Tiffany L. Smith
Racial Autobiography Assignment

CC770 Introduction to Racial Reconciliation
February 8, 2023

My earliest memory of race was during my elementary school years. At the time, most of my teachers were White in the public schools I attended in Paterson, New Jersey—the urban community where I was born in 1970. I spent much of my childhood there (and until recently, adulthood), with my mother who was single. She had moved there two years prior to my birth from her hometown of Farmville, Virginia.

The youngest of nine children, my mother did not experience the same racism as her older siblings although it did exist. Her parents had nine children, but only my mother and one of her two brothers finished high school. The other seven children stopped attending school to work or were unable to complete their education because of segregation. (Three of the siblings would later earn GEDs).

As a youngster growing up in Paterson, as well as in Virginia where I spent my summers, and in Hackensack, New Jersey where I attended high school, I primarily interacted with other Black people. It wasn't until I was in college that I began noticing differences in people in terms of race, ethnicity and religion.

I recall two distinct times that come to mind when I think of negative experiences associated with my racial identity. The first was during my second or third year of my undergraduate studies at Virginia Commonwealth University in the early 1990s. My roommates and I were walking through campus one Saturday night. As we headed back to our apartment, a pickup truck sped by. A young white man, probably in his 20s, was in the passenger side and yelled "niggers" as the truck passed us.

One of my roommates, ironically, the quietest of the bunch, shouted back a few expletives as the truck headed up the street. My other roommate and I, somewhat panicked, motioned for her to be quiet.

Did we like being called niggers by White guys? Absolutely not. We were very clear, however, that this was Virginia-the capital of the old confederacy. It may have been 1990 or 1991, but these were White men who seemingly had been drinking. This meant any inhibitions they had about Black people were relaxed, and their bravado had no restrictions. They could have easily turned around and headed back to do us harm. Thank God they kept going.

Another time that stands out in my mind was during my mid-twenties around 1996. I was visiting family in North Carolina during the Christmas holidays. My mom, aunt and I were at a grocery store, and somehow, an older White lady thought I took her shopping cart.

She started yelling at me about me taking her basket. I'm not certain if I unknowingly took it, but what I am sure of is that I had no ill-intensions and was feeling festive and in the holiday spirit.

Before I realized what was happening, she was yelling at me and told me to give me her "buggy" (referring to her basket) back. She too called me a nigger. I can still her voice saying, "give me my buggy, you ol' nigger with your big eyes." I froze.

My mother and my aunt, born in Virginia in 1940 and 1950, both remembered where we were—North Carolina. Not only did they not want to make a scene in yet another state known for its mistreatment of Black people, but they also didn't want me to mention this

to my cousin, my aunt's son, with whom we were visiting for the holidays. Like me, they were upset at the women's words towards me, but they knew my cousin, a Black man, would not have handled it well at all.

In both of these instances, I did not like these insults being hurled at me. However, my safety was more important, so I moved on.

My racial consciousness was really birthed in corporate America. To date, I have worked for two corporations, and it was really was during this time that I began to think more deeply about race and diversity.

I worked at the first corporation from 1995-1998. What stands out for me during that job in terms of racial awareness was several interactions with my supervisor at the time. We were two very different people. Like her, I was a college educated, conscientious worker who was well-respected by peers.

Unlike her, however, I was a young, Black woman from an urban community. She was White, about 15 years older than me and from the mid-west.

She always seemed amazed that I was articulate, especially with me being from, and still residing, in the inner-city. Not only did she doubt my skills, but she also seemed to doubt my home-training as evidenced during a visit from one of our colleagues from Europe. I was assigned to escort him from the reception area to our department. Being a professional, and having manners, when I met him, I asked him if he needed to stop in the men's room. He said yes so, I took him there before heading to our department. As we were walking to our department once he finished, my manager came walking towards us with a concerned look.

"What was taking you so long," she asked?

I explained our colleague's quick stop in the men's room.

"Oh, I thought you were letting him roam the building," she said.

"Roam the building," I thought to myself. "Why on earth would I let a guest roam the building?" Once again, I had given her no reason to doubt me, but she did.

I worked at the second corporate job more recently from 2015-2017. It was the first job that I had after working in Newark, New Jersey at a hospital. During my 16 years there, I worked with people from around the world and loved the diversity professionally and personally.

When I went to work for the second corporation, the environment was completely different from Newark because the corporation was in the suburbs. While at work, I sometimes felt invisible. On more than occasion, I would be in a meeting, share my suggestion regarding a particular project but it fell on deaf ears. More times than not, I would hear my suggestion or something similar at another time, usually from a White man, and the idea was given consideration.

While I would not say that the White people at that job were racist, I will say that at that job, it was very clear that the "good old boy" network was alive and well. As one of my black co-workers pointed out one day, "John Doe (name changed) is the most blatant example of White male privilege I've ever seen in my life." He was right.

In terms of the different stages of my racial identity development, they are:

Stage 1: Conformity: As a youngster, my friends were Black, Hispanic and some White. It was truly my colorblind stage.

Stage 2: Dissonance and appreciating— I am not certain as to where this state fits into my racial identity development.

Stage 3: Resistance and immersion—The 16 years that I spent working at University Hospital in Newark was definitely the time when I experienced the most diversity professionally and personally. I worked with colleagues from around the nation and the world.

Stage 4: Introspection—When I moved from working in an urban setting to a suburban setting, I really did long for the rich diversity and culture of that urban city.

Stage 5: Integrative awareness: I am working towards that now.

The primary concerns I have about my racial past is that I wish I knew more about my family's history. To my knowledge, there really has not been a recording of their history and not much is known before my grandparents.

I am encouraged about my racial past because of my father's family history. His family has recorded a significant portion of their history extending back to the 1800s. I am learning more about that history and about my dad's great-grandfather who was White.

I "do" racial justice to help ensure equity for those who have trouble ensuring it for themselves.