the next set of doors. An incorrect answer will give you passage to the next set of doors, but an incorrect answer will cost the test-taker valuable points. The GRE is structured from heaviest to lightest – this is counterintuitive. Answers to the first-tier questions determine the outcome of the test so it is in the interest of the test-taker to consider these questions with thought and care.

August 5, 2008 – CLASS SESSION #8 (PROPORTIONS & GEOMETRY)

Awakening – On the Importance of Connecting Theory to Practice: Tonight is the last math session! My eyes are glassed over from the sheer density of the material – geometry. While my brain desperately wants to escape from its bony container as a means to relieve itself from the night's material, something incredible is happening: I am actually beginning to see my proficiency with the Kaplan methods increase. I am beginning to experience myself as a person who uses the method to unravel not just the GRE's questions, but to also solve the questions that occur in my life *outside* of the classroom. This is where the real bonus lay – in connecting, or applying classroom theory with the outside practice. For example, I recently listened to the Sunday puzzle feature hosted by Will Shortz, on National Public Radio's (NPR) *Weekend Edition*. As I played along at home, I assessed the puzzle's clues using the Kaplan methodology with an increased skill and ease. I was able to use the question's clues to *reason* out an appropriate answer and solve the puzzle. I have learned a new way of thinking, and that thinking translates into a valuable skill; which in turn, has provided me with a new appreciation for the Graduate Record Examination.

Now that I understand the Kaplan methodology, the GRE occurs for me as doable. My new relationship to the GRE contrasts with my old perceptions of the exam. Prior to embarking upon this endeavor, the GRE occurred as a necessary evil – a nettlesome and required task needed to enter the next phase of my education. Unlike the standardized tests of my youth, like the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the GRE requires much more than just a good night's sleep. The GRE is what it says it is: an examination of the graduate record. In other words, the GRE is a probative examination of the student's baccalaureate experience. The foregoing statement causes some problems: What if the student did not attend a quality institution? What if the student's baccalaureate experience did not provide exposure to the empirical and the theoretical? What if the student isn't intellectually curious? These questions open a new line of inquiry: How does the individual student ensure that her baccalaureate properly prepares her for the graduate school? Is lack of preparedness (or perceived lack of preparedness) a factor for why so few people pursue advanced degrees? I ask this question in light of a recent statistic from the U.S. Department of Education. For the school year ending in 2005, only 574,618 persons successfully attained

⁷ In the Chicago Public School System, Magnet Schools are public schools for the academically gifted. Admittance is ironically based upon above-average performance on standardized tests.

graduate degrees (one-quarter of the degrees were conferred in the area of business)⁸. Though the number of people who will attain an advanced degree is likely to increase in the coming years, it is crucial to note that this group represents a tiny fraction of the total American population⁹. This small group is the gilded class of the academically privileged. Notice that I do not label them as the economically privileged. That moniker is reserved for the true elite.

The Estimated Return on the Education Investment: The Kaplan rhetoric is founded on one principle: Graduate School equals higher earnings potential. Could someone please tell me when did a bachelor's degree, coupled with experience become insufficient? Why is school becoming an exercise in acquisition and one-upmanship? Where has learning gone? I contemplate these questions not only as life-long learner but also as a concerned citizen and future manager. I am concerned that learning, especially classroom learning, is becoming nothing more than an exercise in disposable knowledge. From my vantage, it appears as if students are learning how to cram and purge knowledge. While it could be argued that cramming and purging are useful skills, what gets lost in the process is the connecting of the classroom to the outside world. In other words, the material in-class has no relevance to the outside world – and that is a real problem. The relegating of the student's learning experience to the solitary confines of the classroom negates the entire spectrum of learning forums. The student is now disconnected from experiencing learning as an integrative, holistic activity, one in which the theoretical and the practical converge within the student through the application of theory.

I bring this issue up after observing the behavior of my Kaplan classmates. They are über-attentive to the instructor. They sit quietly at the edge of their seats, eagerly downloading and replicating the instructor's every word, but they refrain from interacting with the instructor and their other classmates. Their physical demeanor communicates that they are in the class to receive the knowledge. It's a tidy transaction: the instructor transmits the knowledge, the student receives the knowledge, and when the knowledge has served its purpose, the student promptly discards that knowledge¹⁰. I have watched the rift between the theoretical (in-class learning) and the practical (out-of-class application) grow ever wider within my lifetime. I have borne witness to subjects like civics, art appreciation, and physical education vanish from the curriculum. I have watched how within my own lifetime the perception of education as a means to “do better” (improve yourself) radically shift toward the derisive racial-ized statement: “you (the student who does well in school) are just trying to be white.”

Filling the rift's wake are classes taught by teachers whose primary, if not sole aim, is to prepare the student to “take the test”¹¹. The difference with me as I prepare to take my own version of “the test” is that I have ownership of this enterprise. I am very clear that I am the author of this adventure. Simply put, I got myself into this situation. I chose to be here; and with that realization, I gain greater clarity about the value of my Kaplan experience. Had I not invested in the Kaplan class I do not believe my test performance would be at the level I perceive (and believe) I need to distinguish myself among the throng of competing graduate applicants. I will not concede that my GRE score will gain me admission into my school of choice. For me, the score functions as a component of a *whole body of work* that is inclusive of

⁸ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2006* (NCES 2007-017).

⁹ The United States Census Bureau estimates the total US population at 304-million. See *U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division*.

¹⁰ Writing theorists Kail and Trimbur contend the framework for learning inside the classroom is based upon the Gen/Tran or Generation and Transmission model. The gen/tran model is a rigid hierarchy that alienates knowledge from the public domain. In gen/tran, the purveyor of knowledge is restricted to a highly trained, professional class. The professional class generates and then transmits knowledge. The student simply receives the knowledge. Gen/Tran establishes two opposing core groups: a professional community of instructors who sit atop the hierarchy; and the students, at the bottom. Gen/Tran does not allow for making meaningful connections between knowledge received and knowledge applied, rather, this model explicitly trades in the inscription, indoctrination, and imprinting of the student participant. See Kail, Harvey and John Trimbur. “*The Politics of Peer Tutoring*.” *The Writing Center Journal*. 11.1-2 (1987).

¹¹ The “test” used here references the examinations mandated under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, for students at the elementary and secondary levels. The students' performance on these tests are determinates for school funding and teacher salaries.

my baccalaureate career, my work and life experience, and my intention/purpose for pursuing the advanced degree. I am not walking down this path to be *en vogue*. I walked into this experience expecting to learn a skill that would prove useful to me not just in the short-term, but also for my lifetime. Learning is not a garbage-in: garbage-out activity for me. Learning, if allowed to deteriorate into a series of inputs and outputs smells suspiciously like mediocrity, which, in turn, is precariously close to stagnation and for that, I have no interest.

August 7, 2008 – CLASS SESSION #9 (READING COMPREHENSION & ARGUMENT ESSAYS)

The Peculiar Business of Being Privileged: Tonight is the last class! I am relieved to be complete with the classroom portion of this project. I will have access to the Kaplan Center and its online materials through October 9 (possibly longer because I am not taking the GRE until November/December of 2008)¹². I am free to engage in some self-directed learning and can now use my favorite learning style – active exploration. In the interim, I will get the collaborative experience I sought in the classroom in the center’s weekly workshops and drop-in sessions. I also will have unlimited access to Kaplan’s extensive online materials. These materials include lessons on-demand, which are webcasts of full classes; computer aided tests (CATS), quizzes and timed tests, as well as additional practice exercises that will reinforce the various Kaplan methods. Now that I am concluding my time with Kaplan, I am edified in my knowing that my time and my money were well invested. I expect to realize an improved score that is 250-300 points above my respective quantitative and verbal scores on the diagnostic.

Since tonight is the last class, the center’s Student Services Coordinator came in to give the class, one last pep talk. Speaking to us in a manner evocative of a high-school cheerleader, she praised us for “making the right choice” and in doing so she commended us for having “increased” our “competitiveness” by some arbitrary and equally attractive percentage in the “GRE marketplace.” The GRE marketplace sounds like some auction venue where graduate school applicant scores are inspected the way slaveholders of old inspected a slave’s physical strength. Raising my level of “competitiveness” is an attractive prospect, but what exactly does that mean? If I believe the Student Services Coordinator (to be truthful I find her perkiness suspicious), then my “increased competitiveness” will materialize into achieving a better score, which then translates into being accepted by a better school with a better program, which will position me to acquire a better job. Can I really get all of that for \$1200 plus the exam cost? The Student Services Coordinator would have me and my classmates believe that the answer to that question is yes.

Now that the Kaplan synod has officially anointed me, I am certified to approach the veil of the GRE. As I move toward this point, I find myself confronted by the idea of being considered privileged. I am having a terrible time of wrapping my mind around the idea that I am already in many ways a member of the “Talented Tenth.”¹³ Privileged is not a word that I use to describe myself. In fact, the word “privileged” does not occur among my “psychosocial”¹⁴ descriptors. My definition for who I am is contoured by the words “fortunate,” “hard-working,” and “diligent.” Together these words connote the sense of me earning my way, which is the direct opposite of my perception of privilege. To me privilege insinuates entitlement. It could be argued that neither I, nor my contemporaries are entitled to a higher education. Yet, among people who subscribe to certain class cultural values, college is an entitlement. It could even be argued, as it is in some cultures regardless of economic class that I, *because of my gender*, am not entitled to *any* formal education. Yet here I am as are a steadily growing number of women.

Instead of reveling in being a member of the Talented Tenth, I rather feel like George and Louise, the fictional couple from the comedy series *The Jeffersons*. I may have “moved up” but I am still trying

¹² My extended access comes at one-time administrative cost of \$249.

¹³ DuBois, WEB. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Paradigm Publishers: Boulder, 2004.

¹⁴ Stewart, Dafina Lazarus. “Awareness and Integration of Multiple Sociocultural Identities: An African-American at a Predominantly White Institution.” *Journal of Critical Inquiry Into Curriculum and Instruction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. 16-44.

my best “to make it.” My double-consciousness is a mixture of individual achievement tempered with the awareness that I am striving with all my might to achieve solid footing on quicksand. I acknowledge my individual achievement: I am one generation out of public housing. When I complete my bachelor’s I will have disrupted a cycle of low-paying jobs but I am by no means insulated from poverty. I am however, positioned, should the economy stabilize, to increase my earning potential. But even as I celebrate this achievement, I am very aware that my earnings will always lag behind my white counterparts. My goal is not to keep up with the Jones’ but I don’t want to be too far behind them either. Here lay the paradox of Black Progress: Accomplished and still lagging behind.

President Lyndon Johnson articulated with clarity the tension between Black achievement and the slow pace of Black progress. Giving the commencement address at Howard University in June 1965, Johnson cuts to the heart of the tension between blackness and privilege:

You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, “You are free to compete with all the others,” and still justly believe that you have been completely fair. Thus it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates. This is the next and the more profound stage of the battle for civil rights. We seek not just freedom but opportunity. We seek not just legal equity but human ability, not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result.¹⁵

Opportunity’s gates were open to me. I am a beneficiary of the *Brown* decision. My path to the school’s door was free from picketers, water hoses, mad sheriffs and rabid dogs. School was the shelter that protected me from the turbulence at home. School was, and still is, the acceptable way for a girl to get out of, and break free from poverty. As I pierce the veil of the GRE to pass into the domain of graduate study, the terrain becomes whiter and more feminine. And as I move deeper into this new territory, the psychosocial markers, “black,” “woman,” “poor” or “urban” no longer work as an all-purpose, one-dimensional short-hand for who I am. My definition for who I am has to expand beyond the limits of these narrow descriptors. While I give thanks to my familial and cultural heritage for giving shape to who I am, I am painfully aware, that I cannot maintain the ethos endemic of Chicago’s West Side working poor. I may be one generation up from public housing but that is not all of who I am, nor is it indicative of who I have the potential of becoming.

It is at this point, where the student gives up her indigenous, or home, culture in exchange for that which is unknown, that many of my African-American contemporaries find themselves desperate to maintain an authentic “black” identity while paradoxically propelling toward an identity *perceived* as assimilated and “white.” This struggle, often articulated as an attempt to “keep it real,” most often manifests as the black student abruptly dropping out of school. I question if this is truly a struggle between what is perceived to be authentic (black: indigenous culture) and what is perceived as inauthentic (white: assimilated or learned culture). Rather, I believe what entangles African-American students is a fearful avoidance of proving to themselves and others (white people) that to be Black *is* to be a “clownish [and] simple creature.¹⁶” Peter Vandenberg, author of the Afterword to Thomas West’s *Signs of Struggle*¹⁷, provides an insightful commentary into this fear. Vandenberg argues that when we reach the edges of our own understanding we confront the veil of the unknown. We are either rendered immobile, transfixed by the unknown, or enlivened by the prospect of the unknown.

Rather than succumb to the trap of bifurcation, where I rate one identity over the other as better, I am instead, thankful to be an amalgam of multiple cultural experiences. This makes me conversant and at home in a wider variety of environments. From this point forward, as I train to enter the realm of the professional thinker, my focus shifts from being concerned about fitting in toward the work – the quality

¹⁵ “President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Commencement Address at Howard University: ‘To Fulfill These Rights’ June 4, 1965.” [Speeches](http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/Johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650604.asp) 14 August 2008 <<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/Johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650604.asp>>.

¹⁶ DuBois, WEB. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Paradigm Publishers: Boulder, 2004, p 48.

¹⁷ Vandenberg, Peter. Afterword. *Signs of Struggle: The Rhetorical Politics of Cultural Difference*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002. 121-126.

of the work, and only the work. This next step will put me in a place that is cold and dispassionate, but with the cold is the potential for being refreshed and invigorated.

Epilogue

Reflective Observation: Looking Back to Move Forward

To be a returning adult student is to be in constant motion. The returning adult cycles from home to work to school and back again – three full-time lives contained within one body. The Nike Company’s slogan, “Just Do It” could be the returning adult’s perfect motto. While “Just Do It” speaks to the performance on the field, the slogan steps over the off-the-field practice and analysis that makes the performance possible. Likewise, a learning style that relies primarily on just doing, like active experimentation, does not provide the learner access to the fullness of the learning cycle. The well-rounded learner moves through the entire learning cycle passing through each learning style, alternating her between taking in the experience and engaging the experience. The experiential learning project brings the learning cycle into the foreground. This essay will examine how reflective observation functions as an analytical tool within an experiential learning project.

Before beginning this project my learning style was a combination of active experimentation (learning by doing) and abstract conceptualization (learning by thinking). Working together, these two learning styles use data gathering and data testing to *converge* onto the solution. Though analysis is present, both styles are action-oriented. In contrast, reflective observation suspends the action and clears a space for a thoughtful consideration of the action. Reflective observation is akin to an athlete watching her game film. Reflective observation puts physical and temporal distance between the player (learner) and the game (learning). It is within this space that the learner’s view of the game expands thereby enabling a critical and thoughtful analysis of the performance. This enlarged view provides a different perspective of the playing field. From this vantage point, the learner is positioned to employ reflective observation as a method to produce insight into her performance. These insights are immediately put to work (into practice) so as to improve the next performance.

Within the context of an experiential learning project, the learning journal is the conduit through which reflective observation flows. The journal is bounded by the experience of preparing for the GRE and by how that experience exerts influence over my identity. While I have in the past used journaling as a method to organize my thoughts, I refrain from thoughtfully considering the text. The journal is structured to mirror the Kaplan class schedule and in so doing places a demand on me to practice reflection. The externship’s journal reveals a human being in an ecdysial state – shedding the old (identity) and generating the new. The ecdysis was triggered by preparing for the GRE and kept active through reflection on the preparation. This activity places pressure on my identity. Furthermore, the activity is complicated by the realization of the extent to which I have internalized a discourse that judges *different* as *deficient*. From this realization, two themes emerge: A preoccupation with achievement and a desire to make meaning out of achieving. In other words, my drive to perform is fueled by my need to minimize, make-up for, and ultimately conceal my deficiency.¹⁸

¹⁸ My deficiency comprises what I term, the Big Three: race, gender, class. The learning journal articulates the concern for “class” status as a pressing need to complete the baccalaureate. This need is tempered with the understanding that neither the BA nor the MA guarantees a homestead or entrance into a particular economic class.

My digestion of this discourse manifests as a constant need to prove that I am good enough. My preoccupation with concealing my deficiency by proving my efficacy impedes my ability to adapt to new learning and new teaching. It also alienates me from having more than a cursory interaction with other human beings. Put another way, my constant need to prove myself prohibits me from interacting with human beings fully. Class sessions one through seven offer evidence of my disability: these seven entries are thematically bound together by one complaint – the lack of action. My standard way of operating is to run out onto the field and get the learning. The Kaplan classroom operates in the opposite manner wherein the *learning is dispensed from the front of the room* at a steady rate over a set period of time. The gap between the two practices is the territory that I must navigate. Evidence of my travail begins to come into view at about Class Session #3 (Toto, We're Not in Kansas Anymore) when I begin to accept that my learning style will not produce the results I desire. My efforts reach a climax in Class Session #7 (Inside the Emerald City) where I come to connect the *theory* of the Kaplan methods to the *practice* of taking the GRE. Bridging theory to practice propels me toward a new understanding of and appreciation for the mechanics behind the Kaplan methods.

The journal's second theme, the desire to assign meaning to achievement, runs concurrent to the first theme. The second theme contains the revelation that I am already a member of the Talented Tenth. As a member of this body, I am privileged. The journal's last entry concerns itself with the odd duality of attaining self-determination through education, contrasted with the exertion to exercise that same self-determination over a larger terrain. What becomes apparent is an expansion DuBois' double-consciousness wherein progress begets privilege but only for a chosen few. No longer hemmed in by *overt* racism, the new generation of the Talented Tenth marches ever-forward toward an identity contoured by the acquisition of things. It is here, against this backdrop that I find myself questioning the relevance of Talented Tenth. Then something remarkable happened: On evening August 25, 2008, Michelle Obama took center stage at the Democratic National Convention. She commanded the podium with grace and dignity. While I watched the last minutes of her speech it occurred to me that for the first time in my lifetime the world was observing the confluence of blackness, Feminity, and achievement. The broadcast showed an authentic expression of who Michelle Obama is: Black, Feminine, and Accomplished.

The role the Talented Tenth plays within the Black community and for all Americans has evolved from DuBois' original construction. The Talented Tenth does not necessarily make material investment in Black Progress, although notable members like Bill Cosby¹⁹ and Tom Joyner²⁰ are known for their monetary support of black students. In many ways, the challenges faced by today's Talented Tenth are not that different from their forebears. The Tenth is making progress while trying to make it. However, the difference with today's Tenth is that they are visible much more so than in generations past. We live in an America where an educated Black is not so exotic as to be outside the bounds of possibility. Watching Michelle Obama it became clear to me that my race, my gender, and my class origin *do matter*. They matter because my success is a signal to others of what is possible.

The journal closes with a sense of pragmatism imbued with the realization that the sociocultural markers are just that, markers and not judgments. In other words, I am the author of

¹⁹ International comedic star Bill Cosby and his wife Camille donated one million to Spellman College, a Historically Black women's College located in Atlanta, Georgia.

²⁰ Radio mogul Tom Joyner through the Tom Joyner Foundation provides financial support in the form of scholarships to students attending HBCUs.

my own identity. My word creates my world. If I say that I am deficient, then I am deficient. Conversely, if I say that I am able, then I am able. I can be either limited by how I define my identity or I can use that definition to empower myself as well as others. The value of developing the practice of reflective observation is apparent in the journal's concluding entry. My optimism for the future would not have occurred without the deep thinking inherent in reflective observation. I move forward into this next phase of my life with greater clarity that I am traversing the right path and that I able to handle whatever I come across on that road.