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**CBC COLUMN**

I t is a curious thing, indeed, as a Black woman in the United States to frequently be held accountable for the emotional sensibilities of white America. I should think before I speak, I should moderate my tone, and depending on my audience I should avoid conversation that links inequality to anything systemic or institutional. The early years of my career as a professor of history at an R-1 institution [a top-tier research university] taught me that the average American student is both tired of the traditional narratives associated with standard U.S. history classes and simultaneously resistant to new conversations that challenge the prized tall tale of the American Dream.

Thus, I struggled to teach the story of America in a way that was never taught to me — with full transparency, honesty, and a lack of fear. I fell into the intellectually colonized trap of selecting privileged sources, parroting irrelevant chronologies, and relying upon student evaluations to gauge classroom success. It took years to become truly comfortable bringing my authentic self — from the way I chose to wear my hair to the historical epochs I chose to decenter — to my work. *It’s Just Skin Silly!* is a reflection of my desire to normalize conversations about the things that separate us — like skin color — as a way of bringing society together.

I am an unrepentant cliche. I became an educator for all the idyllic, stereotyped reasons individuals enter the profession: I believe the world needs more (and better equipped) educators, I believe educators have unique opportunities to make a difference in the lived experiences of learners, and I believe engaging intellectual curiosity in meaningful ways can enrich our lives and society as a whole. Most importantly, however, I became an educator because in spite of having a background of being exposed to excellent instruction at the K-12, secondary, and post-secondary levels, my educational path was, sadly, still not devoid of the various forms of discrimination in higher education that are characteristic of the Black academic experience.

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Everyone knows racism, discrimination, and prejudice are wrong, but there is very little sustained teaching and open dialogue about why and how those ideas should be a part of our collective past. I envision *It’s Just Skin, Silly!* as an opportunity to begin an important
conversation with children about how we normalize acceptance and kindness through simple understanding. The misleading lies, myths, and negative constellation of ideas surrounding race and skin color must be debunked, and adults should normalize — rather than ostracize — conversations about race and its social construction with children.

My experiences as a Black student in predominantly white classroom spaces taught me to temper my love of learning and desire to share knowledge with the realities associated with living in a fear-based society. Subtle eye rolls, smirks, and exasperated sighs from white classmates in high school in the 1990s taught me early that asking questions about race, gender, or class was unpopular. In college at a private, predominantly white college in Arkansas, there was first the white professor who suggested I shouldn’t be concerned about a grade because it was “good enough,” then the other who accused me of plagiarism because my work exceeded his low expectations.

Indeed, it was that blatant act of educational discrimination that compelled me to transfer to an HBCU (historically Black colleges and universities), starting a journey of racial healing I didn’t even realize I needed to travel. I necessarily returned to the PWI (predominantly white institution) system for graduate school only to have a celebrated historian I once respected have the audacity to tell me I needed “seasoning” (a term specific to the transatlantic slave trade era that refers to the period of adjustment to perpetual servitude in the Americas that enslaved persons suffered upon arrival) to be successful in his eyes. These events all taught me I could do very little to change the minds of those determined to believe in and subtly enforce social gatekeeping based on outdated and debunked ideas that link skin color to perceived abilities and place in society.

It took me years to recognize all those actions for what they were — people expressing their fear of the unknown, being wrong, left behind, or surpassed. Fear is, undoubtedly, an incredible negative motivator. So much so that today, questions in the classroom regarding race, gender, and class no longer evoke mere unpopularity but inspire dangerous levels of social volatility and poorly considered legislative action based on rhetorical nods to patriotism. As an educator, I see students bombarded with misinformed messaging and outright lies that seek to inhibit independent thought, critical analysis, and rational discourse. There is enormous pressure to just avoid uncomfortable conversations and challenging narratives, rather than to engage in them as an exercise in distinguishing between rational and irrational anxieties.

It is not hard to talk about skin color. It is not even hard to talk about race in America. What is difficult, however, is talking about both those things with children in a way that is honest. Our national history is, quite frankly, filled with scary stories that can leave children confused, hurt, and angry. These stories can seem even more difficult to understand if that information runs counter to something they’ve learned at home, church, or at the knee of someone they love and respect. Being wrong and feeling attacked are two separate things that feel identical when individuals prioritize pride over humility. It is incumbent upon me as an educator to remain mindful of this in the classroom when I engage in difficult conversations with students, many of whom have never had the freedom to participate in informed dialogue about uncomfortable histories.

This generation’s discomfit, however, can be the next generation’s social salvation if those of us who are in a position to do so choose to educate fearlessly. *It’s Just Skin, Silly!* is purposefully in direct conversation
McGee gladly specializes in the wholly uncomfortable. Difficult conversations about race, gender, class, and sexuality are mainstays of her professional work, and she takes pride in empowering students with comprehensive instruction that enables them to enter into informed civic debate, dialogue, and conversation. McGee is passionate about creative service initiatives and community engagement programming. During her time at the University of Cincinnati, she has raised more than $100,000 in on-campus programming funds, created dozens of experiential learning opportunities for hundreds of students, faculty and staff, co-planned and hosted the 2019 Universities Studying Slavery (USS) Fall Symposium with Xavier University, and secured almost $1 million in federal funds for nonprofit entities in the Greater Cincinnati area.

McGee is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Dr. Holly McGee specializes in U.S. history and African American history, with an emphasis on Black women’s intellectual history, comparative political activism in the United States and South Africa, and popular culture in the twentieth century. Her secondary specialties include local histories of the American South, South African women’s history, and oral histories. Before earning her PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, McGee earned a BA in English from Dillard University, an MA in Applied Social Science from Florida A&M University, and an MA in Afro-American Studies from Wisconsin. McGee’s most recent publication is One Day We Are Going Home: The Long Exile of Elizabeth Mafeking, the first biographical oral history of famed South African union activist Elizabeth Mafeking, one of the first African women banned by the National Party in 1959 who survived 34 years of self-imposed exile in Lesotho.