TIGHTROPE WALKERS: NARRATIVES OF ACADEMICALLY SUCCESSFUL
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN ATTENDING PREDOMINATELY WHITE
INSTITUTIONS

Dissertation

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By
Christina S. Haynes, MA,
Graduate Program in Education

The Ohio State University
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Dissertation Committee:
Professor Mary E. Thomas, Advisor
Professor Tatiana Suspitsyna
Professor Beverly J. Moss
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation uses Black feminist standpoint theory and feminist geography to construct a new approach for understanding how academically successful African American women students construct and reconstruct their identities while attending predominately White institutions (PWIs). The primary research takes place against the backdrop of an investigation into the lacunae of educational scholarship that examines why African American women are not performing well at PWIs. Many of these studies define Black women as social outsiders, as unprepared, and as lacking academic abilities. This research often fails to ask how Black women characterize their higher educational experiences, and it overlooks the fact that many Black women students not only perform as well as other students but also exceed academic expectations while negotiating an environment that has been historically antagonistic toward them.

This qualitative study uses one-on-one interviews of academically successful African American women attending a Midwestern PWI for its primary data. By integrating geographic theories about space with perspectives from Black feminist standpoint theory and intersectionality theory, I demonstrate that Black women at PWIs develop socio-spatial practices that offer a counter-narrative to established negative stereotypes of African American women. I also investigate the ways that color-blind racism influences how these women identify themselves. I conclude by arguing that their standpoint empowers them to be successful, but it also limits their choices. Though
African American women are influenced by color-blind racism, these women conditionally challenge, reinforce, and reproduce it in their socio-spatial practices. Academically successful women walk a tightrope in higher education, at times silencing their resentment, anger, and anxiety while promoting equality and “sameness” between themselves and White students.
DEDICATION

The Haynes family
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It has been a long road to get here, and I am very well aware that I did not get her alone. I feel such gratitude that I am finally able to write the acknowledgements for my dissertation because I did not know if I would get to this point.

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VITA

2001…..B.A., English, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge
2001…..B.A., History, Louisiana State University (Fall 2001)

Professional Positions

Spring 2010-present. Associate Lecturer, University of Wisconsin, La Crosse for Teaching Courses in Educational Studies, Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies, and the Institute of Ethnic & Racial Studies

Fall 2009 – Spring 2010. Adjunct Faculty Member, Tallahassee Community College for Teaching Diverse Population’s course

Fall 2008 Adjunct Faculty Member, Tallahassee Community College for Teaching Diverse Population’s course

Fall 2005-Fall 2007. Outreach Consultant, The Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing (CSTW) at The Ohio State University

Spring 2005 Graduate Assistant, Minor in Professional Writing Program, The Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing (CSTW) at The Ohio State University

Summer 2004 Summer Assistant Program Manager in the Office of Minority Affairs Collegiate Services at The Ohio State University

Summer 2004 Graduate Research Assistant to Dr. Lupenga Mphande in the Department of African-American and African Studies at The Ohio State University

Fall 2003-Fall 2004 Graduate Research Assistant to Dr. William E. Nelson in the Department of African-American and African Studies at The Ohio State University

Spring 2003 Graduate Teaching Assistant for Dr. Viola Newton in the Department of African-American and African Studies at The Ohio State University

Fall 2002 Graduate Teaching Assistant for Dr. Paulette Pierce in the Department of African-American and African Studies at The Ohio State University

Publications:


Fields of Study

Major Field: Education
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I had a ritual when I was an undergraduate student. When I woke up in the morning I would lie in bed and stare at the ceiling and think about the classes I had for the day. I would get excited and think about all of the questions that I had written down and notes that I had taken in my books. I wanted my questions answered because I wanted to learn. I could not wait to get to class and ask questions and make comments. I had something to say. My undergraduate college experience was a great time for me because I felt as though I had come into my own. I had confidence in myself. I felt like I was on the verge of becoming the woman I wanted to be – I just needed to take one more step and I would be my best self. I was the perfect sister, the perfect daughter, the perfect student, and the perfect employee. I never needed any direction; I knew what needed to be done and I did it. I was “the magic woman.” If someone said that it could not be done then I was going to do it – “Take that!” When I played soccer, if we needed to score a goal some way, I scored one. If you needed help with a paper, I knocked on your door. If a friend needed a shoulder to cry on, I provided it and asked nothing in return.

But the “magic woman” is no more.

Graduate school was a difficult transition for me. I felt out of place. No one seemed to think the way that I did; no one seemed to play by the same rules that I played by, and no one seemed to care about the things that I cared about. I found myself around people who told me who I was because they were comfortable with that definition. I
allowed others to define who I was and did little to challenge the way that other people characterized me. I tried brushing this aside, insisting to myself, “Who cares about what people think? People who are my friends know who I am and that is all that matters.” I know now that this is not true – I cared a great deal about what other people thought about me. It grated on me daily that people did not have a good opinion of me. I seemed to be a riddle to students and faculty in graduate school. No one could “figure me out.” I lost confidence in my abilities and felt undermined and disheartened by my inability to present myself in positive ways. I slowly began to think that I was the person people said that I was: too quiet, aloof and a little too weird. I knew that I was smart, but people kept treating me as though I was not intelligent – as if I did not know what I was talking about. I felt as though I was always sticking my foot in my mouth. I seemed to never miss the opportunity to say or do the wrong thing. It was nerve-racking and disheartening. I would take one step forward and two steps back. I could not seem to have a breakthrough and move forward.

I was one of a few African Americans in many of my classes. Everyone always knew my name, or who I was, but it was hard for me to remember all of the other students in my classes. In classes, I felt as though people had dramatically different opinions of me – some people thought that I was intelligent and similar to themselves; in other courses it seemed people thought that I was completely oblivious and did not know what I was talking about. I rarely made the effort to talk to other students unless I was leaning over to ask them, “Did that make sense?” I was preoccupied with what others thought about me and wondering if I was performing well in class. I wanted to know if I was making grades that were comparable with other students in my courses.
During this time, I did not feel I had anyone I could trust and confide in about what I was going through in school. I was acutely aware of the fact that there were few African Americans in graduate school. There were days where I could go an entire day without seeing another African American woman, much less African American woman graduate student. This was dramatically different from my undergraduate school, a Southern school that had many more Black women in it. In my isolation, I always felt as though people were watching me, and that produced great anxiety: to be under constant surveillance, whether real or merely perceived, left me with the sense that a single misstep, no matter how small, could destroy my career – potentially for the rest of my life.

Whether or not any of those ideas were running through anyone else’s head, they were constantly running through mine. For me, that is the nature of being a person of color in a world controlled by Whites. I must be constantly vigilant, I must try very hard to be perfect so that I won’t be judged as just another example proving negative stereotypes, and most of all, I cannot trust most White people – or rather, it is very difficult for me to give them the opportunity to earn my trust, because of the risks involved. If I trust the wrong ones, I risk having my future destroyed, or possibly even my immediate present. It is easier, instead, to be silent, to pretend and believe that racism is dead – or at least, no longer relevant; and to give that belief everything you have. To be successful, you must achieve the impossible: you must be perfect, and when it turns out that you are human after all, with flaws like everyone else, you must hide it. And so, you keep walking that tightrope, keeping your eyes focused on the goal ahead, never looking down, or even sideways, and most of all, pretending the tightrope you walk isn’t even there.
During the final stages of my graduate school career, I have been tired and worn down. I am no longer perfect and have no idea how to be perfect. It was too hard, too demanding. I did not want to smile when I did not feel like it. I did not want to think that things were going to work out, because the thought of being disappointed again would further crush me. I found that I did not have much to say to anyone.

This is not to say that I had no one who reached out to me and offered me assistance. However, in many instances, I was suspicious of their motives and what they would think of me cracking under pressure. I had regressed to the point of not recognizing myself. I used to love making schedules and planning for the future and being excited about reaching my goal. Now, I had no goal and it was difficult to make plans. It was a chore to think about my future. As a friend told me, “You are in survival mode.” I was trying to make it through the day avoiding disappointment.¹

Then one day a professor suggested the topic of this dissertation to me at a moment of struggle. I was uncertain at the time. It seemed crazy. I even asked my mother what she thought of the topic. My mother thought that it was a good idea. She said what all good mothers would say: “You are so smart. I think it is a good idea.” I cringed at the thought of someone calling me smart anymore. I had lost my ritual. I had lost myself. The thought of facing young women who were actually successful was

¹ Nothing of what I say here should be construed as an indictment of anyone. People do what they can when they can for as long as they can. I am very grateful to everyone who made the attempt to reach out to me whether our relationship blossomed or not.
frightening – they would see right through me. Why would anyone listen to me? I had fallen and could not figure out a way to get back up.

Everyone likes a winner. Everyone likes to be associated with women who are successful models, and in my mind I had lost that status. For me there was nothing worse than a “fallen” Black woman. Such a woman is too weak to stand up or to stand for anything. No one could stand on her shoulders. A “fallen” Black woman was the Black woman who made it hard for anyone to give another Black woman a chance. As an African American woman aspiring to be a Black professional – feeling that I had failed at that was the worse gut-wrenching sensation that I have experienced in my life. I did not want to be around myself, and I believed no one wanted to be around me. I was certain that I was a disappointment. I still was not ready to talk about how I felt, so I did what I usually said, “I will think about it.” Clearly, I was thinking about it.

However, the prospect of learning the secret to remaining passionate about one’s work by studying academically successful Black women was too much of a temptation to pass up. I turned my scholarly attention to figuring out the conundrum I was living. I was walking a tightrope, balancing myself precariously on a single thin line and afraid to look at the abyss below, into which I was sure to fall with the slightest miss-step.

In the beginning of my academic career, I firmly believed that I could succeed on my own merits. But my experiences soon led me to question that faith. Like other academically successful Black women, I had to be constantly on guard against my words and actions being interpreted within racist frameworks. Although most of the people I encountered in academia seemed to be sincere in their attempts to counter the impact of racism on their students of color, more than a few appeared to be blithely unaware of the
unconscious ways in which their words and actions reproduced racist effects. And here’s the thing: I had no way of determining how sincere they might be, because I was afraid to challenge them, afraid to raise questions about the ways they were treating me and other Black women, afraid to be honest about my feelings. For one thing, I did not want to hurt their feelings. For another, challenging their words and actions meant bringing the issue of race to the forefront of our relationships. Yet another concern was about how they might perceive me: for instance, would they see me as someone “playing the race card” and trying to elicit unjustifiable empathy, trying to excuse my failures and make others responsible for them? Would they see me as “that Black girl” who is always angry, always focused on racism? Then of most concern: would they try to punish me in some way, using the powers granted by White privilege?

So, how do women walk that invisible tightrope? How do academically successful African American women stay balanced in a society that creates so many obstacles and discourages their prospects for success? What is the emotional cost for trying to stay balanced in a society that is out of balance and that silences and oppresses African American girls and women?

Setting out to answer those questions provided me with some much-needed catharsis in my life. I have suffered and have allowed people who care about me to watch me suffer enough. This project, in many ways, became an effort for me to help other African American women think about their experiences and to show them that they can and do deserve an opportunity to be successful. I could say to them: you are not the only one who has felt the strain of trying to do the right things and to be successful. I have seen other African American women suffer enough (whether they were
academically successful or not). I wanted to say: it is not just you – it is all of us. We all feel it.

And from that shared experience we can draw strength.

It was time to overcome the silence – both my own silence, and the silence that too many Black women at predominately White institutions PWIs know all too well. It is difficult to be successful at PWIs and stay sane and stay focused. We celebrate academically successful Black women for their accomplishments, but do we really understand what they endure on a day-to-day basis? Do we really understand what they give up? Do we really understand the pain, resentment, and anxiety that they endure and manage so that they do not “fall,” which will lead them to be further isolated and marginalized in hostile environments?

This is where my project begins: How do academically successful African American women walk the tightrope?

The Need for the Study

The discourse in the literature on academic achievement focuses on why African Americans are not performing well at predominately White institutions (henceforth referred to as PWIs). Though these studies are important, they emphasize the collegiate experiences of African American women from a deficit perspective. In academic circles, African Americans generally and women, in particular, are identified as lacking academic preparation by their White counterparts (Fordham, 2000; Gratham, 1998). The emphasis on Black women’s poor achievement neglects a crucial research opportunity, which is to ask how Black women themselves characterize their individual higher educational experiences. My desire to investigate and challenge these stereotypes of African American
American women stems from the fact that, in reality, African American women are not only meeting academic expectations, but also exceeding them.

**Statement of the Problem**

In American society there are a number of women who are defined as exemplars and have “overcome” discrimination in order to be successful. People can easily name successful African American women such as Oprah Winfrey, Tyra Banks, Halle Berry and First Lady Michelle Obama. American society celebrates African American women when they are doing well, and we present them as stories of triumph. Why should we be concerned about them? After all, they’ve made it. They have “proven” that the American dream is alive and well. They have “proven” that you can overcome racism and build a better life for yourself, and a better future for African Americans. How could there possibly be a problem? However, we do not think about the anxiety, anger, and resentment that these women feel as they work toward success in a system that expects them to fail. Negative stereotypes regarding African American women’s femininity, character, and intelligence have led many to question their abilities as students and colleagues (Banks, 2005; Banks, 2009; O’Connor, 2002). Just walking in the door of the classroom, they start out with extreme self-doubt created by internalizing those stereotypes, either as images that deep down they feel are the truth that they must hide, or as images they must constantly fight against.

In her undergraduate thesis at Princeton University, Michelle Obama discusses her frustrations about feeling like an outsider while attending college:

> My experiences at Princeton have made me far more aware of my “Blackness” than ever before. I have found that Princeton no matter how liberal and open-
minded some of my White professors and classmates try to be towards me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don’t belong. Regardless of the circumstances under which I interact with Whites at Princeton, it often seems as if, to them, I will always be Black first and a student second (p.2).

First Lady Obama is clear about her experiences with being racialized by Whites at Princeton and the frustration that she feels because she realizes that many Whites are unable to see beyond African American women’s color and see her as a student. African American women experience this and must learn to cope with feeling like an outsider at PWIs on a day-to-day basis.

As a result of the conditions in which they strive for success, Black women lack choices in the ways that they can identify themselves, and those limitations constrain the kinds of interactions that they will have on college campuses (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Regardless of the conditions of the specific classrooms they enter, they enter carrying the baggage of history on their shoulders, a history to which their White counterparts are often oblivious because they’ve never had to know anything about it. Their lives and their futures do not depend on being aware of the ways in which race determines relations of power and privilege. They can afford not to “see” race as an issue.

In contrast, African American women cannot afford not to see it, as their lives and their futures depend on “doing the right thing” to avoid conflict with Whites and to present themselves as the “right kind” of Black woman. African American women are victims of color-blind racism in two ways: first, for the ways in which the assumptions of color-blind racism mask the very real ways in which racism continues to operate; and second for the ways that these women also internalize the rhetoric, believing they can
“overcome” racism individually, through hard work, discipline and diligence, even though the system is stacked against them.

As will be discussed further in the literature review in Chapter 3, color-blind racism de-emphasizes the impact that race and racism have on African Americans (Bonilla-Silva, 2008; Collins, 2010). It thus allows discriminatory practices and stereotypes to be perpetuated that blame African American women for their social condition, attributing even obvious racist incidents to the ignorance of a limited few, and ignoring the historic, social, and economic conditions that subjugate African American women. Thus, the concerns and experiences of African American women are not taken seriously and are minimized from the perspective of hegemonic White society.

This dissertation examines the narratives of academically successful African American women as they construct their identities in an effort to “overcome” stereotypical images of African American femininity. These narratives are important because they problematize stereotypical images of Black women by illustrating the complicated nature of their identity constructions.

My dissertation fills in the gap in research on achievement among African Americans in several ways. First, I focus on African American women whose academic records indicate that they are in fact succeeding. Second, I allow the women to speak for themselves, to define their own struggles and to explain their strategies for coping with them. Third, I use concepts drawn from Black feminist standpoint theory and from feminist geography to explore the ways in which these women navigate the spatial territories of White academia, asserting their own agency against entrenched institutional boundaries. I examine how Black women are given the illusion of “choice” in their
interactions on campus, making conscious and unconscious choices in order to avoid being racialized on campus.

**Theoretical Perspective**

In this dissertation I draw upon three sets of theories that enable me to investigate and interrogate the unique challenges that African American women encounter when they attempt to succeed in academia. These are: Black feminist standpoint theory, intersectionality theory, and feminist geography.

Black feminist standpoint theory explores the ways that Black women’s experiences with and survival of racism have enabled them to develop a standpoint that challenges stereotypical and controlling images of Black femininity. Black feminists argue that Black women use their status as outsiders to empower themselves by creating their own social standards and perceptions of society (Collins, 1995, 1990; hooks, 1981).

In addition, intersectionality theory enables me to investigate the variety of ways African American women perceive race and racism on campus (Crenshaw, 1994; Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Although all of them experience racism, the intersections of their various identities differ because they influence the degrees of access to power each woman has. Throughout this study, I explore the implications of the process by which Black women draw strength from their racial and gender identities while navigating college spaces that are sometimes unwelcoming (if not downright antagonistic) to women and students of color.

The notion of “navigating space” is an important theme in this dissertation: the application of feminist geography is fundamental in my analysis, and it forms the foundation for the “geographic map” of my analysis chapters. Human geographers argue
that space is “embedded in social relations rather than being a mere backdrop to them” (McDowell & Sharp, 1999, p. 257). Space is gendered, raced, and classed, and is not neutral in the expression of identity and subjectivity of African American women. Feminist geographers define space as fluid, unstable, and malleable (Bondi, 1997; Kobayashi, 1994; McDowell, 1992, 2001; Massey 1998; Pratt, 1998). Spatiality (the production of space) therefore creates power relationships through the interactions and norms established in society; these relationships are always contested and negotiated, and Black women at PWIs experience this process in uniquely important ways.

The analysis chapters in this dissertation are divided by the social spaces in which these women must operate: on the larger scale, there is a distinct difference between academic and social spaces in terms of the subjectivities these women construct; within each larger classification there are further subdivisions, such as the classroom, housing, student government/organizational spaces, and personal spaces. Because of the ways the women are racialized in predominately White spaces, the women’s socio-spatial practices reproduce segregation through self-preserving, self-segregation practices (i.e. forming friendships with only members of their racial groups) (Thomas, 2011). My research explores how these women express positive aspects of their identities in order to contest socio-spatial norms. These spatial practices protect them from further racialization, but contradictorily, they also reinforce the segregative practices that isolate them.

**Objectives of this Study**

The purpose of this research is thus to explore the day-to-day experiences of successful African American women at the college level and the ways they negotiate racialized, gendered, and classed spaces of the university. My research contributes to the
field of educational research by exploring a) the ways that Black women construct space and how this affects their abilities to be successful at the college level; b) adding geographic theory to examine how women of color experience the university as a space; and c) exploring the intersections of identities such as race, gender, and class. Because this dissertation is focused on exploring the experiences of African American women, the research design must lend itself to placing the narratives of African American women at the center of analysis. In order to investigate the experiences of academically successful women, I interviewed 23 high achieving African American women at a predominately-White institution. The participants in my study had senior or junior status at this research one institution.

**Research Questions**

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1) What are some of the formal and/or informal ways that academically successful African American women cope with being outsiders in a predominately White university?

2) How do successful African American women construct and reconstruct their identities, and how do these identity formations influence their levels of achievement?

3) How do race, gender, and class intersect in the ways African American female students construct their identities?

4) How does exploring different spaces of the university help me to understand the ways that African American women navigate their college experiences?
5) What spatial practices are at work as these African American women attempt to challenge established boundaries while attending PWIs?

I have constructed this dissertation to examine these issues and provide an overview of each of my chapters below.

The Significance of Study

This research is designed to facilitate policy making by predominately White institutions in the effort to create more inclusive environments for students. My research challenges administrators to problematize racial tensions on campus and to stop allowing relationships between students and between students and faculty affected by racial tensions to be defined as normal and natural outcomes.

Educators need to be more aware of the ways that African American women are affected by racism and sexism on campus. They need to be more aware of the ways they interact with African American women. They should also be cognizant of how they may unconsciously reinforce and reproduce racial tensions on campus. Educators should be more aware of the ways that stereotypes of African American women circulate and are reproduced, and how stereotypes influence the experiences of not only academically successful women, but women who are struggling in higher education.

For researchers, a closer investigation into how spaces and contexts play roles in the educational experiences of African Americans should be taken into account. Researchers should understand that space is not neutral but works to racialize Black students and mark them as outsiders. In addition, an investigation of the complexity of African American women’s experiences in higher education is needed in order to
understand the myriad ways that entrenched racial and gender stereotypes still operate to oppress women of color.

**Organization of the Study**

Chapter 2 provides an historical overview of African American women in higher education. The historical overview provides much needed background on the struggles that Black women have endured while gaining access to higher education. I argue that African American women struggled with the ways they position their racial (and gender) identities in order to gain access and navigate through higher education. African American women in higher education bore the burden of being defined as “representative of the race” to legitimize their right to be accepted as full citizens of the United States. Additionally, African American women viewed their participation in education as a form of activism to help uplift all African Americans from poverty. The women in my study indicate that this burden remains.

Chapter 3 reviews the relevant literature and provides the theoretical framework for my dissertation. In this chapter I explore how presumed “color-blindness” in fact works to racialize African American students and to normalize the segregation of space, creating a hostile environment for these students. I then discuss campus climate literature and the ways it racializes students of color and normalizes racial tensions on college campuses. I first discuss the ways education researchers have theorized identity construction and how issues of race, gender, and socioeconomic status have influenced the educational experiences of African Americans, their perceptions of higher education, and their interactions in higher education. I construct my conceptual framework by integrating Black feminist thought and intersectionality within education studies. This
framework places the experiences of African American women at the center of analysis. I then integrate theories of feminist geography to argue that African American women develop both social and spatial practices in order to achieve academic success at PWIs. Using these three theories, I examine how African American women define and express their identities and provide insight into how they assert power, agency, and subjectivity as they negotiate the spaces of the university.

Chapter 4 describes the methodology used in the data collection process. Employing qualitative methods to frame this study, I use narrative inquiry to examine the lived experiences of academically successful African American women. First, I discuss integrating feminist methodology, Black feminist standpoint methodology, and feminist geography to frame my study because it provides me with the tools to best gain insight into the identity development and expressions of successful African American women at PWIs. Each of the theoretical tools as well as the writing and rewriting process established the codes and analytical categories applied to my subjects’ narratives, and I discuss this methodological process. I then discuss narrative inquiry and discuss the relevance of interviewing as my sole method for collecting data for this project. I argue that the narratives of African American women are central to understanding their perceptions of power, race, gender, and agency in socio-spatial interactions.

Chapter 5 is the first of my analysis chapters. In this section, I examine academically successful African American women’s experiences in academic spaces. I examine how Black women feel about stereotypical images of Black femininity and how these images influence the ways that they construct their identity. I argue that African American women’s spatial practices are conditional and work to contest stereotypes of
Black women at PWIs. I explore the ways their experiences in college have evolved and changed, and how they perceive various aspects of their identities. In addition, I discuss how African American women understand color-blind racism and the myths regarding merit in their experiences on campus. I investigate the tensions that arise as they cross, reinforce, and police boundaries on campus, and the conscious and unconscious ways that they perceive and negotiate these boundaries. I argue that Black women’s standpoints compel them to be activists both inside and outside of the classroom in order to empower themselves.

Chapter 6 is my second analysis chapter. In this chapter I examine how these women negotiate social spaces, and I argue that the campus climate has a direct effect on the social interactions and practices of African American women attending PWIs. By examining Black women’s experiences in dorms, social organizations, and friendships, I argue that Black women have carved out spaces at the university to attempt to make it more accessible and less hostile. I argue that Black women try to “overcome” race through the ways that they develop friendships, but they cannot avoid being racialized when they cross racial lines. Black women identify with other African Americans because of their similar experiences, and believe they are making these choices because it is “natural” to be around people of their own race. However, a deeper investigation of these practices reveals that racist socio-spatial practices have led these women to “choose” to self-segregate. Black women try to make choices about the ways that they identify themselves, but are limited in the kinds of relationships that they form.

In chapter 7, I provide concluding thoughts about my findings and offer suggestions for future research. I discuss the ways color-blind racism normalizes racial
tensions and suggest possible solutions. Finally, I argue that universities should seek ways to make “the informal formal” by offering more opportunities for African American women to discuss and form organizations that suit their social and academic needs. I also suggest the ways that geography can be used in educational research to understand how and why certain designated “African American spaces” were not particularly constructed to accommodate students’ social, academic and cultural needs and preferences.
CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In this chapter, I examine the complicated methods African American women have used over time to fight against negative perceptions of themselves in higher education. On the one hand, I examine the ways that PWIs worked to segregate Black women, police their identities, and maintain racialized and gendered hierarchies through university policies and social practices. On the other hand I consider how, as more Black women entered higher education, these women fashioned their identities in ways that both resisted dominant negative ideals and marginalized their existence within the dominant culture. In so doing, I seek to map the hegemonic processes that marginalizes African American women in higher education.

I apply historian Stephanie Y. Evans’ periodization scheme for African American history, with slight modifications for the purposes of this dissertation,\(^2\) breaking my historical overview into five waves to emphasize important transformative events and the ways that racism and the attendant discriminatory behaviors evolve over time (see Evans 2007a). Each of the five sections of this chapter discusses a distinct era:

1) The Antebellum Period, which is commonly defined as the timeframe between 1784 to1865;

\(^2\) Evans (2007b) indicates that her periodization scheme is rough and open to debate, with specific years being arguable. I have chosen to use the broad strokes of her periodization scheme and to tie the specific years to easily identifiable events that mark significant changes, such as the passage of legislation.
2) The Reconstruction Era from the end of the Civil War in 1865 to 1877;
3) The Third Wave, from 1877 to 1954, spanning the period from the end of
   Reconstruction and to the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement, which begins
   in earnest following the historic Brown v. Topeka Board of Education (1954)
   Supreme Court decision;
4) The Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1968, ending with the passage of the Civil
   Rights Act of 1968, which established the legal concept of affirmative action;
5) Post Civil Rights, 1968-present.

Through this study, I explore the methods used to position African Americans in
higher education and answer the following questions: historically, how were African
American women socially and spatially located in higher education? In what ways have
gender and race prohibited these women’s access to and success in higher education?
What methods do universities use to ensure the segregation of Black women? And how
do they work to position African American women in subordinate positions while they
are attending PWIs?

Antebellum Period (1784-1865)

The arduous road traveled by African American women to gain access to
education begins with the institution of slavery. Enslavement of Africans was justified
by reference to their presumed inferiority as human beings, and most particularly their
lack of intellect. Enslaved Africans were viewed as subhuman. Also, White
supremacists argued that Blacks lacked the intellectual and moral character to function
without the “guidance” of White slave owners. Defining enslaved Africans as subhuman
allowed for the barbaric and inhuman treatment of enslaved Africans; as property they
had no legal standing. Enslaved Africans were prohibited from protecting their family members (from being raped, beaten and whipped etc.); enslaved African children were the property of their White slave owners.

As Evans (2007a) notes:

The legal and social status of Black women varied widely in different regions between 1619 and 1850; what can be said, generally, is that legal status combined with economic and social class played a very large part in determining who had access to formal education” (p. 27).

In the South, slave codes prohibited educating slaves and were used to psychologically, socially, and economically stifle any independent thought (Anderson, 1988; Evans, 2007a; Gidding, 1984; Harding, 1981). Among slaves there were no gender distinctions regarding education: neither male nor female slaves were to be educated, even at the most basic level.

In contrast, while free Blacks living in the North had greater autonomy, it was still difficult for them to gain access to schools. Educated free Blacks were the exception and not the rule during the Antebellum Period (Evans, 2007a). Freed Blacks in the South usually left Southern states once they attained their freedom. Whites feared that the presence of freed Blacks could incite those who remained slaves to question their status. Freed Blacks were treated with open hostility and always risked being mistaken for runaway slaves.

Even in the North, early efforts to develop educational institutions for African American women were met with hostility and violence. For instance, in 1833 Prudence Crandell’s, a female boarding school founded by Quakers in Canterbury, Connecticut,
caused a stir when Crandell admitted Sarah Harris, the daughter of free African Americans, into her school. The school was destroyed by White mob violence because the school attempted to educate Black girls (Evans, 2007a, p. 21). Though New England was defined as “liberal” toward Blacks, Whites still used violence to reinforce the racist social order. Evans (2007a, p. 21) points out that, “if the climate in New England was hostile to the idea of educating African Americans, the rest of the country was downright murderous.”

Higher education for wealthy White men was well established by the time the first Black man, John Chavis, graduated from Washington and Lee University in 1799 (then called Washington Academy), and the first White woman, Catherine Elizabeth Benson, graduated from Georgia Female College (later known as Wesley College) in 1839. The first Black woman, Mary Jane Patterson, did not earn her undergraduate degree (from Oberlin College) until 1862 (Evans, 2007a, p. 27). During the Antebellum Period, African American women were admitted into only a few institutions of higher education – such as Antioch (Yellow Springs, Ohio), Wilberforce University (Wilberforce, Ohio), Hillsdale College (Hillsdale, Michigan), Lincoln University (Chester County, Pennsylvania) and Berea College (Berea, Kentucky) – out of 250 institutions of higher education (Evans, 2007a). And while financial means provided upper-class Blacks access to education, it did not secure their admittance into any specific college or university. More established schools on the East Coast excluded Black women from the university if they were not generally admitted to PWIs in their home states (with the exceptions of Lincoln University and Wilberforce University, which are historically
black colleges and Universities [HBCUs]). Many African American women who had financial means were from the Midwest and the east coast (Evans, 2007a).

Women of the period wrote in their journals and other primary sources that they felt they had “to prove themselves” in the classroom, and that they were often ignored and marked as invisible by their White counterparts in classes (Evans 2007a). Jacqueline Royster (2000) comes to similar conclusions in her research:

People of African descent were deemed inferior and unworthy, generally, so it comes as no surprise that the acquisition of learning carried with the ongoing struggles against these prevailing sentiments: to gain admission; have talents and abilities recognized and nurtured; to create spaces – particularly within the often cold, unaccommodating environs of White institutions – that permitted at least [a] modicum of solace affirmation and reward (p.179).

Indeed, the culture of institutions of higher education echoed those of the larger society regarding Black femininity and intelligence. The institution of slavery suffocated any thought of African American women as intellectually equal to their White counterparts. For instance, White missions assumed that “Black people were savages in need of civilizing and natural slaves in need of morality, brutes and sexual deviants in need of purity, or all of the above” (Evans, 2007a, p. 34). African American women were defined as sexually aggressive and amoral seductresses who encouraged sexual liaisons between themselves and White males. This narrative obscured the sexual assaults on African American women at the hands of White slave owners. It also precluded these women from being seen as “ladies” by White standards of femininity.
Black women “were not seen as moral beings. Black women’s character was everywhere impugned” (Evans, 2007a, p. 35).

Despite enduring hostility and racial tensions in higher education, the women empowered themselves by using the limited avenues these few institutions provided to them. Like their White counterparts seeking to rise above their stations in life, African Americans viewed higher education as a stepping stone to improving their own conditions. Unlike their White counterparts, however, Blacks in general and Black women in particular saw their efforts to educate themselves within a larger social context: by becoming educated, they believed they would thereby demonstrate that they were worthy of citizenship and therefore worthy of being integrated into mainstream society. They also saw themselves as exemplars, or role models, for other Black women to follow, and thus further “uplift” their race.

During this period, the ideology of the “Cult of True Womanhood” governed constructions of femininity to which all middle class White women of the period were supposed to adhere; and all Black women who aspired to become integrated into mainstream society were expected to conform to it as well. Paula D. Giddings notes that the “Cult of True Womanhood” included the “cardinal tenets of domesticity, submissiveness, piety, and purity in order to be good enough for society’s inner circles” (Giddings, 1996, p. 47; see also Welter, 1966). White women often defined education as a means to obtain a husband and to become wives and mothers (Perkins, 1983). Black women were educated to promote the uplift of fellow Blacks and defined this task as a life long duty. Black women were primarily concerned with the “uplift” of African Americans. Educated Black women sought the abolishment of slavery and to educate
African Americans (Perkins, 1983). Black women subscribed to the notion of “True Womanhood,” but framed their practices as a means to improve the conditions of Blacks to prove to Whites “that color, class, or the experiences of slavery did not nullify the moral strength of true womanhood” (Gidding, 1996, p. 88). Though both Black and White women subscribed to the ideals and practices of “True Womanhood,” Black women saw these gendered practices as essential to uplift for them because they pulled Black women out of their conditions that they endured during slavery.

For educated African American women, “moral and spiritual uplift” also involved educational, social, and economic uplift. Race and social status influenced how African American women lived up to ideals of femininity and thus “uplifted” the race (Blackmon 2008; Evans; 2007; Giddings, 1996). Nonetheless, African American women collegiates also had academic ambitions. The women had to live up to these social and behavioral standards to gain access to higher education, but they knew that doing so did not ensure that they could thereby win access to the colleges, universities, and educational programs of their choice. Nor did acquiring an education necessarily translate into better economic status through expanded access to professions.

African American women were well aware of the White standards of femininity and worked to replicate them in the hopes of gaining more educational access and social status. Upper-class African American women were raised with similar perceptions of social practices. Evans (2007a) describes the knowledge of the latter as a luxury afforded to those with sufficient “capital”:

Those families who could afford to send their daughters to schools for teacher training or liberal arts education, regardless of region, could do so only because of
financial capital (earned in trades or agriculture), social capital (earned through elite kinship or White sponsorship), or a combination of the two (p.27).

Whites assumed that African American women did not have the same (if any) of the social graces and/or moral fiber of White women; yet the Black women adhered strictly to the demands of White femininity in order to challenge stereotypes about African American women. There is a wealth of literature confirming that Black women who adopted these racialized standards were received more favorably by their White colleagues (see, e.g., Jewel 1993; Mgdami 2009).

Even as African American women gained admittance into universities, those institutions developed policies to segregate them and their male counterparts from the majority White population. Black students were subjected to racist comments and attitudes from White faculty, staff and students. In addition, African Americans may have been admitted into the classroom, but PWI policies excluded Blacks from belonging to social organizations and from living in campus housing (Evans, 2004). Black women also dealt with constraints on the programs to which they were admitted, consigned to “Ladies Studies” programs (Lawson and Merrill, 1994). Bachelor’s degrees were reserved for male students; both Black women and White women earned Literary Studies degrees (LD). These courses were less rigorous than the courses assigned to the bachelor’s degree or “gentlemen’s course” (Evans, 2007a, p. 21-23).

These institutional policies mirrored social practices in the United States. Segregation marked Black women as outsiders at PWIs. Because they were marked as “outsiders,” and therefore “different” or “not normal,” there was little expectation for Whites to interact with the few Black women on their campuses. Black women’s
presence on campus was read as an anomaly – exceptions that merely proved the rule that Black women were intellectually inferior. Try as hard as they might, the Black women who were successful in obtaining college educations were unable to persuade Whites that their success in any way represented potential among other Black women. Any individual success was seen as precisely that – the result of anomalous characteristics of the individuals rather than as illustrative of what Black women in general could achieve. Moreover, success was confined to extremely limited intellectual endeavors by virtue of segregated programs.

**Reconstruction Period (1865-1877)**

The Reconstruction Period for African American communities centered on struggles to gain full citizenship, to create self-sufficiency, and to end the brutality that once enslaved African Americans. In the North, college-educated Blacks viewed Reconstruction as an opportunity for advancement and community uplift (Anderson, 1988, Bennett, 1969). In the early years of Reconstruction, the U.S. government did not focus on establishing an education system to address the needs of newly-emancipated slaves. The federal government was more concerned with keeping order in the South and ensuring property damage did not occur. The Freedmen’s Bureau was created to keep social order in the South; however, in the later years of the Reconstruction Era, the Bureau began to focus on improving the conditions of African Americans. By the late 1860s, the Freedmen's Bureau had finally begun to focus on integrating newly freed slaves into free society by providing food, housing, and jobs, as well as by helping Blacks obtain educations (Anderson, 1988). Many African Americans and some Whites moved to the South in order to help educate freedmen and freedwomen in the South.
However, access to education remained limited by economic and political standing (Anderson, 1988, p. 5). Blacks had few, if any, formal schools to educate their children. Additionally, these schools were not well funded and had a variety of different age groups and learning levels in a single classroom. Also, the Black school year was shorter because Black children had to work in the fields with their parents during harvest seasons.

During Reconstruction, African Americans gained greater access to higher education than ever before. It was no longer illegal to educate African Americans and they were and they sought every avenue to become educated. However, their advancements were limited because the kinds of programs to which they gained admission were limited. For instance, Blacks were admitted into teaching programs, but they still experienced difficulty being admitted into bachelor’s degree programs (Evans, 2007a, p. 36).

While White women also had to fight for access to higher education, there was little, if any, solidarity between them and Black women. Both were victims of gender bias and discrimination, but race was always at the center of their divisions. White women did not see Black women as allies in their struggle. Indeed, the White single-sexed schools known as the Seven Sisters, while being at the forefront in fighting on behalf of higher education for women, did not welcome African American women and were “comparatively slow” (in relation to co-ed PWIs) in granting admission to Black women (Evans, 2007a, p. 48). Thus, the established racial hierarchy was reinforced at

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3 The seven sister schools are Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Wellesley College, Smith College, Vassar College, Radcliffe College, Bryn Mawr College, and Barnard College.
women’s colleges throughout the Reconstruction Period. Black women were still viewed as inferior to their White female counterparts.

**Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

Although my primary concern here is the position of Black women at PWIs, it is also essential to account for the development of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) – most of which were established following the Civil War – as they were also involved in the construction of educated Black femininity during the Reconstruction period. The early development of HBCUs also provides insight into how African Americans are influenced by and positioned in relationship to power and authority during the Reconstruction Period. With these new predominately Black learning institutions came discussions regarding what types of curricula colleges and universities should teach their students.

Educational organizations from the North that helped to facilitate the development of HBCUs can be categorized into three groups: a) missions (such as the American Missionary Association and the American Baptist Home Mission Society), b) individual philanthropists (such as Richard Humphreys and Samuel Coleman), and c) Black religious organizations (such as the AME church and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church) (Evans, 2007a). All three of these groups had specific ideas about their educational missions and where Blacks should be positioned in mainstream American society.

At the core of these arguments about curriculum are issues of racial discrimination and identity politics. These groups’ constructions of Black racial identities also defined their positions in society. For instance, both Black church
organizations and White missions agreed that Blacks should be taught a liberal arts curriculum in order to integrate them into mainstream society. However, these two groups differed in terms of their understanding of Black culture and the purposes of integration. African Americans wanted to prove that they were equal to Whites, and one way they illustrated their intelligence was by achieving academically. Also, many White missionaries believed that, while Blacks and Whites had equal intellectual abilities, African Americans did not possess the same level of moral decency. Despite the fact that Whites created the now-condemned institution of slavery, White culture was presumed to be above critique, including critique of its beliefs regarding Blacks and their “place” in American culture. Essentially, White missions believed that the institution of slavery had culturally and morally damaged Blacks (Evans, 2007a). For them, a liberal education would lead to Blacks’ indoctrination into western culture and, ultimately, to spiritual uplift (Anderson, 1989).

**Community Outreach and Personal Responsibility**

Though African American collegiate women were taught to participate in community outreach and racial uplift as core elements of their educations, both elements also restricted opportunities for their empowerment. African American women focused more on issues of race because of the state of African American communities and place less of an emphasis on issues of race. Evans (2007a) notes that African American women “were educated to be levers of service to society regardless of the type of institution they attended. The ideals of ‘service’ and ‘Social Justice’ were not always based on classless, egalitarian assumptions, but they were pervasive” (p. 51). Educated Black women sought
to uplift their race through education to prevent further suppression of Blacks and to help future generations of African Americans.

Blacks’ survival at PWIs depended on their finding or creating receptive community organizations; such organizations provided personal support and cultural connections for African Americans who were otherwise isolated by their race. African American women began to develop sororities (such as Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta); however, these organizations did not begin to flourish at HBCUs until after the Third Wave of Black women gained greater entrée into higher education (Evans, 2007a).

The Women’s Club Movement played a significant role in the education of American women. Indeed, the women’s club movement in the United States was frequently referred to as the middle class woman’s “university” (Blair, 1980). As the Black middle class expanded, they attempted to join White women’s clubs, but they were usually rebuffed. Both Black and White women’s clubs attended to the needs of the poor, but middle class Black women recognized that their fate was linked to poor African Americans (Giddings, 1996). They believed that the uplift of poor African Americans would eventually open the doors to middle class society for them because they believed they would longer be defined as inferior to Whites.

Both White and African American women’s club members came from middle class backgrounds, and they shared a strong emphasis on the Protestant ethic. For both Black and White women, the clubs served as training grounds for activism, teaching them how to assert themselves in public forums and to work closely with politicians and government officials to secure useful legislation. These organizations focused on
political and social issues that oppressed women such as education, poverty, and suffrage. Members of these clubs believed that the family was the cornerstone of American society and that women should provide the moral compass and the educational skills to help their families (Giddings, 1996). These organizations were involved in informal education through letter writing, delivering speeches, and cleaning up government corruption.

**The End of The Reconstruction Period**

The Reconstruction Period concludes during 1877 with the Great Compromise. The Great Compromise solved a dispute over who had won the majority of electoral votes in Louisiana, South Carolina, and Florida in the presidential contest between Tilden and Hayes (Anderson, 1989). Both parties stipulated that federal troops would leave the South, and that Hayes would become president. The removal of federal troops signaled the end of Black freedom obtained during Reconstruction, and a return to the violence and brutality of the slavery period (Anderson, 1989). During this time period, lynching increased in an effort to control and oppress African Americans. Blacks had no legal recourse to defend themselves against the attacks of Whites.

**The Third Wave (1877-1954)**

Though there were major advancements by African Americans in the years following Reconstruction, racial progress was met with harsh opposition by most Whites. In response to that progress, Southern states passed Jim Crow laws, leading to the segregation of public facilities (Anderson, 1989; Lucas, 2006; Willie, 2003). Although Black women gained greater access to higher education between 1850 and 1899, “The post-Reconstruction era saw the institutionalization of Jim Crow and a life of sharecropping and hard labor” (Evans, 2007a, p. 50).
African American Women in Higher Education

The Third Wave of African American women entered college following the Reconstruction Era until the Civil Rights Movement and the enrollment rates increased for Blacks as they gained admittance into PWIs, and as HBCUs were newly established in the South. For instance, “At the end of World War I, the numbers of African American degree earners had swelled at 7,304 bachelor’s, 145 master’s, and 25 doctorates” (Evans, 2007a, p. 57). Though there were some HBCUs before the time Reconstruction (e.g., Wilberforce University (1856) and Cheyney University of Pennsylvania (1837), many of HBCUs were opened at the end of Reconstruction and the Third Wave of African Americans entering higher education (e.g., Dillard University [1869] and Fisk University [1866]). The Higher Education Act of 1965 provided federal funding for the establishment of HBCUs not simply in the South but across the United States (Evans, 2007a). Though Black women’s annual college attendance rate was higher than men’s, their attainment of bachelor’s degrees from top ranked schools was woefully behind that of African American men and White women (Evans, 2007a, p. 57).

Thus, the numbers of African American women in higher education increased; however, Black women still remained behind in obtaining degrees. As Evans (2007a) noted, “Overall, Black women were on average 30 years behind Black men and White women in earning the bachelor’s, thirteen years behind in the master’s, 24 years behind in high honors like Phi Beta Kappa, and 50 years behind in earning the PhD” (Evans, 2007a, p. 58). The most significant issues of the time involved the lack of progress toward African Americans’ access to higher education on the East Coast.
Black women’s colleges were established with the specific intent of educating African American women. Like coeducational and all male Black colleges, these schools were designed by leaders of the local African American community (most specifically African American church ministers), philanthropists, and Northern White women who all dictated the curriculum (Watson & Gregory, 2006). The most notable Black women’s institutions established at the time were Bennett College (1873) in Greensboro, North Carolina; Hartshorn Memorial College for Women (1883) in Richmond, Virginia; and Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary (1881) in Atlanta, Georgia (Giddings, 1996).

While establishing the curricula for their graduates, HBCU founders also developed institutional expectations regarding how African American women were to conduct themselves. Most Black women’s colleges (such as Bennett and Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary [later known as Spelman College]) trained their women to adhere to strict moral standards. According to Evans (2007a), “Both Bennett and Spelman institutionalized the ‘ideal’ of a phenomenal Black woman who was educated and dedicated to race uplift” (p. 46). Characteristics of the ideal woman are echoed in the standards of the Cult of True Womanhood. Both Bennett and Spelman emphasized not only being morally upstanding but also providing support to the women’s communities. Indoctrinating these women into collegiate life also meant socializing them into standards created by the colleges’ benefactors.

While it was highly unusual even for educated White women to work outside the home, it was not at all unusual for Black women to do so. These women worked as domestics in White homes, as teachers in segregated Black schools, and as nurses in Black medical facilities – that is, in occupations considered suitable only for Black
women or not desired by Black men. In the South, Black women domestics had no choice but to work for White families. Like Black men, they were defined by their ability to serve and produce for Whites. To respond to these realities, Spelman’s original curriculum was geared toward domesticity and child rearing to train Black women as domestic workers. Spelman College tried to create a balance between a liberal education and industrial education. Black women who had educational opportunities believed that an education could enable them to improve their conditions economically; however, these women were still extremely limited regarding the kinds of jobs that would employ them. Spelman’s curriculum reflected this by arguing that Black women should be trained to have a skill to help them earn money (e.g., cooking, cleaning, etc.); however, these skills should be defined through professionalization, applying scientific principles to the tasks (Evans, 2007a).

Although African American women were welcomed into HBCUs, Black female collegiates, like their White counterparts, still faced sexist stereotypes regarding the type of academic training they should receive. Unlike collegiate White women, however, Black women in higher education faced even tighter restraints defined by race. Courses such as engineering, math, and science were defined as “men’s curricula” and thus “defeminizing” for women at both PWIs and HBCUs. Any African American woman who took these courses faced the prospect of not being able to marry; equally important, it was unlikely they would ever be employed in their fields (Evans, 2007a). Except for positions as teachers and nurses (both restricted to segregated facilities), it was rare for Black women to able to find employment outside of domestic work. Unlike their White counterparts, they were excluded from employment as secretaries and clerks, positions
that were newly open to White women as educated White males left for better paid positions (Giddings, 1996).

Black women still were blocked from crossing certain boundaries. Though HBCU admissions for Black women increased up until the end of World War II, these universities did not operate on the same intellectual plane as the New England schools. Admission policies of East Coast colleges and universities were still highly restrictive toward African American students (Evans 2007a, p. 64). East coast colleges and universities continued to garner the title of “elite” by excluding groups that were defined as socially undesirable.

Also, many Black women intellectuals began to challenge the validity of the uplift ideology. Women such as Mary Church Terrell criticized the uplift doctrine and the notion of the “ideal woman” because it emphasized middle class morality and because the idea was predicated on the assumption that Black women were responsible for “lifting up” the Black community (Evans, 2007a). The uplift ideology is problematic because it placed “regular” Blacks in subordinate positions and perpetuated stereotypes of Blacks. The “iron cage of uplift” (as Ula Taylor named it) bound Black women to roles as “saviors of the race” who must strictly adhere to morality and sexual repression in order to achieve that “savior” status (Evans, 2007a, p. 64). As Evans argues, “The uplift creed potentially created a martyr or savior complex for activists and ignored the agency of lower-class Blacks who were not simply waiting to be ‘saved’ by those who claimed to be or who were appointed race leaders” (Evans 2007a, p. 65).

Interestingly, the attempt to create an image of themselves as saviors also created the illusion that Black women had the power to overturn racism by educating other
African Americans. It assumed that neither their gender nor race would deter them from gaining power to overturn racism and chauvinism to create real social change. Black women were under pressure to fit a model that is unattainable, does not exist, and does not lead to their own personal uplift and freedom.

During the period after Reconstruction African Americans struggled with the brutality of Jim Crow laws in the south and attempted to use the legal system to overturn its racist laws. These laws were challenged in court, but the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) Supreme Court decision presented a huge setback to racial integration. The case involved Homer Plessy, an African American man, who attempted to ride in a segregated rail car in New Orleans, Louisiana. In 1890, Louisiana passed a law to separate cars based on race. Upper class Blacks, some Whites, and creoles (mixed-raced African Americans) formed the Committee of Citizens to challenge this new law. Plessy was arrested on East Louisiana Railroad for sitting in a White segregated car. He sued the state, arguing that his civil rights had been violated (Anderson, 1988). His grievance served as a test case for challenging how race would be defined in the United States for more than half a century, and had serious ramifications for racial identity and racism in the United States. Plessy was an “octoroon” (a person with both White and Black ancestors, himself being on eighth Black, which gave him a light complexion and therefore the ability to pass for White). Plessy argued that legal rights should not be based on a characteristic.

However, the Court rejected the plaintiff’s argument that forced separation is inherently unequal, stating:

> We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff’s argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race
with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it. (Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896)

Thus the Court argued that the racial inferiority implied by segregation existed only in the minds of “coloreds” and was not inherent in the law. The decision also noted: “If the two races are to meet upon terms of social equality, it must be the result of natural affinities, a mutual appreciation of each other's merits, and a voluntary consent of individuals” rather than through legislation. The Court thus placed all responsibility for obtaining equal rights on the shoulders of Blacks, who must individually and separately each persuade individual Whites to accept them on their merits.

The Plessy decision gave legal consent to the segregation of all facilities, including all schools and institutions of higher learning. However, Black schools were significantly underfunded and could not afford books, adequate schoolhouses, nor rooms for separate grade levels (Anderson, 1988). In higher education, Black colleges and universities faced similar funding issues. The vast majority of White institutions of higher education were closed to Blacks, thus drastically reducing the number of schools to which they had access. The legal separation of Blacks and Whites in the South had two effects on education for Blacks: to maintain segregation, Southern states paid for African Americans’ tuitions to Northern universities, and Southern leaders encouraged the funding of HBCUs (Franklin, 1978; Higginbotham, 2001). In the South, Blacks were virtually locked out of White educational institutions.

The era leading up to the 20th Century Civil Rights movement was one of the most difficult for African Americans, particularly in the South, because Jim Crow laws
blocked momentum toward gaining full citizenship following the end of slavery, and it stunted academic development among Blacks. White Southerners used every means possible to revert to slavery era culture by reasserting control over Blacks living in the South. Reinforced and justified by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, these practices continued through the 1950s. Because Plessy could pass as White, the decision made it clear that skin color was not the signifier on which segregation was based; instead, social practices that developed out of slavery and continued long past slavery’s abolition defined how Blacks would experience American citizenship. Despite the Court’s argument that separation was not inherently unequal, the case proved that many Whites still viewed Blackness as deficient, and that segregation was justified and normal. There were no substantial advancements for Blacks in White southern education for decades, until the end of the Great Depression in 1939.

From the 1930s until the 1950s, African American lawyers laid the groundwork to overturn *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) by challenging enrollment policies at professional and graduate programs (Anderson, 1988; Gamson, 1978; Lucas, 2006). There are three court cases that are instrumental in overturning *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The first case is *Gaines v. Canada* (1938). Lloyd Gaines applied to the University of Missouri’s law school but was not admitted because he was African American. The state of Missouri had no law school for Blacks at the time. The state offered to pay for Gaines to attend a law school out of state, but he refused this offer. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Gaines and stated that Missouri violated Gaines’s 14th amendment rights, ruling that the state must offer an in-state school for both Blacks and Whites. Gaines later disappeared, and it was thought that he was murdered. Almost ten years later the next substantial challenge
to *Plessy v. Ferguson* involved two cases, *Sipuel v. Oklahoma* (1948) and *Sweat v. Painter* (1950). The Sipuel case centers around Ada Louis Sipuel. Sipuel’s application for law school was denied at the University of Oklahoma based on race. Sipuel’s lawyers argued that her 14th amendment rights were violated because all of the law schools in the state were White and she would have to leave the state if she wanted to be admitted into law school. The University then opened a law school for African Americans (Langston’s Law School), but Sipuel was later admitted into Oklahoma’s law school because Langston’s facilities were not equal to those of the White law schools in Oklahoma.

The *Sweat v. Painter* court battle occurred simultaneously with the *Sipuel v. Oklahoma* case. Hermon Sweat was denied admission to the University of Texas School of Law due to his race. At the time, no law school in Texas would admit African Americans. The Supreme Court sided in Sweat’s favor, stating that Texas would have to integrate the law school or create separate facilities. The University originally opted to create a separate school for Blacks, but the university was forced to integrate the school because the facilities (faculty, resources, etc.) were not equal and the graduates would be unable to compete in the field.

These court cases challenged the validity of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and the ability of Southern states to continue to separate African Americans and Whites based on race. Eventually, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954) overturned separate but equal policies, setting the stage for the next era in education.

**The Civil Rights Era (1955-1964)**

The era of the Civil Rights Movement marks the fourth wave of Black women entering the university. A number of factors facilitated changes in African American
women’s educational experiences. The *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954) decision overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), ruling that separate was inherently unequal, and calling for the desegregation of all public institutions in addition to education. Subsequently, Black students sought entry into White institutions in the South; however, they were often denied admissions and/or expelled under false pretenses from these colleges (Hines and Thompson, 2009). In response to violence that erupted in 1957 when nine Black students attempted to desegregate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, President Dwight Eisenhower nationalized the Arkansas National Guard and sent in federal troops.\(^4\) It was not until the early 1960s that African Americans began to make strides to desegregate universities in “the border states” and states in the Deep South (Lucas, 2006). But those efforts were also met with great violent resistance, as exemplified by the challenges faced by James Meredith when he became the first African American to attend the University of Mississippi, to which Attorney General Robert Kennedy responded by sending 500 U.S. Marshalls to protect him. And though African Americans were admitted to universities, their numbers remained low; they were not fully integrated into college life and were restricted from certain university spaces (e.g., social facilities and dormitories) (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Willie, 2003).

The U.S. government began to develop policies that would assist African Americans in gaining more access to education and to the professions. In 1961, John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925 allocating funds to ensure against racial discrimination in employment, requiring government agencies to take “affirmative

\(^4\) Similarly, in the early 1970s, court orders to achieve desegregation in Northern cities where *de facto* segregation prevailed were also met with violent resistance by Whites.
“action” to ensure that discrimination did not occur based on “race, creed, color or national origins” (Curry, 1996). Government funded institutions, including educational institutions, could no longer reject applications based on race. For African Americans, this policy provided assistance only to Blacks from the middle class. Blacks who had education could have access to higher education and the possibility of being hired in more prestigious positions. However, this executive order did not ensure that African Americans would not experience racism and/or hostility when entering into predominately White institutions. Furthermore, at the time, the majority of Blacks lacked the educational preparation to be admitted into college.

As more opportunities opened for African Americans to enroll at PWIs, HBCUs suffered tremendous declines in enrollment. For instance, in Southern states, “between 1965 to 1970 Black enrollment in white institutions more than tripled. Simultaneously, black enrollments in historically Black college and universities had dropped from 82 percent of all college-attending Blacks to 60 percent 1965 to 1970” (Lucas, 2006, p. 262). When given the opportunity to attend PWIs, Blacks flocked to these schools although they knew that they would be met with violence and hostility. Many Blacks began to attend PWIs in the South because they now had the option to stay closer to home and family rather than traveling to HBCUs, which decreased the cost of education. As more Black students were admitted into higher education in both HBCUs and predominately White universities, these campuses became hotbeds for Civil Rights organizing and action.

The Black bourgeoisie played a pivotal role in the desegregation of institutions in Civil Rights Movement. The Black bourgeoisie can be defined as African Americans
who were college educated, upwardly mobile and had material wealth (e.g. car, residence in more affluent neighborhoods, etc.) (Giddings,1996). Middle class Blacks were more financially stable and had more material wealth than the average African American during the time, and that propelled them into leadership positions. Well-established Civil Rights organizations such as the NAACP and the Urban League were lead by older generations of African Americans who were fighting for Civil Rights.

In addition, the student movement was pivotal to the Civil Rights Movement. College aged students formed youth organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC) to help incorporate college students into the movement (Giddings, 1996). Though African American women desegregated schools along side their male counterparts, they were sometimes limited in the roles that they played as spokespersons for African American organizations. While African American women who worked in civil rights organizations were able to obtain leadership positions, they were not typically defined as one of more recognizable “the faces” of an organization (Gidding, 1984). They provided support and worked behind the scenes, which meant enduring patriarchal practices and agenda setting. In addition, the younger generation of African Americans sought more aggressive challenges to segregation than their older counterparts. African American students in campus and other youth-oriented organizations desegregated colleges and universities, mobilized Southern Blacks, participated in sit-ins, and integrated lunch counters. For example, students from North Carolina A & T integrated the Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960 (Giddings, 1996).
Blacks who enrolled at PWIs during the Civil Rights Era in the South faced violence and harassment on a scale incomparable to schools in earlier periods. These students were chosen not only for their intellectual ability but also for their moral character. While the language of “uplift” may have been discarded, many of the criteria placed on middle class African Americans during the Reconstruction and pre-Civil Rights periods were still intricately involved in the socialization of these students. As in the past, African Americans were expected to represent their race in the best light possible even in the face of violence and physical threats. Although they were empowered because they challenged the entrenched social and cultural norms of the South by virtue of their presence on university campuses, they still faced indignities as well as physical and psychological abuse, while at the same time they were expected to perform in the classroom.

Black women played an active role in these struggles. As with Black women in the first wave, Black women of the Civil Rights Movement sought solace from other members of their race (Higginbothom, 2009). Additionally, there was “no public acknowledgement of the differential needs” (p. 169) while they attended PWIs. Black women’s femininity did not prevent or lessen brutal attacks and indignities that they endured while trying to integrate Southern White schools. Instead, “Black women faced insults, condescending attitudes, and demeaning requirements. When not directly assaulted, they were conspicuously invisible: shunned, ignored, treated as exotic, or silently despised” (Evans 2007a, p. 104).
Northern Universities and Black Power

African Americans residing outside the South gained greater access to higher education due to governmental policies that worked to end racism in higher education. In addition, the Higher Education Act of 1972 provided funding for students of lower socioeconomic status who would otherwise be unable to receive a higher education (Kerr, 1963, 2001; Lucas, 2006; Willie, 2003). In 1978, Executive Order 10925 was extended to end racist administrative practices in higher education, such as excluding and/or limiting admission to universities based on race, which led to an increased number of African Americans gaining admission into institutions of higher education. As in the South, youth organizations were leading the charge for racial equality. College campuses became sites of great social unrest and protest. For Blacks, the desire to have their experiences and perspectives added to the body of knowledge at PWIs was essential to their learning process. As more Civil Rights organizations began to form, there were also more public debates regarding the best ways to ensure Black liberation. Many of the battles that took place on the streets of big cities outside of Southern states spilled over into universities in the North. For instance, a rival Black activist group, the US Organization (also known as Organization US), killed two members of the Black Panther Party when an argument spilled over onto the UCLA campus (Austin, 2006, p. 225).

In the later years of the Civil Rights Movement, the “Black Power” contingent, particularly on college campuses, pushed to redefine “Blackness” in a more positive light. African Americans challenged these norms by developing self-definition and embracing Afro-centric history, culture, and style. Rather than seeking “moral uplift” as defined by previous generations – that is, rather than attempting to model White cultural and moral
ideals – the Black Power movement found, developed, and redefined moral exemplars from Black and African history, redefining achievement within Black rather than White terms.

In the North, African American students sought greater inclusion into extra-curricular social spheres (social organizations, dormitories, etc.) and into the classroom by challenging curricular choices and university policies regarding race. Predominately White universities provided little, if any information about African Americans’ experiences in the United States. Neglecting the experiences of African Americans allowed negative stereotypes of Black culture to be perpetuated. Blacks continued to work to make college campuses more racially inclusive. As more minorities were admitted into predominately White universities during the 1970s and 1980s, these students wanted more racially inclusive and culturally diverse courses added to college curricula. Liberal-minded students and faculty members began to challenge the established standards of what was considered knowledge, equality, and free speech (Kerr, 1963, 2001; Lucas, 2006).

**The Post Civil Rights Movement (1964 - present)**

As racial politics in the United States lost its momentum during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Whites realized that Jim Crow segregation and other overt forms of racial discrimination would no longer be accepted. This did not mean that racism went away but rather that it went underground, making it difficult to identify. Willie (2003) writes, “When racism is overtly expressed in a putatively anti-racist atmosphere, its presence is difficult for many students and faculty to make sense of as anything other than an ‘isolated incident’ perpetrated by an ‘off-campus element’” (p. 25).
More covert forms of racism were developed to restrict Blacks' access to higher education (Curry, 1996; Bowman and Smith, 2002; Tierney and Chung, 2002). New forms of racism did not attempt to openly discriminate against Blacks but rather ignored the impact of America’s racist past on current levels of Black achievement. The post Civil Rights Era was followed by the White backlash during the 1980s (Gandara and Orield, 2006). Though Blacks have made huge strides in their penetration of PWIs, they are also encountering new forms of discrimination that are packaged in a way that makes them more politically and socially acceptable. African American women were less likely to be the victims of physical violence than in the past, but this did not mean that African Americans did not experience racism on campus. Blacks were still defined as intellectually inferior to Whites and still had to “prove” that they were intellectually equal to their White counterparts.

Though African Americans encountered hostility on campus, they were not detoured from advocating for more inclusivity in academics on campus. African American students attending PWIs were angry and frustrated because the racist climate at their universities was not being addressed adequately by college administrators, and they were not receiving adequate educations in African American life, whether in specific courses focused on the topics or in their other courses. As a result, African American students lobbied for the establishment of Black Studies programs that would be centered on developing curriculum about African Americans’ experiences and taught by African Americans for African American students (Williams, 1984, p. 304). These programs were designed to aid African Americans in challenging White social practices and norms and to raise questions regarding their influence on the lives of African Americans.
African Americans developed self-definitions and embraced Afro-centric history, culture and style.

In addition, programs designed to promote equality are increasingly being coded as discriminatory toward Whites. Interestingly, these policies forced college administrators to open their doors to more African American students; however, there has been no substantial effort to increase the enrollment of African Americans even as program development occurred (Curry, 2002, p. 52; Horn and Marin, 2006). Programs designed to promote equality are defined as “reverse discrimination” by many Whites in positions of authority at PWIs.

More than a century of gainful policy efforts have been undermined by the following: the steady underrepresentation of African American students at PWIs; continued over-reliance on racially-biased college entrance exams; consistent attempts to dismantle affirmative action; increased statewide admissions standards for public postsecondary education, without corresponding advances in public K-12 schools; and an increase in reports of racism and other negative experiences by African American students at PWIs.

Black college students must still cope with being outsiders at predominately White institutions; as Feagin at al. (1996) note: “Today as in the past, racial discrimination involves erecting physical, legal, and social barriers to make certain places, situations, and positions inaccessible to, or difficult for, members of racial out-groups” (p. 5). As more African Americans enter higher education, they are defined as exceptions rather than the rule because of their level of education and middle class socioeconomic status. African American women students entering college after the Civil
Rights Movement have been assumed to be unqualified and unworthy of admission because of “reverse discrimination.” Though African Americans in other eras faced similar stereotypes about Black intelligence, there was no question that they were in higher education because the standards had been “lowered” for them.

During the 1990s, admission standards have begun to increase as elite colleges and universities choose to become more competitive. These admission standards have work to reinforce racial, cultural and class norms that work to reinforce racial tensions and discrimination. Paul Green (2002) points out that one of the issues with contemporary universities is that they “have failed to understand that their programs do not reflect the thinking of an expanding and diverse community” (p. 51). As a result, many African Americans chose to attend junior colleges or have been admitted to satellite campuses with the hopes of transferring to the main campus branches of larger universities.

**Conclusion**

The end of the Civil Rights movement signaled a shift in admission policies and university procedure. However, it did not change nor did it challenge the ways that race is constructed on college campuses, nor the social boundaries that limit Black students’ access. Nor did it challenge the deeply entrenched negative stereotypes that African American women must still negotiate.

In predominately White institutions of higher education, Black women have been marked as abnormal for one primary reason: the very presence of African American women challenges the social and cultural norms and practices that dictate that they must be segregated and defined as intellectually inferior. In addition, the universities that they
were allowed to attend limited their options for choosing degree programs. Nonetheless, they were not deterred from higher education and sought ways to excel in the classroom in order to prove themselves as good students.

African American women were pressured to make good grades but to also adhere to rigid social expectations. Black women patterned their behaviors after White women in order to be defined as “ladies” and challenge negative stereotypes of Black femininity. These women felt that proving their female gentility would provide more access and respectability. However, their gentility did not change the minds of the Whites who defined African American femininity as deviant.

Adherence to White social codes of femininity and race did not mean that Black women did not assert themselves. Even when adhering to these codes, African American women resisted the boundaries placed on them by their race and worked to “uplift” other African Americans. Their sexual exploitation and lack of economic resources forced them into social situations that were particular to their experiences as African American women. They did not remain silent but rather sought ways to improve conditions for African American women.
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Following the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s it became clear that brutal violence against those who would seek racial equality would no longer be tolerated. The general consensus, at least as publicly presented, was that race was no longer an accepted reason to deprive people of access to the highest levels of success in American society. This did not mean that the racist attitudes expressed in prior centuries suddenly came to a halt. Rather, they evolved over time, coded into language that rendered that racism invisible (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Collins, 2010; Dillard, 2001). As states gradually added Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday as a holiday, Americans publicly celebrated the first half of Civil Rights Movement, or at least that aspect of it that focused on achieving integration through nonviolent protest. Mainstream America applauded African Americans for their vigilance and bravery fighting for their rights in Southern states (Bonilla-Silva, 2009).

However, these celebrations focused on the achievement of abstract individual rights, as well as the achievement of racial harmony and unity. Individuals were urged to follow King’s admonition to judge others according to the content of their character rather than the color of their skin (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Dillard, 2001). It was presumed that racial equality was a matter of individual choice to either follow King’s ideal or to reject it; it was also assumed that those who rejected the ideal would themselves be rejected and consigned to failure. With the passage of the Civil Rights Acts, the Voting
Rights Acts, and later, Affirmative Action laws, it was presumed that the United States had finally set the conditions to achieve a color-blind society, where people would be judged on their individual merits, and not by race.

However, the belief that society has suddenly become color-blind with regard to race is in itself a form of racism that, while acknowledging racism is wrong, insists that it no longer exists. Bonilla-Silva (2012) identifies this phenomenon as "color-blind racism," arguing that it is inherently racist to believe that the long history of racist oppression suddenly disappeared following the passage of certain civil rights laws, or, more recently, the election of a Black president. Bonilla-Silva (2011, p. 191) explains “color-blind racism” as follows:

Whereas Jim Crow racism explained minorities’ social standing as the outcome of their imputed biological and moral inferiority, color-blind racism avoids such facile arguments. Instead, the ideology rationalizes the status of minorities as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and their alleged cultural deficiencies (Berry and Bonilla-Silva 2008; Lipsitz 2006). Much as Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defending racial oppression in the past, color-blind racism provides the ideological armor for the “new racism” regime (Sullivan, 2006).

Bonilla-Silva’s critique of the “color-blind racism” forms a foundation for my critique of the literature in the field relevant to this dissertation. The ideology of color-blind racism renders racist assumptions invisible, explaining racial inequality through the use of four frames or filtering processes: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism and minimizing racism. These four frames enable me to tease out the unconscious
racist assumptions undergirding much of the research in the field. Along with the four frames of color-blind racism, the perspectives of Black feminist standpoint theory, intersectionality, and feminist geography help carve out the prism through which the data gathered for this narrative study may be seen and understood.

This chapter reviews the relevant literature as follows. First, I discuss the concept of the “color-blind racism” and its corollary assumptions regarding “personal responsibility” as a means of responding to racism. Then I summarize the campus climate literature to contextualize African American students’ interactions with and perceptions of PWIs; then I examine the achievement literature to investigate factors that help and hinder the achievement of African Americans in general and African American women specifically. Both the campus climate literature and much of the achievement literature frame the problem of academic success among minorities as matters of individual personal responsibility, as it is assumed that higher education has moved past racism and is now “color-blind.”

To counteract the myths produced by these concepts, I also discuss the literature of feminist geography as it applies to the of higher education. Next, I examine the application of Black feminist standpoint theory to research the collegiate experiences of Black women. Finally, I discuss the application of feminist geography theories regarding social spaces, and then locate my own study within this body of literature, suggesting that theories of space offer a useful approach to understanding Black women’s experiences in higher education.
Color-blind Racism

According to Bonilla-Silva (2010), the ideology of color-blind racism renders racist assumptions invisible, enabling the perpetuation of historical and cultural forms of racism by explaining racial inequality through the use of four frames or filtering processes: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimizing racism. Abstract liberalism is defined through the integration of political liberalism (the idea that people should compete and equal opportunity should be ensured for all) and economic liberalism (focusing on individualism and individual choice). Though there are four frames, abstract liberalism is the most important because it provides the foundation for color-blind racism as a whole (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 26). Bonilla-Silva characterizes the underlying filtering process as a “cognitive cul de sac”: that is to say, once racial issues are sifted through these frames, explanations for racial inequalities become obvious and predictable, as if the people using them “were getting on a one-way street without exits.” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 25 – 26)

Abstract Liberalism

Abstract liberalism originated in Classic liberal political philosophy, developed during the mid- to late 18th century by the budding ruling class in European countries and in the United States. Political liberalism is founded on the concept of the abstract individual, stripped of all political, economic, and social contexts, promoting individual freedom (limited government intervention) and a “laissez-faire” (hands off approach) in economics. Political liberalism emphasizes each individual’s inalienable rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” These rights are not given by government but are “natural rights;” – that is, rights with which each person is born. From this view, the sole
purpose of government is to protect individual rights. These inalienable rights along with “marketplace forces” are assumed to guarantee that achievement in society will be based on individual merit free from government tyranny (McNamee and Miller, 2009). Some groups (such as women, Blacks, and property-less men) initially were marked as subhuman and excluded from the protection of the Constitution, having no access to inalienable rights “naturally’ given to Whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; McNamee and Miller, 2009).

Economic liberalism also focuses on the individual, emphasizing “self-interest, individual competition, private ownership, and laissez-faire principles” (McNamee and Miller, 2009, p. 8). In this view, individuals are allowed to determine the price of labor, goods, and materials. Individuals can decide their price and thus own their own lives. By dint of hard work and the “invisible hand” of the free market, individuals presumably would be able to better themselves and the lives of their families. Free market ideology, however, does not “guarantee democracy, civil liberties, or political freedom” (p. 8). Slaves clearly had no access to the free market, and had little access even when freed. Similarly, even White women at the time were effectively chattel, owned by either their husbands or their fathers. Men of color, some White men, and all women regardless of color were excluded from the freedoms granted in the economic as well as the political sphere. Even as laws changed and excluded populations were finally brought under Constitutional protection, each of those populations, once freed, began from disadvantaged positions, and continued to encounter restrictions on choices and options long after gaining citizenship and the right to vote.
Through the frame of abstract liberalism, racism is defined as something that happened in the past and does not influence present day opportunities. Thus abstract liberalism frames racist assumptions in a manner that allows Whites to appear to be reasonable and rational even when challenging policies that are designed to curtail de facto segregation (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). For example, applying the language of abstract liberalism makes affirmative action appear to give Blacks and other minorities an “unfair” advantage, whether in employment, rewarding of government contracts, or admissions to schools.

Abstract liberalism deeply influences the experiences of Black women at PWIs by concealing institutional racism behind the ideology of “free market” choices. It is assumed, for instance, that any qualified student, regardless of race, has the ability to choose whatever college she may wish to attend. This viewpoint ignores the deep-rooted disparities between White and Black families with respect to financial resources, standardized test performance, pre-college preparation, and so forth. When the financial disparities are brought up, color-blind racism explains those disparities as rooted in the failure of those families to “work hard enough” to better themselves. Through the lens of abstract liberalism, all of the structural conditions that lead to the narrowing of choices for Black women are explained away as irrelevant.

Abstract liberalism also provides the foundation for resistance to affirmative action. Affirmative action opponents argue that racially redistributive policies that attempt to make up for the systematic oppression of the past do so by ensuring that minorities receive undeserved consideration for those opportunities, and the result is that Blacks take positions that rightfully belong to Whites (Connerly 2001; 2003). Among
other practices, affirmative action policies look at the representation of minorities in the population as a whole and encourage institutions to develop programs that will result in a closer representation of such populations in the university faculty, staff and student body (Kellough, 2006). They also ensure that hiring committees look to every possible source of minority candidates, with the belief that minority students will look to minority staff for successful role models. In short, the policies take “affirmative” action toward ensuring diversity in the student body, the curricula, and the staff rather than standing by passively waiting for the inequities to somehow right themselves.

However, through the frame of abstract liberalism, these policies are perceived as privileging African Americans. African Americans in general and African American women in particular are seen as being rewarded with jobs and school admissions by virtue of the color of their skin rather than by merit and qualifications. In addition, abstract liberalism reformulates the purpose of affirmative action by arguing that it gives away the “earned” positions of Whites to undeserving African Americans (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Policies leading to increases in the numbers of African Americans into higher education did not result in social or cultural acceptance. Thus the atmosphere remained openly hostile toward African American women, challenging their intellectual abilities. In theory, African American women gained access; in practice, Black women remain marginalized and oppressive power structures remain intact. Exactly how that practice works its way through the lived experience of academically successful Black women is the subject of this study and will be explored in more depth later.
Naturalization

The second frame of color-blind racism is the naturalization of racism. Naturalization is defined through the normalization of racial segregation. Segregation is framed as “a choice” freely made rather than as evidence of racism because it is assumed it results from Blacks merely choosing to be around members of their own race. Bonilla-Silva (2010) challenges these notions of segregation as natural and argues, “Segregation as well as racial preferences are produced through social processes and that is the delusion/illusion component of the frame” (p. 37). The naturalization of segregation is shattered, for example, when real estate practices deter Black ownership in certain neighborhoods, and when those who do manage to make it past the gatekeepers must cope with racial hostility among neighbors.

The naturalization of residential segregation has educational consequences for African American women. For example, on the surface, Blacks have the right to buy a home in neighborhoods that are predominately White and that have a good school system. Their ownership of this home requires them to have the financial resources to purchase in higher quality neighborhoods. Many do not have those resources, and as a result their children end up at poor quality schools in predominately Black, poor neighborhoods, producing de facto school segregation, less access to quality educations, and less access to preparation for higher education. From this perspective, segregation becomes less about choice and more an expression of economic opportunities, which are dependent on other variables. These economic opportunities translate into African American women’s access, opportunity and choice. Lack of opportunity to acquire sufficient wealth to purchase a home in more affluent White areas represents a
culmination of the political, economic and social factors that have lead to racial segregation in housing.

**Cultural Racism**

The third frame of color-blind racism is cultural racism. Cultural racism replaces biological racism when racial difference and cultural practices are framed as “fixed.” The link between the assumed inferiority of Blacks and genetics has been broken and instead has become linked to cultural practices. Cultural racism “relies on the culturally based arguments such as ‘Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education’ or ‘Blacks have too many babies’ to explain the standing of minorities in society” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 28). Cultural racism is used to justify racial inequality by “blaming the victim.” People that subscribe the rhetoric of color-blind racism assume that minorities lack the work ethic, family structure, or values needed to be successful in society (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). These people assume that Blacks have been given enough time and resources to overcome discrimination in American society, even though “separate but equal” was demolished by law only a little more than 50 years ago, and Jim Crow laws continued in various forms long after that. It is easier to blame Black people for their social and economic conditions rather than to examine the mechanisms that cause their oppression.

Cultural racism influences the success (or lack thereof) of African American women in higher education in many ways, but perhaps most pertinent is in the way that their academic underachievement is perceived. That underachievement is explained as a failure to work hard enough to ensure that they make good grades. In addition, rather than considering that African American women may feel isolated and uncomfortable on college campuses, and that *those* feelings may contribute to their underachievement, that
underachievement is read instead as a cultural deficiency. Everyday humiliations and constant racialization are factors influencing Black women’s performance, as they exact a massive price on the psyche. As will be demonstrated in the analysis of my data, Black women recognize that they are on the margins of society and they can break under the pressure to perform in an environment that keeps sending them messages that their failure is inevitable.

**Minimizing Racism**

The final frame of color-blind racism is the minimizing of racism. In the post Civil Rights era, Blacks do not experience as many incidence of overt brutal and violent forms of racism and oppression that they endured in the past. Though Whites are willing to concede that racial incidents still do occur (e.g., the beating of Rodney King by the police, the late reaction of the U.S. government to Hurricane Katrina, and the Trayvon Martin shooting), anger and frustration expressed by Blacks toward these events are interpreted as being hypersensitive to issues of race – i.e., as “playing the race card” to gain presumably undeserved sympathy and privilege.

This is also illustrated in the ways that African American women are perceived as overly sensitive regarding negative images of Black femininity. Black women are constantly challenging controlling images of Black femininity that portray Black women as hypersexual, loud and aggressive. A perfect example is when Don Imus referred to the Rutgers women’s basketball team as “nappy-headed ‘ho’s,”’ purportedly as a joke, on his radio program. When African American women and even some Whites reacted strongly to Imus’s racist comments and called for an apology from him, Imus initially argued that African American women were overreacting to a comment that should be deemed as
“harmless” because it was only a “joke.” He and his supporters could not grasp that the image of “nappy-headed ‘ho’s’” strips Black women of their femininity and desirability and portrays them as prostitutes with ugly hair and no moral compass. As Collins (2010) argues, these images of African American women have consequences: “Although most Black women typically resist being objectified as the Other, these controlling images remain powerful influences on our relationships with Whites, Black men, other racial/ethnic groups and one another” (p. 97).

In another example, the movie The Help recycles the mammy stereotype that depicts African American women consigned to positions of service, glossing over the complications of their experiences and historic struggles (Harris-Perry 2011; Jewel 1993). African American women who reject stereotypical images still are unable to escape them because they are bombarded with them at every turn, so that White society does not know how to identify African American women outside of these entrenched stereotypical images.

Black women voice their frustrations regarding these negative images and argue that they influence their personal and professional relationships. Those negative images prevent Black women from being seen as exemplary students, which may then prevent them from being properly mentored when faculty fail to see them as viable candidates for graduate programs, internships, and leadership positions.

When these negative stereotypes are dismissed as merely a joke or an easily recognizable exaggeration of Black femininity, they are deemed “harmless.” However, these images lead to a widespread perception of them as accurate depictions of African American women. As a result, young Black women attending PWIs must fight these
stereotypes on two levels: they must struggle against internalizing them as evidence of the inevitability of their failure, and they must struggle externally against those who would perpetuate them. And that struggle comes with a double-edged sword: when they fight against the stereotypes they are labeled as complainers who have no valid concerns. Complaints also make Whites question what the women are doing that causes them to be treated differently: i.e., they are asked what they did to provoke this negative behavior.

**Campus Climate Literature**

Campus climate literature focuses on the manner in which higher education institutions use social norms, behaviors, and practices to socialize students. As a result, the literature is infused with concepts of color-blind racism and personal responsibility (Ancris, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Chavous, 2005). Despite (or perhaps, because) these institutions deny or minimize the existence of racism, African Americans cannot escape being racialized on college campuses. Chavous (2005) writes:

> On PWI campuses, issues related to race often are interwoven into academic and social domains directly and indirectly (e.g., through class curricula, discussion of current events, institutional policy, etc.) resulting in an institutional climate where race is made very salient to minority and majority group members” (p.240).

Issues of race and racial tensions are a part of Black students’ everyday live inside and outside of the classroom. In order to investigate how color-blind racism affects the collegiate experiences of African Americans, I construct my literature review to emphasize three themes: a) the normalization of racial tensions, b) attempts at intervention, and c) the effects of racism.


**Color-blind Racism and Normalizing Racial Tensions**

Campus climate research begins with the assumption that White students and students of color perceive and experience racism differently at PWIs (Ancris, Sedlacek, Mohr, 2000; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Hagedorn, 1999; Chavous, 2005, Rankins & Reason, 2005). According to this research, White students assert that racist behaviors on campus are rare – the exception that proves the rule; that is, that the campus is essentially “color blind.” In contrast, the vast majority of students of color at PWIs insist that they have experienced racism at PWIs (Ancris, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000, Rankin & Reason, 2005).

These racially based differences in experience on the same college campus are a clear indication that race deeply affects students’ college experiences. If Black students perceive racism on a daily basis, whereas Whites do not see it, the dominant White perspective explains the phenomenon as resulting from Blacks being hypersensitive to race, or “playing the race card.” This perspective privileges White viewpoints and minimizes and discredits African American students’ experiences. In the final analysis, Whites are assumed to be objective whereas Blacks are presumed to be overemotional and caught up in narratives of victimization that “keep them down.”

Color-blind racism also normalizes racial tensions by assuming that the reason Blacks and Whites do not get along is the result of fundamental cultural differences. Racial tensions that occur between African American and Whites are defined as simply “the way it is.” Gurin et al. (2004) argue that normalizing or accepting racial tensions will lead to better campus climate. As Gurin et al. (2004) argue, “It is important, therefore, for faculty administrators and students to normalize the existence of tension and conflict,
even as they make every effort to understand its complexity and the complexity and critical difference between perception and personal experience” (p. 9). From this perspective, it is assumed that African American students who attend PWIs will be more successful if they learn to cope with and “overcome” racial tensions. Normalization of racism thus further promotes racism rather than challenging it, and places all the burden of racial tensions on the backs of African American students.

Though Blacks and Whites often do have cultural differences, when racial tensions arise, focusing on cultural differences alone gets in the way of examining the structure and institutional factors that created the conditions of inequality that cause hostility. Racial tensions arise when Black culture is defined as not just different but as inferior to White culture. Normalizing racism gives pride of place to White culture, thus subordinating African American culture, which allows many Whites to reinforce and to reproduce unequal power relationships. By normalizing racism, researchers fail to understand that racial tensions are due to unequal power relationships, and color-blind practices reproduce educational, economic, political and social oppression.

In other words, color-blind racism renders Whiteness invisible at PWIs by marking White norms and social practices as normal. Peggy McIntosh’s groundbreaking article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (2003) made clear the connections between the normalization of Whiteness and its privileges. McIntosh defines White privilege as “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, code-books, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks” (p. 31). Because their privilege is taken as a matter of course, it is invisible to them, and that allows them to assume that Blacks and other minorities enjoy
the same privileges. For example, McIntosh notes that a White woman can enter a store without anyone assuming merely at a glance that she must be a criminal preparing to shoplift. Many Whites can grow up without ever being concerned that the people around them will be openly hostile toward their presence in the neighborhood. A White girl child will grow up with dolls that look like her and that meet standards of White beauty. And White children will grow up with textbooks full of faces of people who look like them, most of them considered heroes or heroines. Thus Whiteness and White culture are defined as natural and normal rather than as social constructions (Dyer, 2003).

These privileges are invisible to Whites, and that invisibility promotes policies at PWIs that are intrinsically racially biased and that promote the advancement of Whites at the expense of Blacks. To counter White racial bias, Dyer deconstructs Whiteness and the way it works to oppress people of color. He argues, “The point of seeing the race of Whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequalities, oppression, privileges and suffering in its train” (2003, p. 540). In contrast, color-blind racism frames the social perspectives and interactions of Whites as the “the way it is” for everyone rather than “the way it is” for Whites. Additionally, color-blind racism normalizes Whites’ success, and conversely, it marks African Americans’ success as abnormal, and failure as normal. Since everyone is assumed to be on a level playing field, when Blacks fail, it must be because they lacked the capacity to succeed, not because there is anything inherently wrong with the institution.

In higher education Whiteness and White privilege permeate the cultural practices and policies in institutions of higher education (Gusa, 2010; Rankins & Reason, 2005). Whiteness also affects the climate at universities by influencing the ways that knowledge
is defined, produced, and disseminated – that is, the embedded cultural practices and traditions of White education (Gusa, 2010). Gusa coins the term “White institutional presence” (WIP) to explain the way

White normative messages and practices... are exchanged within the academic milieu. When these messages and practices remain subtle, nebulous, and unnamed, they potentially harm the wellbeing, self-esteem, and academic success of those who do not share the norms of White culture (p. 471).

The normalization of White cultural norms marginalizes African Americans on college campuses and forces them to conform to White standards in order to survive their college experiences. The result of this normalization is that students of color experience racial tensions on a day-to-day basis in their interactions with faculty, staff and other students on campus (Gusa, 2010; Museus, Lam, Huang, Kem, Tam, 2011; Museus, Rvello, & Vega, 2011; Love 2009).

Another form of normalization comes in the use of “microaggressions” – subtle and nonphysical racially based attacks – to police the boundaries of White privilege (Rankins & Reason, 2005; Solórzano, Déjà, and Iosco, 2000). Examples of microaggressions include stereotype-based comments about level of academic abilities, such as expression of surprise at an excellent grade earned by a Black student, especially when that surprise is also coded with veiled references to the possibility that the grade was given just because of the student’s color, not because it was earned. Another example: a White student attempts to compliment an African American woman in a way that instead reveals deep-seated racism when she tells an African American woman student that she is “pretty for a Black girl.” This “compliment” is supposed to flatter, yet
this comment racializes, implying that Black women can be pretty, but they are not as pretty as White women. This racialization conjures feelings of anger, fear, and anxiety for African American women, and those negative feelings reinforce social norms and practices.

Solórzano, Déjà, and Iosco (2000) examined microaggressions and how they influence the experiences of African American students. While these researchers found that microaggressions were a significant aspect of African American students’ experiences, they also stated that African American students must learn to cope with these in order to be successful in higher education, thus again burdening the target of the aggressions rather than the aggressors. Thus microaggressions are normalized and Blacks, rather than Whites, are left to solve issues of race. In short, those who have the least power to produce institutional change are thus burdened with primary responsibility for it, essentially guaranteeing that no real change will occur.

Interventions

Universities recognize that campus climate issues are affecting the social and academic experiences of African Americans at PWIs, but PWIs have not developed ways to curtail racial tensions on campus. The entrenched nature of color-blind racism leaves few viable options for administrators, faculty, and students who are committed to challenging and creating policies that will improve campus climate. I distinguish two themes among the possible solutions for reducing racial tensions on campus: the commitment to meaningful dialogue, and the creation of policies devoted to ending racism.
**Meaningful dialogue.** Meaningful dialogues are commonly suggested as a solution to campus climate (Cheng, 2002; Parker 2006). Forums designed to discuss issues of race do help African American students to express their frustrations and anger regarding their treatment at PWIs, with the hope that faculty, staff, and students will come to understand and be more aware of their experiences. Cheng (2002) argues that meaningful dialogues between Whites and students of color to improve campus climate do help curtail racial tensions on campus. Additionally, Parker (2006) also argues that sustained dialogue can combat both structural and cultural climate issues.

This research attempts to challenge racism and the racialization of Black students; however, these conversations about issues of race and diversity are problematic. The dialogue sessions that researchers propose are not mandatory and would be composed of students who are already actively seeking conversations about race and diversity. The campus climate literature states that many Whites do not believe that there are issues of racism and racial tensions on campus, and, therefore, they would not find it worthwhile to attend such dialogues. However, these conversations are important because they attempt to promote agency and to empower students to talk about race and racism in order to change campus climate. These conversations do not lead to changes in policies, or the redistribution of power, or systematic and institutional racism. However, many White students may feel empowered by these conversations and believe they have learned about racism and the experiences of Black students on campus. This could possibly lead these students to fully critique the ways that color-blind racism effects their interactions with Black students. Dialogue sessions could work to undermine their narratives about their experiences by minimizing the impact of race and racism.
Policy changes at the university can also lead to hostility on campus. Students without proper knowledge of why diversity policies are being implemented could cause further rebellions against African American students because Whites perceive diversity policies as being “shoved down their throats.” Policy recommendations such as more inclusive curricula, purposeful recruitment of African American students, and programs designed to produce retention are good, but they are often met with resistance from students who see any and all such efforts as privileging Blacks.

**Effects of racialization.** Campus climate researchers have acknowledged the cultural and social strains placed on Black students at PWIs and have provided services to retain African American students (Jayakumar & Museus, 2011; Hallenger, 2003; Love 2008). The current racial climate on campus makes these programs necessary because the isolation and marginalization felt by Black students threatens minority enrollment.

African American students respond to racism by attempting to find “safe spaces” and “often gravitate toward or intentionally seek out ethnic subcultures” (Jayakumar & Museus, 2011, p. 9). For African American women, segregated organizations such as sororities (AKA, DELTA, etc.) are essential because they promote networking, sisterhood, and community service. White sororities may promote similar qualities, but African American women do not join these organizations in significant numbers. It may seem on the surface that African American women are choosing to socialize with members of their own race but in reality African American women are well aware of reasons Black sororities were created. Historically, African American women were not welcomed nor invited into White sororities because of their race. Also, the assumption that race will not play a role in the selection process is belied by experience, and few
choose to put themselves through the emotional turmoil of being rejected. The possibility of being racialized by White students is not worth the effort.

This racialization can influence the academic performance of African American students in higher education. Research suggests that there are strong links between retention and achievement of African Americans students at PWIs (Aguirre & Messineo, 1997; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999; Whitt et al., 2001). However, many PWIs create a hostile environment by reinforcing racist attitudes, policies, and practices that hinder the life chances of African Americans. Black students seek minority-centered organizations because they need a safe haven (Cook, Williams, Moore, and Screvens 1997). While on the surface it seems that by creating those organizations, African American students are “choosing” to self-segregate, more often the organizations are made necessary by the hostility that Black students face in other areas of the university (see Patton 2006). Nonetheless, this segregation supports the ideology of color-blind racism by taking over responsibility for meeting the needs of African American students, and it also relieves the White students of their responsibility for creating the climate of hostility that makes these separate organizations necessary (Flowers & Pascarella, 1999).

The creation of clubs, cultural centers, and dormitories that are designed for students of color are clear indications that PWIs are working to solve campus climate issues. These services are needed and useful on campus, yet the segregated organizations also reinforce racial difference. Though racial solidarity offers solace from being underrepresented and isolated while attending college, self-segregation also reinforces the marginalization of African Americans.
Additionally, Black student service organizations become racialized and have difficulty getting the same status and respect as White student service units on campus (Patton and Herron 2008; Patton 2006). When Black student services offices bring issues of racism to administrators, these are defined as “minority issues” rather than as student issues that affects the entire campus. Minority service organizations are useful and help in retaining African American students; however, these organizations also take pressure off the university by normalizing segregation rather than fixing institutional climate issues.

African American women are influenced by the constant racialization by other students and focus on not being accepted at universities. The day-to-day struggle to manage being different may become too high of a price to pay for some, and they choose to leave. The anxiety and anger that these women feel as a result of having to constantly and prove themselves to White students may become too much for them to handle. It may be they simply drop out of school or find a university that is more welcoming or has a larger population of African American students.

**Achievement Literature**

Several themes emerge in the literature focused on African American achievement, which is concerned primarily with exploring the causes of poor performance among Black students as compared to Whites. An over arching theme is that African American students are individually responsible for overcoming the damaging effects of racism and the chilly, hostile climate they experience on campus. Another theme involves three sides of a cultural debate. Claude Steele’s (1997) stereotype threat theory argues that African American students unconsciously sabotage their ability to
achieve because of the ways in which they are racialized in higher education. In contrast, Ogbu (1992) suggests that African American students underachieve as a means of constructing their racial identity in opposition to White norms. A third view says African American achievement can be seen as challenging the color-blind norms of Black intellectual inferiority as high achieving students work twice as hard as their White cohorts in order to overcome racist stereotypes, upending racism into a source of racial uplift. Yet another theme focuses on support systems and the influence of family involvement, or lack thereof, on the ability of African American students to succeed. Finally, some literature exists that examines the achievement of African American women. Each of these themes is discussed in more detail below.

The Cultural Debate

*Stereotype threat theory.* Claude Steele’s (1997, 2006) stereotype threat theory is useful in understanding how societal racism and disempowerment influence the academic performance of African Americans. Steele (1997) argues that Blacks’ “stereotype threat” (i.e., the fear of being intellectually and/or socially stigmatized because of their race) causes them to underperform. Though African Americans students have the ability to perform at high levels, these students become anxious while pursuing their academic goals and do not perform up to their full potential, unconsciously sabotaging their ability to achieve. Steele’s study demonstrates that Blacks are affected by and internalize negative stereotypes of their race in educational institutions. Using a series of experiments, Steele and his colleagues demonstrated that an African American student may feel apprehension about certain classroom tasks (for example, taking a physics exam) because she is afraid of doing poorly – and, in this case confirming that women in
general (and Black women in particular) do not belong in the math and sciences. Ironically, this fear of underperforming can contribute to that student failing the exam (Spencer, Steele, and Quinn 1998).

A study by Smith and Hopkins (2004) supports Steele’s argument. By replicating Steele’s experiments on HBCU students, Smith and Hopkins find that “[test] performance is enhanced for individuals who identify positively with stereotyped groups and is weakened for individuals who identity with negatively stereotyped groups” (Smith & Hopkins, 2004, p. 34).

**Oppositional consciousness.** In contrast to Steele’s stereotype threat theory, Ogbu (1989, 2004) argues that Black students develop an oppositional consciousness that he believes empowers them and helps them challenge systems of oppressions. Ogbu (1992) argues that Black students purposefully sabotage their education in order to rebel against the predominantly White curriculum in the classroom. He suggests that African American students underachieve as a means of constructing their racial identity in opposition to White norms, rejecting White norms of achievement as “acting White.”

Ogbu argues that failure results from the hopelessness that Blacks feel because they believe racism will prevent them from achieving the same levels of success as Whites.

Critics of Ogbu’s research argue that he overlooks African Americans’ long and difficult fight to gain access to education. Moreover, Ogbu fails to problematize the idea that achievement for Black students represents “acting White” – that is, that characterizing success as “acting White” is in itself an effect of the ways the education system racializes them. Ogbu not only blames Black culture for Black students’ lack of
achievement, he also implies that African American students think negatively about achieving in school and thus normalizes the achievement of White students.

Scholars have challenged the validity of Ogbu’s theory by offering a counter narrative about Black intelligence, more specifically by reframing conversations about achievement by studying academic success among Blacks rather than focusing on their perceived academic failures. This research also challenges color-blind racist frames that normalize Black intellectual inferiority. This research offers counter narratives to African Americans’ underachievement and challenges the normalization of Black apathy and laziness associated with Black culture.

Being twice as good. Some scholars have found strong evidence connecting the strength of a student’s cultural identity with his or her ability to achieve in academic settings (Lehram, 2005; Saunders 1997; Smith & Hopkins, 2004). For example, Saunders (1997) suggests that high achieving African American high school students represent a positive response to racism. These Black students believe they must perform twice as well as their White classmates in order to overcome racism, and that belief helps them strive for academic excellence (Sanders 1997; 1989). In this way, African American achievement can be seen as challenging the color-blind norms of Black intellectual inferiority. Thus responding to racism through achievement can be empowering, and, in some instances, a source of racial uplift.

Presenting a positive view of Black intelligence in the classroom as a means of challenging racist stereotypes is another motive for Black achievement. Carson’s 2009 study indicated that successful Black students are less concerned about grades and more focused on preparing for class discussions, so that they could present positive
representations of African Americans intelligence in college classrooms. Because they
know they are expected to fail, they develop counter-practices, working harder than their
White counterparts. Thus achievement is sometimes defined differently for African
American students, for example, illustrating that they know the material is more
important to them than the grades that they receive. This study shows that Black students
are actively trying to dispel stereotypes about Black intelligence.

Taking a somewhat different tact, in the article, “Uneven stories: Successful
Black collegians at a Black and a White campus,” Fries-Brit (2002) compares and
contrasts the experiences of African American students in higher education. This study
uses interviews with 35 Black college students who are either juniors or seniors at either
a traditionally white institution or at an historically Black institution on the East Coast.
This study finds that universities would to build confidence by developing institutional
and personal support (Fries-Brit, 2000, p. 326). She argues that universities should
promote a more diverse curriculum that does not require that minority students become
the race experts in classes. Faculty should be commended for trying to create a more
inclusive classroom that promotes diversity.

In another article, “Identity development of high ability Black collegians,” Fries-
Brit (2000) focuses on the experiences of 12 high achieving Black students enrolled in
the merit-based Mayerhoff program at the University of Maryland. Fries-Brit states that
academically successful African American students’ interviews reveal an evolution of
these students’ perceptions of “academic” self and “racial” self over time” (Fries-Brit,
2000, p. 36). African American students seek a balance between their racial and
academic selves. These students attempt to find people, or rather, groups of people
(regardless of their racial backgrounds), who are “like type” – that is, a group of people who reaffirm their intellectual abilities. Fries-Brit calls on more faculty members to support African American students in their academic career as a means of validating the experiences of high achieving African American students.

In a later article, “The Black box: How high-achieving Blacks resist stereotypes about Black Americans,” Fries-Brit and Griffin (2007) look at the ways that high achieving Black students cope with being racialized at PWIs. Fries-Brit and Griffin argue stereotypes about Black students’ lack of academic preparedness, as well as misconceptions about affirmative actions as a means of gaining admission into PWIs, place students in a “black box” that is “often a racial box in which their racial/ethnic background limits how their peers and faculty perceive and interact with them” (Fries-Brit & Griffin, 2007, p. 510). These negative interactions with fellow students, which are in many instances White, force students to feel as though they must prove themselves and challenge negative perspectives of negative Black intelligence and identity. Fries-Brit and Griffin argue that Black students spend a great deal of their effort and energy attempting to challenge stereotypes which could be used to focus on their academic endeavors. The authors argue that over time there is a build up of emotional cost and stress, though students up until this point have been able to achieve academically.

Support systems and family involvement. Another theme in “achievement gap” literature involves investigation of support systems. These scholars tend to focus on how formal and/or informal networks have helped African American students achieve in college. In “The Effects of School, Family, and Community Support on the Academic Achievement of African American Adolescence,” Sanders (1998) argues that support
systems allow for “certain goals, such as student academic success, [that] are of mutual interest to each of these institutions and are best achieved through their cooperative action and support” (p. 386). As with previous studies, student interviews indicated that the students saw their achievement as a challenge to stereotypes of Black intellectual inferiority.

Families also constitute informal support systems, and family involvement is a major theme in achievement literature. African American students’ pride in their parents’ academic accomplishments has a direct affect on their desire to continue this tradition and plays a role in these students’ desire to achieve (Smith, Atkins, & Connell, 2003). Students whose parents have high expectations for their academic performance and who support their academic goals have higher GPAs than students whose parents are less involved in their schooling (Saunders, 1997; Walker & Satterwhite, 2002). By supporting their children, parents assist students in coping with the anxieties that they encounter while adjusting to new academic situations and remaining positive when they seem to question their academic abilities.

The need for students to have support networks outside of the classroom is essential not only for their academic development but also to their self-esteem (Bonnett, 2008; Kazer, 2008). Family encouragement and mentorship is further evidence that problematizes color-blind racist arguments concerning Black cultural deficiency. Contrary to popular perception, this research provides examples of Black parents serving as positive examples of academic achievement, and their children respond to those role models. However, this research also emphasizes the ways that African American parents also normalize their children to expect racism; or rather, that they present racism and
discrimination as a fact of life for their children, which must be overcome by their children’s hard work and perseverance.

Satterwhite (2002) focuses on parental expectations of college students. Satterwhite suggests that there is no clear consensus about whether family support has an effect on minority students’ academic achievement. Satterwhite administered questionnaires to a convenience sample of psychology undergraduates to explore how parental expectations influence the experiences of Black and White students. It was clear that parental involvement had some small indirect effects on the performance of African American students, but Satterwhite was unable to directly tie parental involvement to student success: there are differences between Black and White students’ performances in school, but those findings could be influenced by student’s self-reports of the racial and cultural factors shaping their college experience.

As these studies indicate, African American students’ cultural solidarity may be what compels them to disprove stereotypes; however, achievement studies do not closely examine the pressure that students of color endure in higher education. These studies rather emphasize African American students’ resilience. In addition, the studies contend that Black students expect to be racialized and accept that racialization. In other words, they have been programmed to expect racism and look to family members for support. This focus fails to critique systematic racialization and fails to advocate for system-wide change.

**African American Women and Achievement**

The literature focus on African American women’s achievement is sparse. The scholarship that does focus on African American women emphasizes the struggles of
these women living in two separate worlds: Black women’s social world is predominately Black, whereas they are educated in predominately White classrooms (Gratham & Ford; Howard-Vital, 1989).

Gratham and Ford’s (1998) study of Danisha, a 9th grade African American girl, provides insight into her experiences as an African American female student in an all-White gifted program. Though Danisha’s test scores indicate that she is in the 90th percentile, she earns low grades in her gifted courses. Gratham and Ford state that Danisha feels pressured by White faculty and staff to be a leader and to mentor other African American students, but she is uncomfortable in this role. She feels isolated in her all-White classes because she is the only Black student, and she follows strict norms of White behaviors and speech while in the classroom to avoid being stereotyped, and thus ostracized, by White students and faculty. Because of that, she worries that her Black friends will question her racial identity. The article highlights Danisha’s struggle to not be defined as “acting White” by fellow Black students.

This article does not highlight the fact that Danisha has few choices in the ways that she identifies herself when interacting with predominately Black and predominately White groups. White faculty expect her to perform a role as mentor even though she is uncomfortable with it. If there were more Black students in the class, a natural leader would emerge from them. She tries very hard to fulfill White expectations that would not be imposed on her if she were not the only Black student in the program. Danisha is thus set up for failure.

In another study, Williams et al. (2005) examine the lived experiences of three African American women graduate students. These researchers argue that these students’
positive relationships with African American women faculty members helped them cope with negative stereotyping by Whites at PWIs. Mentors provided a sounding board for African American women students and allowed them to share experiences and learn from one another. Mentorships are crucial for all who attend college as they provide connections as students go beyond their bachelors’ degrees, either into the work world or into graduate school. Also they help reduce feelings of isolation. However, there are far too few African American women in the professoriate, and this also puts pressure on those professors who may or may not have the time or the inclination to mentor others. African American professors, like their African American students, often work twice as hard to achieve promotion and tenure, and at the same time they are expected to be the mentors for every Black student who seeks one. Fulfilling that role can put African American women professors into a lose-lose situation, where they end up failing to achieve tenure, and thus contributing to the lack of availability of Black female mentors at the university.

Ultimately, the women in this study sought mentorship from other African American women because racism and segregation have been normalized; African American women have been so racialized and marginalized by their negative interactions with many Whites that they “choose” relationships with African American women in an effort to avoid racial hostility. Thus color-blind racism limits the choices that African American women have regarding positive and trustworthy mentors in higher education.

O’Connor (2002) argues that the overt and covert discrimination experienced by Black women in higher education has changed over time, and this has created generational differences among African American women. Examining African American
women from different age cohorts, O’Connor highlights the fact that racism has evolved over time. O’Connor places Black women into three cohorts based on age (cohort I: pre-Civil Rights; cohort II: post-Civil Rights; cohort III: post-Reagan). All three of the cohorts were steered away from enrolling in higher education, but there were differences in the ways they were systematically detoured. The two older generations said that they were discouraged from enrolling in college in high school, and were actively steered toward getting jobs after graduation. Cohort I was told to get jobs as maids and cohort II was steered toward secretarial and other clerical jobs, as well as the postal service; cohort III members were passively steered away from college because they were not given information about colleges or how to apply to them.

O’Connor argues that researchers should redefine resiliency. Rather than seeing it as a collection of individual characteristics, it should be seen, rather, as an expression of gender, race, and class. Resiliency is defined differently in different time periods because of the ways institutionalized racism and sociohistorical conditions influence how racism oppresses African American women, and how they respond to it.

**Cultural Racism in Achievement Literature**

In *Black Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity, and Success at Capital High* (Fordham 1996), Fordham recognizes, like Ogbu, that Black students feel pressure to conform to cultural norms marking African American achievement in negative terms, or face being targets of abuse by other members of their racial group. Fordham agrees that Black students who achieve academically do so because they are attempting to gain the approval of White students. She specifically examines the achievement of African American women in high school. She found that African American women become
successful in their studies by learning to be “silent” regarding their African American culture and gender performance. Fordham herself, however, fails to complicate the identity of Black women because she offers a false binary: Black women must choose between hiding their cultural identities in order to be successful or expressing their racial identity at the expense of their academic goals. The presumption of fixed racial identity disallows complexities in their identity constructions, giving preference to a binary, dualistic view of racial identity rather than allowing a spectrum of possibilities.

Banks (2009) uses Fordham’s research as a springboard to challenge negative characterizations of identity development and expressions of Black women. Banks states that Fordham’s research argues that Black academic success or failure “was driven by Whiteness and their responses to Whiteness” (p. 5). Banks argues that African American women need social capital to be successful in higher education. She defines social capital as “the possession of resources, financial and intellectual, that are not equally distributed among all members of a society, but rather, are socially inherited” (p. 15). Banks stresses the importance of social capital by arguing that African American women must not only be twice as good academically, but also must understand and appropriately respond in social interaction in order to form good relationships while attending PWIs. Banks’s book provides insight into the lived experiences of African American women and highlights the positive aspects of African American women culture.

A 2005 study by Banks examines the importance of space among high-achieving Black women reflecting on their experiences at predominantly White high schools and their experiences at predominately White colleges. She explores how Blackness is read in White spaces, and how it reinforces the notion of Black bodies as “troubled” (p. 190).
These women are in a precarious position: on the one hand, they are not considered “Black enough” by other African Americans, and they are “too Black” (and dangerous) when viewed by Whites. This study provides insights into how scholars should think about African American women’s racial identity in particular contexts. She recognizes that understanding the ways that space is racialized is key to understanding how power relationships are reinforced, reproduced, and marked as invisible.

**Black Feminist Standpoint Theory**

Black feminist thought centers on the experiences of African American women. It derived from feminist standpoint theory, which emphasizes the fact that White male subjectivity has been presented as “objective science,” excluding all other viewpoints as abnormal and therefore suspect and inferior.

**Feminist Standpoint Theory**

Feminist thinkers developed standpoint theory to critique and challenge elite knowledge creation and objectivity. Feminist theorists argue that scientific objectivity as defined previously in fact represents the viewpoints of White males, rather than some “universal” subject (Haraway, 2004). Standpoint theory argues that, to the contrary, knowledge can be created from the everyday experiences of groups living on the margins of society. Feminist thinkers argue that oppression creates a standpoint that is particular to a group’s experiences.

This standpoint is predicated on women’s social locations. This social location – that is, the way groups are ranked in levels of access to power – provides a different perception on how power works to subjugate and oppress. The lack of access to power makes oppressed groups question why some part of their identity (e.g. race, gender,
class, etc.) places them in a lower status in society. Thus, standpoint theory emphasizes a group’s ability to question the social forces preventing them from gaining access and privilege in society. In other words, minority groups learn to question, “the way it is.”

As Haraway (2004) notes, “The standpoints of the subjugated are not ‘innocent’ positions. On the contrary, they are preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretative core of all knowledge” (p. 88). Social locations allow women to question what is defined as “normal” and “natural” in society and to offer their experiences as counter narratives regarding what knowledge is. Haraway also argues that, because there is no way to have absolute knowledge of an experience and/or location, such knowledge is always situational and partial.

Situated and partial knowledge affects the ways marginalized groups construct and express their identities. Identity is not stable but rather is fragmented and conditional on social interactions; “the self” is always fragmented and partial due to women’s various social locations. This lack of access to the full experiences of women results from women not having complete access to their experiences. Women recognize that they are oppressed; yet they do not see all of the ways that they have been oppressed in society. Additionally, identity or subjectivity is always socially constructed and partial. This vision of the self is fragmented and always being reshaped and remolded. Haraway (2004) argues:

The topography of subjectivity is multi-dimensional; so therefore, is vision. The knowing self is partial in all of its guises, never finished, whole simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another” (p. 90).
Women cannot fully escape the effects of living in a society that oppresses them. Standpoint theory defines subjectivity as interlocking and overlapping rather than singular and separate from one another. In addition, women’s identity is contradictory, complex, and nebulous.

**Black feminist standpoint theory**

Black feminist thought was created in response to the marginalization by both race and gender of African American women, whose voices were lacking in feminist thought and theory. Black feminist thinkers recognized this lacuna in theoretical perspectives and focus their scholarship on accomplishing four objectives:

1) to rediscover the contributions of earlier African American women scholars and experiences of these women;

2) to reclaim power over perceptions of Black womanhood that have been controlled by White society;

3) to examine the experiences of African American women and to challenge entrenched systems of oppression that subjugate African American women; and

4) to seek new avenues and discussions about the lived experiences of African American women.

In her influential book, *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins describes Black feminist thought as “a specialized thought that reflects the distinctive themes of African American women’s experiences and that holds work, family, sexual politics, motherhood, and political activism at the core” (p.251). Black feminist thinkers have worked and continue to work bring to light the complicated and complex struggles of
African American women. Black feminist thought utilizes the aforementioned themes to examine the oppression of African American women.

Collins argues that African American women experience three interlocking forms of oppression: a) economic exploitation through limiting African American women’s options and advancement in the work force; b) the normalization of controlling images that stereotype African American women as aggressive, controlling, and deserving of their current social status; and c) the denial of privileges and political oppression that are naturally given to White males.

Collins (2000) points out that “self-conscious struggle is needed in order to reject patriarchal perceptions of women and to value women’s ideas and actions” (p. 27). Being marked as outsiders has inspired African American women to challenge the norms and beliefs that deny them equal citizenship, enabling them to develop a value system that reflects the fact that their lived experiences are predicated on oppression. This process requires demystifying the White male power structure to produce oppositional knowledge. African American women thus develop their own values and sense of self in a way that not only demystifies, but also challenges the White male power structure. Their specific social location gives Black women “situated knowledge,” defined as knowledge created through a particular, socially located experience (see Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002).

The social location of African American women has produced situated knowledge based on three assumptions: a) Black women’s experiences cannot be separated by structure and thematic content of thought from the historical and material conditions shaping the lives of the producers, b) Black women have a particular standpoint that is
reflected in African American women’s experiences as a group, and c) African American women may have common experiences, but intersections of identity (e.g. sexuality, class, region) shape the individual experiences of African American women’s lives and those lives become “expressions of these common themes” (Collins, 2008, p. 105).

According to Black Feminist Standpoint Theory, Black women develop a dialectical relationship linking oppression and activism. Interlocking oppression has led African American women to resist inequality. Oppositional knowledge is created as a counter-narrative to the elite knowledge that has justified pushing Black women to the margins of society. African American women challenge the contradictions of elite knowledge, specifically, notions of equality and fairness that are associated with American democracy. Denied first class citizenship, African American women are left with no other option but to challenge their second-class status or risk being further subjugated and oppressed.

Though Black women as a group possess the same standpoint, they experience intersecting systems of oppressions in different ways. Intersectionality is a tool used by Black feminist thinkers to link the experiences of African American women to illustrate the ways individual identities (e.g., race, gender, class, and sexuality) affect each woman’s experiences (Collins, 2004). Intersectionality challenges the essentializing of the experiences of Black women by arguing that standpoint theory is not homogenous. Collins (2008) argues that when thinking about Black feminist theory:

Given how these factors influence diverse response to common challenges, it is important to stress that no homogeneous Black women’s standpoint exists. There is a not essential or archetypal Black woman whose experiences stand as normal,
normative, and thereby authentic. An essentialist understanding of a Black woman’s standpoint suppresses differences among Black women in search of an elusive group unity. Instead, it may be more accurate to say that a Black woman’s collective standpoint does exist, one characterized by the tensions that accrue to difference responses to common challenges. Because it both recognizes and aims to incorporate heterogeneity in crafting Black women’s oppositional knowledge, this Black women’s group standpoint eschews essentialism in favor of democracy (Collins, 2008, p.32).

Subjectivity is the reason that African American women interpret racialization and respond to discrimination in different ways. In other words, some events may be defined as more significant to one Black woman than to another Black woman because of her individual standpoint. African American women’s individual standpoints are linked together because they recognize that they are oppressed as a group. African American women share the same standpoint because they see similar treatments of African American women; Black women “collectively recognize” that all Black women receive differential treatment.

African American women’s standpoints have led them to seek self-definition and to develop their own value systems as a means of empowering themselves. Collins (2008) argues that “the struggle for a self-defined Afrocentric feminist consciousness occurs through a merger of thought and action” (p. 28). This struggle has led African American women to develop identities that reflect their values rather than those of mainstream White society. By recognizing their shared subordinate location and working
to construct identities that reflect their own perceptions about achievement, academically successful Black women actively challenge norms about Black femininity.

Self-definition and self-validation are key themes in Black feminist thought. Self-definition allows Black women to challenge negative stereotypes of African American femininity. The distortions of African American femininity are designed to put Black women in their “place” by labeling behaviors that challenge White authority as negative (e.g., Black women are aggressive). For instance, the assertiveness of African American women is defined as “unfeminine.” In order to resist oppression, Black women redefine their assertiveness as a positive feminine value, rejecting White standards of femininity and preventing their further objectification. In this way, Black women seek self-definition in order to reframe the power dynamic through asserting their own values against the system that denigrates them.

In addition, this definition of standpoint assumes that, “while a Black women’s standpoint exists, its contours may not be clear to Black women themselves” (p. 105). Although African American women challenge interlocking systems of oppression by seeking self-definition, they cannot fully escape the oppressive forces of society. They cannot account for all of the conscious and unconscious ways that discrimination affects them. Collins argues that it is the role of Black feminist thinkers to investigate the experiences of Black women in order to gain more knowledge regarding how these women construct knowledge.

Studies in education from the perspective of Black feminist standpoint theory have yielded thought-provoking results. For example, Brock (2011) explains that misogyny is inherent in the devaluation of African American women. Placing Black
women at the center of discussion and emphasizing their importance as knowledge holders, Brock investigates the way misogynist practices have been normalized and thus influence the perceptions of Black women. Brock argues that unmasking these power dynamics can lead Black women to challenge and change negative images of themselves, Brock (2012) contends that Black women have “the right and responsibility to reclaim, discover, and reinterpret that which affects their reality” (p. 380). Indeed, Black women's activism is a clear indication of individual agency. African American women attempt to control their academic identities by telling stories of frustration and anger about race. This activism prompts them to mentor other African Americans.

In another study, Patton (2009) recognizes the importance of identity expressions in mentoring relationships for Black women academics. Patton investigates the mentoring of Black women in graduate and professional schools and the ways shared standpoint promotes mentorship among African American women in higher education. Patton argues that “African American women situated in academic locations must be mindful of the manner in which they go about creating and/or reclaiming knowledge that pertains to their collective struggles and identities” (p. 317). Mentoring is a “feminist practice” and for Black women that centers on recognizing their standpoint and the need to support other women in higher education. She argues that Black women lacked proper mentorship, and this has led to their lack of success in higher education.

**Intersectionality**

Intersectionality provides insight into the experiences of Black women by emphasizing the complexity of subjectivity in everyday experiences. Intersectionality is better suited to discussions about individual experiences because it emphasizes individual
agency and human subjectivity (Collins, 1998; Gilroy, 1993). According to Collins (1998), subjectivity can be described not only in terms of individual human subjectivity but also through the experiences of African American women through “the matrix of oppression” and the variety of ways that these issues mold their perceptions of reality.

Intersectional subjectivity suggest that to “consistent thread [s] across definitions [of intersectionality] is that social identities which serve as organizing features of social relations mutually constitute, reinforce, and naturalize one another” (Shields, 2008, p. 302). The mutually constructed and interlocking nature of identity explains the conditional and complex nature of identity, which influences the “social, economic and political life” of Black women (Banks, 2009, p. 10).

The integration of Black feminist thought and intersectionality is pivotal to the construction of a theoretical framework for African American women. Crenshaw (1994) points out that Black women’s lived experiences are unique and therefore “cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately” (p. 1244). Understanding the social location of African American women is important; however, there are myriad ways that Black women construct their identity. By recognizing the multiple and varied formation of identities of Black women, researchers challenge stereotypical images of Black women.

Educational research on African American women utilizes intersectionality to examine the identity formations and expressions. For instance, Museus and Griffin (2011) and Thomas, Hackler and Hoxha (2011) use intersectionality to investigate the identity development of African American women in higher education and conclude that a multiple identity framework should be used to shape their analysis of individual and
group experiences. Failing to recognize the intersections of identities “can inhibit students from understanding concepts such as social power and privilege” (Jones & Wijeyasinghe, 2011, p.16). Identity is always “becoming,” depending on context. Intersectionality explains how less privileged African American women are more susceptible to oppressive social forces. African American women may experience discrimination, but it is important to articulate how these differences reflect different experiences with that same process (Banks, 2005; Museus & Griffin 2011; Shields, 2008). Banks (2005) argues, “It is not enough to say that each adolescent girl has a different life experience. Rather, accurate analysis involves examining and critiquing a system of privilege and assigns normalcy to social locations – that is particular bodies and their place in society” (p. 180).

Feminist theories regarding space provide insight into the ways that educational spaces work to racialize and gender African American women. A college education takes place across several spatial locations, not just the classroom. It involves multiple kinds of activities taking place in multiple social locations that are defined by the boundaries of physical space, such as dormitories, student government, student organizations, and “private” interactions. These various social locations and the interactions that reproduce oppression within them require different strategies for response: for instance, what works in the classroom, where knowledge of the subject matter prevails, and where interactions are under surveillance and control by the professor, will not work in the dormitories, where performance will be judged by different standards and academic success is generally irrelevant.
To understand the educational experiences of African American women, it is important to recognize spatiality in these interactions. The social locations of race, gender, class, etc., also affect women spatially by impacting them differentially by context. Geographic theory provides insight into how spatial practices affect identity, which has always been embedded in social interactions.

**Feminist Geography**

Human geographers argue that space is “embedded in social relations rather than being a mere backdrop to them” (McDowell & Sharp, 1999, p. 257). Social and spatial are intertwined with each other. Space cannot be separated from social processes, because space is a part of the social process. Beginning in the 1970s geographers began to argue that “spaces and relationships in space were increasingly being analyzed not only as socially produced but also as an integral part of social process” (Rose et al., 1997, pp. 6-7). Space changes through human actions, thus social interactions are created by space and space creates social interactions. Space is never absolute and cannot be fully known, but rather it is contested as people and/or groups contest spatial boundaries. Space is not absolute or fixed and is always in the state of becoming.

In addition, social and spatial locations mutually construct each other, or rather, social processes are what both links and separates locations. An examination of space allows for the consideration of how locations influence the processes of social and economic equality. Different groups have different levels of access to social power and control depending on where they are. This spatial location reinforces and perpetuates inequality of access to power.
Feminist geographers argue that the social relations of gender and race are embedded into the organization of space, and that human geographers must investigate the ways space is gendered and raced in order to understand social interactions (Hyams, 2000; Thomas, 2005, 2008). Space is not neutral but is a part of the processes that work to racialize, gender, and class African American women. From this perspective, PWIs are not simply the backdrop for racism and sexism; they actively racialize African American women and limit the amount of access that these women have to certain resources.

**Racialization and Self-Segregation**

Spatial segregation racializes African American women, in turn influencing their own practices of self-segregation. Thus, the racialization process is not simply a social practice; it is also a spatial practice. Racialization normalizes segregation and the marginalization of African Americans. Delaney (1998; quoted in Thomas, 2011, p. 11) writes that:

[Racial] relations are what they are because of how they are spatialized. The long struggle against racial segregation demonstrates that the spatiality of racism was a central component of the social structure of racial hierarchy, that efforts to transform or maintain these relations entailed the reconfigurations or reinforcing of these geographies, and that participants were very much aware of this. Space and power are so tightly bound that changing one necessarily entails changing the other.

African American women’s subjectivities dictate how they perceive racial boundaries and the policing of these boundaries. Thomas (2011) writes, “No matter
where a practice occurs, it is shaped by psychic and spatial processes that may not be evident and are contingent on social and spatial formations and idiosyncratic personalities” (p. 13, emphasis in the original).

Jan Nespor’s (1997) ethnographic study, *Tangled up in school: Politics, space, bodies, and signs in the educational process*, applies geographic theories of space to explore the interconnected nature of space, race, agency in schools at an elementary school in Roanake, Virginia. He argues that larger social issues influence the spatial practices in school. Nespor’s (1997) argues that, “school was designed to create a particular body- silent, motionless, masculine…to show that kids continue to articulate alternative meanings, to make sense of age, gender, and race in terms of language grounded in the body” (pp. xvii). More specifically, Nespor problematizes the notion that schools are autonomous from the larger society and must learn to cope with reform and, at the same time, cope with the intrusion of businesses seeking to help improve education for minority students. Nespor pays particular attention to the intersections between school spaces, spaces of finance, and neighborhood spaces to examine how minority students cope with interactions, curriculum, choices and social practices in schools that do not reflect their experiences and cultural knowledge and instead normalize the white power structure and practices.

*The Unchosen Me* (Winkle-Wagner, 2009) is particularly relevant when something about a person (e.g., gender, race, and class of origin) already limits the possible identities or “Me’s” available to him or her. The unique longings, desires, orientations or creativities do not then have a way to be expressed, and the result can be a feeling of oppression (p. 44). African-American women’s subjectivities dictate how they
perceive racial boundaries and perceive the policing of these boundaries. The practices of students are conditional and contingent on how they construct their identity.

The ways that high-achieving Black women perceive their “Blackness” and the ways they construct their identity influence how they negotiate racial and gender boundaries. High-achieving African American women learn to navigate PWIs by creating transgressive spaces to cope with consequences of the pressures of challenging cultural boundaries.

Defining educational spaces as sites of transgression is not uncommon when discussing African Americans (hooks, 1994; Banks, 2005; 2009). Carter (2006) defines transgression as Blacks crossing spatial boundaries into White spaces. It is not an easy task for African American women to cross socio-spatial boundaries, and doing so often causes friction and the contesting of White academic spaces. Hostile responses include microaggressions in classes, in dorms, and in social organizations. These tensions prompt African American women to make spatialized “choices” by determining with whom/where they associate and how they will develop practices that will enable them to succeed.

hooks (1994) argues that Black students view the classroom as a place where they can think critically and challenge established methods of teaching and learning that are encouraged in Black culture but resisted in predominantly White educational settings. When Black women challenge entrenched racism and White male authority on campus, these women are “accepted,” meaning it is not unusual for them to be on campus. Indeed, Black women’s transgressions provide hope for cultural bridges. Specifically, academically successful Black students hope to overcome stereotypes and develop
relationships with non-Black students; however, these relationships are conditional and contestable because of the manner in which space is policed on college campuses.

The normalization of socio-spatial segregation practices has led feminist geographers to question notions of choice when thinking about how people identify themselves and members of other racial groups. Thomas (2005, 2008, 2011) has written extensively on the educational experiences of girls in high school to examine the conscious and unconscious ways that these girls racialize themselves and students of different racial groups. Thomas’s research problematizes the normalization of racial discord by investigating how multiculturalism is diluted into the celebration of culture (e.g., food and holidays). Thomas coined the term “banal multiculturalism” to describe the rote nature of racism in educational spaces. Thomas argues that “multiculturalism shapes contemporary forms of racialization and racial identification; it racializes subjects within a narrow definition of culture expression” (Thomas, 2011, p 4-5).

Banal multiculturalism influences young women’s perceptions of space and spatial practices in their high school by challenging the notion that there are racial tensions at the school and that everyone “gets along.” Thomas examines the relationships among different racial groups and the way that their racial identities are policed and reinforced through student’s interactions in the lunchroom by sitting with same-race friends. Thomas’s (2008) article, “I think it’s just natural”: the spatiality of racial segregation at the U.S. high school,” uses Judith Butler’s performativity theory to focus on White and Black women students in a Southern high school, investigating the everyday practices of “race, racism, and racial difference in a high school” (p. 1234). Thomas focuses specifically on the lunchroom to examine the spatial practices of
segregation between races and how girl students label and police their behaviors and the behaviors of other students.

Because people identify themselves through different socio-spatial practices, there is always a spatial component to identity (Massey, 1997; Thomas, 2005). Though young girls can identify themselves in different ways, they are limited in their expressions of identity because of their race. Racial minority young women are well aware of the standards of femininity and strive to live up to mainstream standards of femininity. These young women incorporate multicultural rhetoric and color-blind racism into their conversations about race and racism, yet when young women are pressed about issues of race, they reinforce racial segregation. For instance, young women in Thomas’s study stated that boys who participated in a school were “stupid,” and the boys should focus on the ways that students at the school are the same rather than how they are different. Yet the girls themselves repeatedly articulate the differences they experience between themselves and others having different racial identities. The participants’ narratives reveal that they experience racialization when they attempt to cross racial boundaries and forge friendships with women outside of their race, yet they reproduce racial segregation by discouraging social-racial integration into their own friendship groups. These young women might say they wish to overcome racial segregation, but in many ways they reinforce and reproduce segregation through their socio-spatial interactions.

Young women may have internalized color-blind ideology; however, girls from minority backgrounds can never be defined as normal because of the ways that they are positioned in society. Minority girls have few options regarding how they “choose” to identify themselves due to the ways that they are racialized in American society. The
notion of choice is not possible for these women, and yet they are asked to subscribe to racial ideologies that work to systematically oppress them.

Looking Ahead

This dissertation explores the ways academically successful women walk the tightrope inherent in being “the outsider within.” To do this, I draw upon three areas of theory that are most useful to understanding this process. First, I use Black feminist standpoint theory to socially locate African American women and to analyze the ways in which the women define themselves and work out strategies for coping with racism on campus. Second, I use intersectionality to underscore the wide varieties of experience among academically successful women and how they view their racialization. And finally, I use feminist geography to tease out nuances in the ways that successful Black women in the academy negotiate and challenge the normalization of racism across varying social spaces on campus. This approach contributes to the existing body of literature by crossing the boundaries of campus climate and achievement literature, applying Black feminist standpoint theory and feminist geography to reveal new insights into the ways academically successful African American women respond to the challenges of acquiring education in the context of entrenched institutional racism, as well as the ways that same racism continues to circumscribe their choices.
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Overview

This dissertation investigates the everyday experiences of academically successful African American women attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs). By studying their narratives, I research how academically successful African American women make meaning out of their college experiences. More specifically, I examine how these women’s subjectivity influences how they identify themselves, their racial practices and how they cope with being racialized on campus, and particularly how they develop socio-spatial practices in order to succeed.

The purpose of this study is to answer the following questions, as outlined in the introduction:

1) What are some of the formal and/or informal ways that African American women cope with being outsiders in a predominately White university?

2) How do successful African American women construct and reconstruct their identities, and how do these identity formations influence their levels of achievement?

3) How do race, gender, and class intersect in the ways African American female students construct their identities?

4) How does exploring different spaces of the university help me to understand the ways that African American women navigate their college experiences?
5) What spatial practices are at work as these African American women attempt to challenge established boundaries while attending PWIs?

This chapter reviews literature on the theoretical underpinnings of feminist research, qualitative methodology, and narrative inquiry that I use to frame my dissertation, selecting appropriate theoretical constructs and methods to fit the questions asked. I first discuss the feminist methodological perspectives, which include: feminist standpoint theory, Black feminist standpoint theory, and feminist geography. I connect these feminist research practices with qualitative methodology. I then explain narrative inquiry and why I chose to use this methodology to frame my research. I then present my research design for this dissertation and the strengths and weaknesses for my approach.

**Qualitative Approach**

I use a qualitative approach for my research to better understand the interpretive and conditional nature of socio-spatial practices and subjectivity in the lived experiences of African American women. Qualitative research does not assume that reality is fixed and stable. Qualitative research emphasizes the fact that “there are multiple constructions of interpretations of reality that are in flux and that change over time” (Merriam, 2002, p. 4). Thus qualitative research emphasizes individuals making meaning of events rather than assuming that meaning is “discovered.” In addition, a qualitative approach emphasizes how individuals construct meaning of human experiences. The ways that individuals choose to construct and express their identities are influenced by the ways they perceive and construct their realities. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to “seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 13). My dissertation emphasizes the
intersecting, complex, contradicting and overlapping nature of these women’s identities; the social-spatial practices of African American women, and their perceptions of diversity, race, racism and other issues of difference at PWIs. The success of my project hinges on my ability to understand how Black women at the college level make meaning out of their experiences, and how they negotiate interactions between themselves, fellow students, and faculty members at predominately White universities.

**Feminist Methodologies**

Feminist methodology is not a specific set of research methods, but rather a perspective that focuses on issues of gender in research. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) argue that feminist methodology is based on a “set of approaches to the problem of producing justifiable knowledge of gender relations” (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, p. 10). Feminist perspectives guide methodology and the methods chosen to do research; there is no specific feminist method; rather, methodologies develop organically from the research questions being asked (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002).

Feminist methodologies are at the center of many research projects that focus on gender issues. For the purposes of this dissertation, I emphasize feminist methodological approaches that focus on how standpoint organizes and influences the experiences of women. I discuss methodological approaches that are consistent with standpoint theory and Black feminist standpoint theory. In these discussions I emphasize knowledge creation, the location of the researcher, and the importance of experience as evidence in feminist research.
Feminist Methodology and Feminist Standpoint

Challenging what counts as knowledge and how knowledge is validated is central to the feminist research enterprise. Feminist standpoint theory challenges the concept of objectivity in research practices and critiques the ways it reproduces unjust power relationships. It deconstructs the ways that “objective” methodologies reproduce male bias. Most important, feminist researchers link methodological approaches to the prospect of liberation of women through the research process (Katz, 1994, p. 70).

Hirshman (2004) identifies the connection between methodological approaches and epistemology, saying, “The methodological similarity provides the means for women within various groups to resist their oppression by drawing on the epistemological power their particular shared experiences afford to rename those experiences” (p. 319).

Feminist standpoint theory focuses on knowledge that is created from a socially subordinate location. Standpoint theory argues that:

- It can explain kinds of accounts of nature and social relations not otherwise accessible – accounts that provide valuable resources to social justice movements.
- And it helps to produce oppositional and shared consciousness in oppressed groups – to create oppressed people as collective “subjects” of research rather than only as objects of others’ observation, naming, and management (Harding 2004, p. 3).

Feminist methodology provides feminist researchers the opportunity to not only investigate gender difference, but also empower participants in the process. This type of research validates the experiences of not only participants, but also researchers who are from the same location as the participants.
**Feminist Geography**

Feminist geography focuses on how gender influences individual socio-spatial practices. The narratives of participants reveal how they perceive space and develop spatial practices. Spatial practices, subjectivity, and power relationships are inherent in the research process, and researchers must be cognizant of these issues while studying racialized groups (Kobayashi, 1992; McDowell, 1999; Wright, 2002). Geographic theory enables me to question how subjectivities are influenced by the naturalized spatial practices of PWIs because there is recognition of the importance of the “layering of social relations, movements of people, fluid subjectivities and changing place identities” (Wright, 2002; 237). Subjectivity is pivotal to a methodological framework that investigates how successful Black women construct their identities and how they influence spatialized practices while attending PWIs.

**Black Feminist Standpoint**

Black feminist scholars echo the sentiments of feminist standpoint theory. Black feminist thinkers recognize that their positions on the margin challenge the validity of White male power. Also, Black feminist thinkers develop research agendas that work to correct distortions and exclusions of what African American women define as knowledge (Collins, 2008). These research practices validate those of African American women academics whose intellects and capabilities are questioned by other members of the academy. Black feminist epistemology reflects the standpoint of African American women and challenges the normalization of White perceptions of what is knowledge and truth. Black women seek the conscience of other African American women when
examining what is knowledge and to making meaning of the experiences of African American women.

Collins argues that Black feminist scholars need an epistemology that will allow them to do research that incorporates the standpoint of African American women. Collins offers six principles for assessing the knowledge claims of Black feminist epistemology: a) lived experience is central to the research project, b) the research must be subjected to dialogue among African American women to assess knowledge claims, c) the research must be conducted within a framework of the ethics of caring to ensure personal experiences of empathy, d) Black women must be accountable for their knowledge claims, e) Black women are agents of knowledge, f) Black women’s subjectivity and the taken-for-granted knowledge of African American women must be reflected in the knowledge creation by Black women intellectuals. These knowledge practices are in direct conflict with the way truth is defined and validated by the established practices of White male academics insofar as those practices fail to account for the Black feminist critique of knowledge. Because of that conflict, Black feminist scholars who use these principles to ensure that methodologies reflect knowledge creation by African American women risk having the foundation of their research questioned and invalidated.

**Narrative Inquiry**

One means of ensuring that the lived experiences and knowledge creations of Black women are respected and incorporated into academic research is through the use of narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry can be defined as “the narrative analysis of lives or narratives,” using individual stories as data (Merriam, 2002, p. 9). Data are collected
through the communication of individual accounts of experiences, and collecting stories in a chronological order. These individual narratives can take the form of interviews, autobiography, life narratives and journals. Researchers attempt to “make meaning” out of the lived experiences of participants. Chase (2003) argues that “all narratives share the fundamental interest in making sense of experience, the interest in constructing and communicating meaning” (p. 273).

Narrative inquiry examines how participants are influenced by social structures that inhibit and/or empower a person to communicate their experiences. Additionally, narrative inquiry places an emphasis on “not only the individual’s identity and its systems of meaning but also the teller’s culture and social world” (Lieblich & Mashiach, 1998, p. 9). In other words, narrative inquiry is designed to examine the conscious and unconscious ways that society influences the manners in which people identify themselves and how this influences their interactions.

My research is predicated on the ways Black women communicate their experiences, their self-perceptions of their own subjectivities, and their strategies for developing socio-spatial practices to deal with their perceived adversities. My research does not seek to judge or question the perceptions about the experiences of my participants, but rather I want to understand how they construct reality and cope with being marginalized. The accomplishments, frustrations, and hardships that these women face are real to them. My work as a researcher is to interpret what these events mean to the subjects of my research and how that meaning affects their lives as Black women.

Narrative inquiry allows for theory to be created through interpreting experience without any “concrete” evidence of racism. That is, it is not necessary to determine
whether or not what each woman perceived as racism was “in fact” racism. What is important is that women experience what, through their own meaning making process, is in their definition racism. And then, based on their understandings of that experience, they can come to terms with what causes racism and develop means of responding to it. Speaking from the margins also empowers these women to challenge entrenched racism by offering counter narratives to stereotypical images of African American femininity and intelligence.

The narratives of academically successful Black women are about more than how they view themselves; they are also about how spaces influence their identities and their educational experiences. One of the reasons for choosing narrative inquiry is that it dovetails with my investigation into identity development among academically successful Black women. Identity development is always partial and fragmented, and it is always ongoing. Thus narrative inquiry is the only means of accessing the relevant data. This dissertation does not simply catalogue the narratives of Black women. Rather, it is a comprehensive investigation of Black female college students’ perceptions about racial and spatial events and the effect on their identities and academic achievement.

Academically successful African American women are not superwomen who navigate the university system with ease; nor are they victims who are overwhelmed by discriminating practices on campus. The students’ narratives reflect the fragmented and contradictory nature of identity construction and expressions.

African American women’s narratives reflect the socio-spatial practices that govern the kinds of relationships that they form in order to navigate their interactions on college campuses. Narrative inquiry allows for the investigation of the spatial component
to subjectivity and how women identify themselves in different ways depending upon the spaces they occupy (McDowell, 1999; Rose, 1997; Thomas, 2011). Through narratives, Black women are able to communicate their experiences illustrating how space affects them and how they influence the space that they inhabit. In addition, women’s narratives reveal the contested and fluid nature of space by discussing their negotiations of spatial boundaries on campus. Narratives regarding the construction and policing of boundaries give insight into how these women develop practices to transgress boundaries as they pertain to race, gender, class, sexuality, and so forth.

In this process, Black women communicate how they are racialized and how this racialization influences the way they perceive available choices that they make while interacting on college campuses. Racialization is something that happens in time, in space, and, like identity construction, is always in process. It happens to concrete individuals and is perpetrated by concrete individuals, but it always takes place within a context that highlights both the past and current racist practices. Each experience of racialization has a cumulative and potentially exponentially increasing effect on the psyche, making self-segregation essential to survival. Like identity construction, it is a process that remains invisible to standard “objective” methodologies. The personal narratives of African American women reveal the conscious and unconscious ways that interacting in racialized and gendered spaces is particular to their lived experience. The only way to gain access to these narratives is through the stories of African American women.

These narratives also illustrate how racial and gendered spatial practices can become normalized in research interactions. Socio-spatial practices create boundaries
that promote discriminatory and racist social constructions of racial minority groups; researchers normalize these interpretations through the spatial practices in their research by coding them in ways designed to ensure that social control is maintained and power relationships are not compromised (Kobayashi, 1992; Wright, 2002). Bringing Black women’s narratives to the fore in research can address the lacunae in research on campus climate by centering perceptions of racism and exclusion in a variety of contexts in PWIs. In this way, the research itself is a practice of confronting racialized power relationships.

Methods

I use in-depth interviews as my method to investigate the socio-spatial practices of successful Black women. Interviewing is a common practice used by researchers studying the achievement gap. Some researchers on the achievement gap also combine interviewing with surveys (Guiffrida, 2005, Howard, 2004; Sanders 1997; 1989; others use group interviewing, see Schwartz, Bower, Rice, Washington, 2003). Many studies on African American women utilize a qualitative approach that emphasizes in-depth interviews (Chapman, 2007, DeCuir and Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings’ 1994) though there are some examples of integrating quantitative methodologies (Boyd, Hunt, Kandell, Lucas, 2003; Cokely, 2008; Harley, 2007).

I chose to do open-ended interviews for my dissertation because they allow for spontaneity and gave me opportunities to think about and react to some of the women’s responses during the interviewing process. Allowing African American women an open-ended means to give an account of their experiences gave them a voice, a voice that they

5 I also took field notes during and after conducting interviews in order to have detailed information about my experiences during the process of analyzing my data (Patton, 2002).
do not normally have. During the interview process, participants were allowed to tell their stories in their own words, providing them with an avenue to make meaning out of their experiences and to understand how they construct their respective realities. This interview style allows women to dictate what was important to them and how they perceived their experiences, rather than having to respond to a large set of pre-determined questions. This interview style also allowed for follow up questions and time to clarify ideas (Holloway and Jefferson, 1997). This enabled me to gain insight into their perceptions of higher education, success, and the ways they developed spatial practices.

I decided that the questions should be open ended to allow for a more conversational approach. I did not want the women to feel as though I was interrogating them or to have any reason to doubt my sincerity regarding my reasons for interviewing them. During the interviewing process, I did not want the women to feel like “objects” nor to give the appearance that I was talking down to them. Ladson-Billings (1997) argues that by “talking with rather than ‘talking to’ other Black women, African American women have the opportunity to deconstruct the specificity of their own experiences and make connections with the collective experiences of others” (p. 155). I hoped that open-ended interviews would provide me with an opportunity to reflect on similarities and differences in our collective experiences as African American women.

**Site and sample.** I selected a Midwestern university as the site of my research. In order to ensure anonymity, I refer to my research site as Marion University. I chose this university as the site of my research because I had connections with administrators, and there was a large pool of highly achieving African American women attending the
university. The university’s African American undergraduate population during the time of data collection was 5.2%, or about 2,000 students.

While attempting to obtain statistics on African Americans attending Marion University, I encountered resistance from university staff. I had a variety of questions regarding retention among colleges across the university and needed specific information based on race and gender. I spent about two months sending e-mails and making phone calls in an effort to gain the trust of someone in the Bursar’s office. During my correspondence, I informed them that I was a PhD candidate who needed information that would help me understand the level of academic achievement of African American women at the university. I was told that they would like to help, but the staff refused to give me this information; the root of their apprehension stemmed from administrators’ fear that the information would be used to cast the university in a negative light regarding issues of diversity.

I had a variety of questions that were not addressed, such as: what are the percentages of retention and graduation of African American women in specific departments; and even more simply, how many African American students there were in different departments at the university. After explaining the purposes of my project and with the help of my advisor, I was informed that there were approximately 500 African American women who had a GPA of at least 3.0 with junior or senior status. I was not given any information regarding the number of students attending this university with my GPA requirements nor the specific numbers of students in particular majors or total of African American women with junior or senior status. I chose to do a purposeful sample because “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich
cases for study in depth” (Patton, 2002, p. 231). I wanted to make sure that the women whom I selected would provide me with insightful observations about the experience of African American achieving at PWIs.

**Recruiting.** During the recruitment process, I began by contacting university administrators and sororities, and I posted flyers about my study and the participant requirements. In my recruitment documents (e-mails and flyers), I informed potential participants that they would receive a $25 stipend as an incentive to agree to participate. During my first few days on campus, I attempted to start conversations with any African American women I encountered to inquire if they would be interested in participating in my study. I was anxious to get started collecting data for my study and was unsure if I could recruit any women for my study. After about a week, I received an e-mail from the president of an African American sorority; she was extremely helpful and forwarded my information to other members of her sorority, which helped me recruit a few participants. I received the most assistance from one administrator in the Office of Minority Affairs. The administrator I spoke with was supportive and acted as a gatekeeper to potential subjects by offering to send my information to minority student populations on campus (Patton, 2002). Thirty minutes after my e-mails were forwarded to potential participants, approximately 60 African American women responded with interest to participate in my study. By the end of the process, I had identified 86 potential interviewees in a two-week period. Through phone calls and e-mails, I corresponded with the African American women who expressed interested in participating in the study; all of these women were willing to accommodate my schedule. While selecting participants, I constructed a list of potential participants that I tried to make as unbiased and fair as possible. I ranked
students based on the order in which they contacted me. I then called and/or e-mailed each potential participant. During my correspondence with potential participants, we discussed participant requirements, and possible times and locations for interviews.

Participants. I conducted my interviews at Marion University in January 2009. My recruiting criteria stipulated that participants must be African American women with juniors or seniors status and have at least a cumulative GPA of 3.0. By focusing recruitment on African American women with these characteristics, I ensured that I would get participants who have illustrated that they are achieving above-average grades and can gain admission into any department at the university.

While in the field, I conducted 23 one-on-one interviews with African American women. The majority of the interviews took place in a local coffee shop, but I conducted one interview with a participant in her office because her schedule did not allow her to leave to meet me at the coffee shop. The day before I met with each woman I e-mailed her to confirm the time, and location of our interview and what I would be wearing to make sure that she would recognize me on the day of our meeting.

My interview sessions ranged from approximately 45 minutes to an hour and a half. The women were very open and excited about conducting interviews with me. Participants were very supportive and encouraging toward me during and after interview sessions. For instance, most of the women thanked me for doing a study on African American women. Also, a few of the women did not want to be paid for participating in the study. The women were gracious and wanted to know how they could help me with my research. They answered all my questions and thanked me for allowing them to participate in my study. Some of the women asked me questions about my work and
asked for my advice about applying for graduate school and professions that they were thinking about entering after graduation. In addition, participants said that they enjoyed the interview process and added that no one had ever asked them about their experiences and that they were happy for the opportunity to reflect back on their time in college.

**Positionality.** Traditional approaches to research reject embracing culture as biased and lacking objectivity, preferring instead to focus on tightly defined research questions that can be answered within the framework of standard objective methodologies such as quantitative research. However, feminist researchers have questioned the validity of this argument for some time. Milner (2007) states that “researchers in the process of conducting research pose racially and culturally grounded questions about ourselves” (p. 395). As a Black woman, I am always interrogating my perceptions and how they are influenced by the social context of living in a society that places me on the margins. My own experiences have not only led me to this project, they are potential tools for advocating research and policy for Black women in higher education. Methodological issues that problematize the complexity of the role of the researcher could offer insights into understanding the lived experiences of African American women.

While discussing my participants’ encounters while attending PWIs, I found myself reflecting on my own education, my perceptions about academics, how I positioned myself in the academy, and how, in many ways, these issues drove me to investigate these themes in my research. I have struggled and watched African American women colleagues struggle through higher education. I have choked on rage at some of the things that I have seen and endured during undergraduate and graduate school. I have
found myself having difficulty coping with the realities of racism and sexism inside and outside of the classroom. Unfortunately, I know that my experiences are not uncommon. I have had more friends than I could count not make it through undergraduate and graduate school. I have wondered what is it about me that makes me want to keep going when there have been substantial evidence and arguments for me to seek other professional routes along the way. I have had moments of what can best be described as survival guilt because I was not able to bring other Black women along with me or to be more helpful to them regarding advice and encouragement so that they could continue in higher education.

I have also watched with great awe some African American women whom I define as successful. I respect their accomplishments and the ways that they carry themselves. I have met women with high moral character who have the respect and adoration of their colleagues. I am curious, but rarely ever ask them what has made them so resilient against the oppression that they face on a day-to-day basis. I wonder what keeps them going and how they are able to keep achieving even when they face challenges in their lives. These are the questions that came to my mind on a daily basis throughout the research process.

The more I have worked on this dissertation the more angst I experienced and the more I have had to question who I am and what my purpose is as a student and academic. This angst is what made me listen intensely to the stories of the African American women. I found myself hearing similar sentiments among my research participants in their descriptions of their experiences on campus. My role as a researcher was not only to listen to these narratives of participants, but also to get them to start thinking about
their experiences as achievers. Our interviews became more conversational the more each woman became comfortable with me. I responded to any questions that participants had about my academic experiences and issues that I encountered. The women appreciated my honesty and openness throughout the interviewing process. The more open I was, the more relaxed and trusting the women became during our sessions.

In addition, I think that my being an African American woman who was a few years older than the study participants was an advantage. We were able to talk and communicate ideas that came from similar perspectives. The young women nodded when I made comments or asked them questions about some of the hardships that they faced in higher education. I found myself nodding when they said something that rang true for me also. I was aware of my research agenda, but I was also aware of how these interview sessions were affecting me and causing me to ask questions about how I identified myself and dealt with being an African American woman attending a PWI.
Participant demographics. Table 1 summarizes the basic demographic characteristics of the twenty African American women whose narratives shape my study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Class Rank</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Felicia</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Junior</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stacey</td>
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<td>Junior</td>
<td>Microbiology</td>
</tr>
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<td>Tia</td>
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<td>Senior</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidney</td>
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<td>Junior</td>
<td>Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
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<td>Junior</td>
<td>International Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
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<td>Senior</td>
<td>Economics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sonya</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Amber</td>
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<td>Senior</td>
<td>Human Ecology</td>
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<td>Alice</td>
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<td>Senior</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
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<td>Junior</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
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<td>Denise</td>
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<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
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<td>Junior</td>
<td>Music and Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Senior</td>
<td>Communications</td>
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<td>Jada</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Subject demographics

A quick look at this table reveals that the majority of the African American women interviewed had majors in the social sciences (economics, political science, psychology, etc.). Students who majored in professional programs like engineering and
business were the second most highly represented, followed by those in physical science (chemistry, biology, and ecology). Furthermore, the table shows that the participants tended to be seniors, and the average cumulative GPA was 3.483, which shows that the sample of African American women who participated in this study tend to perform quite well in the classroom.

**Coding.** After the transcription, I started coding my data. I began by looking for themes in the narratives and referring back to my field notes to explore observations that I recorded during the interviewing process. Since the women I interviewed were so accommodating, and because the sessions that I held with participants were so useful, I did not determine a need to do follow-up interviews. I did, however, e-mail the participants the transcripts of their interviews to make sure that I had correctly transcribed our conversations and, perhaps more importantly, that I did not misrepresent their responses or our interactions.

Though I discuss coding specifically in this section, my coding process overlapped with other portions of my research processes. Data analysis entailed developing systematic ways to create categories and understand themes (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). While in the field I collected notes about my interviews and made points about interviewee discussions. As Patton (2002) writes, the “fluid and emergent nature of naturalistic inquiry makes the distinctions between gathering and analysis for less absolute” (p. 463). I found myself involved in a near constant, ongoing process of listening to interviews, making notes, reading transcripts and rewriting sections to the point that even the process of writing the dissertation involved revision of the coding with which I began.
My coding started during my time in the field. While collecting data, I came up with five general themes that I thought would be useful in my coding process: academic experiences, social experiences, challenges, dealing with racialization, and socio-spatial practices. I made notations of these conversations in my field journal so that I would remember key phrases and themes in my data. During my analysis, I utilized constant comparison as a way of developing themes to assist me in analyzing my data. This allowed me to look for recurring themes and to understand differences in data (Glasper & Strauss, 1967). There were stories that I felt were important to my research, but I was unsure how they would connect or what they would reveal about the experience of African American women at PWIs. During the transcription process, I made more notations about my interviewees and possible connections between their narratives.

After I completed the transcription process, I began the coding process on my interview transcripts. I reviewed my field notes and my research notes and developed themes that I thought were important to my study. I read each typed interview and color coded comments as they pertained to themes that I developed from my notes.

When I first began writing my analysis chapters, I thought that coding would be easy because, on the surface, many of the women seemed to have similar responses about a variety of topics (dating, family relationships, etc.). However, the more I read and re-read my interviews, I felt overwhelmed by the need to capture the nuances of the participants’ experiences. I immediately saw links among the experiences of the African American women I interviewed, but was unsure as to how I would organize data. The moment I thought I had developed a theory about the experiences of Black women attending PWIs, I would immediately question it and start re-reading interviews and
taking notes. For instance, I looked for responses that focused on how the women felt about speaking in class and then placed these responses into smaller categories (e.g., why and when students speak in class).

I thought at first that the academically successful Black women I interviewed refrained from speaking in class because they were afraid to voice their opinion, but the more I read my interviews the more I realized the ways that subjectivity played a role in when and why they spoke in class – even though the women who appeared to hold back were some of the most assertive and confident women I interviewed. I then began to analyze the meaning of these women’s perceptions of the classroom. The more I read my interviews, the more I realized that these women’s interviews were more complex than I initially thought. I would look at interviews until I thought that there was enough evidence to either prove or disprove important themes and the “umbrellas” that I placed narratives under. From there, I sought to create subcategories that focused on the diversity of experiences regarding these topics.

I began to make connections between categories to determine the ways that women’s subjectivity influences how they view their experiences at PWIs. I sought to explain the diversity of these women’s experiences and the different ways African American women dealt with being racialized on campus. I determined that spatial practices were contingent and conditional depending how they perceived spaces and how they defined being racialized on campus. Also, I began to understand that the African American women I interviewed are angry, resentful and anxious about race relations and the expectation that they interact positively with Whites in an educational system that privileges whiteness and marginalizes them and their academic accomplishments.
Overview of analysis. I spent a large quantity of time coding my data and reworking my analysis for my dissertation. As a result, my project looks significantly different from the way I initially conceived it. I had to come to terms with a number of unanticipated issues while analyzing my data. For instance, I had expectations about what was going to be important narratives in my study (i.e. family relationships, mentorship, etc) when I was in the field that turned out to be not to be very important. I had to learn how to “let go” of what I thought participants were saying to me, and focus on that they were saying about themselves. I accomplished this through conversations with friends and colleagues about my project. For instance, a colleague suggested that I was perhaps too close to the topic because I was an African American woman and my own personal struggles were, at times, preventing me from really critiquing participants’ responses. I could not quite see the contradictions in the women’s narratives and I was concerned about making African American women “look bad,” or having someone undermine my findings and in some way find ways to further stereotype African American women. I found myself having to take a step back in order to make sure that I was communicating my points properly and being honest in my analysis. I feel a great deal of gratitude and loyalty to the women whom I interviewed for coming as far as they have in higher education. I was constantly trying to find evidence of these women’s resiliency and sought to present them as assertive and forthright in their opinions; however, with that approach I would have ignored the complexity of these women’s narratives and identity.

The women I interviewed were survivors, but they were still fighting in conscious and unconscious ways to identify themselves. I had trouble articulating the effects of colorblind racism on participants because I had not fully recognized the ways that color-
blind racism had affected me. Institutional racism takes a heavy toll on survivors, no matter how smart, strong, and capable they are. It takes more than internal fortitude, and even those with internal fortitude can be destroyed or severely damaged by their experiences.

Also, theories of colorblind racism enabled me to see how African American women’s choices were so limited and to see the ways these women were influenced by these limitations. As I began to think about how I coded thematic subtopics about racism in the process of reading and re-reading interviews, it became clear to me that I needed to investigate the contradictions in these women’s stories. I found that the women I interviewed did not realize how much they have been influenced by racism, nor did they see the impact upon themselves of their belief that no one cares about their preferences. Academically successful Black women are independent because conditions dictate that they must be. Those conditions require them to constantly challenge and disprove stereotypes of African American femininity and intelligence. As I began to see this process taking place among my interviewees, I had to revisit Black feminist standpoint theory and intersectionality.

One result was the addition of the theme of activism to my coding changed as I began to refer back to Black feminist standpoint theory. My interviewees had very clear sense that their primary concern was to achieve academically, and they attempted to develop personal and professional relationships that would allow them to achieve these goals. Originally I had wanted to think about how the women developed strength from negative personal and academic experiences, and to see that those experiences caused them to think in a particular way. I began to redefine the ways that I thought about
passivity and what it means to be an activist, because many of my ideas about activism did not necessarily square with the way my interviewees thought about it. I thought that African American women would more aggressive about verbalizing their discontent about racism.

**Writing Analysis.** While writing the results of my analysis I was constantly referring back to interviews and notes in order to find narratives that I thought would be the most useful to my analysis. Writing research results is also an analytic process and demands a way to pull together the fragments of data: “Writing gives form to the researcher’s clumps of carefully categorized and organized data” (Glesne, 1999, p. 155). Richardson (2003) argues that writing is not simply something that a researcher does at the conclusion of the study, but rather is itself a method that enables the researcher to learn more about herself and the research participants. As I began writing my results, I began to recognize the importance of subjectivity in the lives of African American women. For instance, when Lisa told me about an interaction with a faculty member and how angry she was that an instructor would be so racist towards her, I believed that her account of the incident was accurate. However, during the writing process, I had to think less about my own feelings towards this incident and focus on what Lisa is telling me – she felt racialized and discriminated against. I do not have an account from the instructor and I was not present during their interactions. I needed to go back to the interview and analyze Lisa’s thought process and discuss what made her feel racialized during this particular experience with a professor.

This process has yielded two analysis chapters, and each emphasizes the two major themes in my research: one focused on academic spaces and the other focused on
social spaces. I define academic spaces as classrooms, interactions with faculty members, and students’ groups. I define social spaces as private organizations, social clubs and other social venues, places of residence, and interpersonal relationships. In the process of interviewing and coding, I began to see the significance of the ways different spaces affected the spatial practices of participants. In academic spaces women seemed to “know the rules” regarding social interactions and perceived a level of control when interacting with students and faculty. In social spaces, participants seemed more surprised by issues of racism and were not sure exactly how to articulate their feelings of marginalization and racialization.

By separating my analysis chapters into two chapters, I was able to highlight particular socio-spatial interactions. In both of these chapters, I selected narratives that best represented the experiences of the women that I interviewed. My main criteria for choosing representative narratives to discuss topics involved a participant’s ability to articulate as many complex issues in their comments to me. This did not mean that they were conscious of what they were saying, because in some cases these women’s narratives did not reflect the ways that they identified themselves. Though I tried to utilize as many narratives of the women as possible, there were some women’s narratives that clearly articulated the sentiments of fellow interviewees more concisely. I felt as if it was more important for me to use narratives that would have a strong impact on how subjectivity, space, race, and gender influences the way these women construct their identity. For instance, all of the women discussed stereotypes of African American women; however, some women’s were more concise in their comments. When I asked
Amber to tell me about some stereotypes of African American women this was her response:

I think that there is like a baby momma stereotype that is hard to get away from because it is all on Facebook and pictures of the stomach like nine weeks and counting. I do not know what I can do about that (laugh). Um, I think there is like this ghetto girl like oh if I see some black girl in class I might think that she is from the ‘hood. I might think that most people don’t think about that or they might think that they are ghetto or dangerous.

I understand what Amber is articulating regarding stereotypes of African American women in regards to sexual promiscuity, class, and culture; however the narratives that I used in my analysis articulated the same sentiments about similar themes (i.e. racism, agency, power, etc.) in more concise and effective language. I have provided examples of comments that I used in my analysis section regarding stereotypes of African American women below:

For Leslie, stereotypical perceptions of African American women entail certain ideas: “I guess most of the time they think that you are really loud and really confrontational and bitchy and like to argue. You complain a lot, you mooch a lot, you like thugs and gangsters.”

Denise, a senior majoring in Psychology, agrees:

There is the stereotype that we are all ghetto, loud, and angry a lot, angry women like that is just…I don’t know like there are times when I can get like that. There are times when I can be all three but not at the same time, but I think anybody can be, I guess.
As I will discuss in the following analysis chapters, I worked major themes into the coding process as they pertain to the spaces in which my participants interacted.

**Validity and reliability.** Validity and reliability are two interconnected terms that ensure the research findings are accurate and reflect reality. Three methods are used to ensure internal validity: triangulation, peer review, and member check. While collecting data, I sought to ensure that my findings were as accurate as possible through thorough documentation and keeping as meticulous notes as possible. Though my primary source of data collection was interviews, I took field notes in an effort to ensure my data were correct. I documented my thoughts and made comments about my interactions with participants to remember inconsistencies and to ask myself questions about my interactions. While analyzing my data, I used two forms of peer review to ensure accuracy in my findings. Peer review is utilized as a means of verify that findings are accurate. There is an inherent peer review in that “all graduate students have a peer review process built into their thesis or dissertation committee”; I also used a member of the research group at the university where I am currently employed to act as reviewers for my analysis (Merriam, 2002, p. 26). I asked members of the research group to read and comment on my findings.

**Ethics.** Before and after the interview process, I assured the women in my study that I would not include any sensitive information about them that they did not feel comfortable having published in my dissertation. I tried to ensure as much anonymity as possible for participants. One of the drawbacks of doing narrative inquiry is the possibility that participants will have personal details about them exposed (Chase, 1996). One of the ways that I combat this is by changing the names of subjects and by not
including personal information that could reveal their identities. All audiotapes, interview transcripts, and field notes gathered during this project will be locked in my home office and destroyed three years after the completion of my dissertation.

In the next two chapters I apply the theories discussed in this chapter and in my literature review to the narrative data offered by my respondents. The data chapters are divided in two because the conditions and coping strategies used in academic spaces are substantially different from those used in non-academic social spaces that are nonetheless central to the collegiate experience.
CHAPTER 5: ACADEMIC SPACES

Meritocracy focuses on individuality and personal achievement, but it also determines how the concepts of sameness (those who achieve) and difference (those who do not achieve) are constructed and reinforced. The notion of merit is tied to the ways hard work and success are defined and normalized in American culture (McNamee & Miller, 2009). Indeed, the notion of merit on a college campus is based on the claim that there is something “normal” about student interactions and abilities. Thus individuality in a “meritocracy” is ultimately governed by a group identity: White achievement is normalized, whereas African American women’s achievement is not. That is to say, it is expected that White students will achieve, and that lack of achievement will be “abnormal,” whereas the opposite is true for African American women: achievement is considered atypical, whereas underachievement or failure is the expected norm. They are expected to adhere to White normative practices in order to claim a level of individuality, in order to escape being seen as stereotypical, non-achieving Black women.

This notion of “sameness” is also inherent in theories of the color-blind racism. Achievement becomes a proxy for equal academic treatment; high-achieving Black women have earned the right to be treated as individuals rather than as stereotypical Black women. These women construct their race and gender in ways that positively represent their race and gender; however, the ways that their identity is contradicted and
fragmented becomes apparent when they challenge or give into the hegemonic forces that would confine them to particular identities.

Academically successful African American women walk a tightrope: they want to be defined as individuals and they strive to perform in ways that counter negative stereotypes of Black women, yet no matter what they do, they are racialized. The experience of being different and an outsider results in anxiety, anger, and frustration. In order to escape those feelings – or rather, to experience respite – the women self-segregate, and that self-segregation also marks their ongoing outsider-ness. These women challenge negative images of Black female intelligence; yet, while subscribing to norms and behaviors inherent in PWIs, they also reinforce them through social and spatial practices.

Black women’s standpoint provides these women with a perspective that challenges normalized oppression and discrimination. Inherent in this standpoint is the desire to challenge oppression. This desire has led African American women to become activists in order to achieve social justice. Collins (2008) argues that activism is inherent in the experiences of African American women:

If Black women find themselves in settings where total conformity is expected, and where traditional forms of activism such as voting, participating in collective movements, and office holding are impossible, then the individual women who in their consciousness choose to be self-defined and self-evaluation are in fact, activists (p. 114).

Patricia Hill Collins argues that African American women’s activism is governed by two dimensions of activism: a) struggle for group survival and b) struggle for institutional
transformation. African American women’s struggle for survival is predicated on assisting other African Americans in developing an oppositional consciousness so that they can “free their minds.” Collins argues that Black women create “spheres of influence” within existing social structures in order to assert themselves. Black women usually cannot directly challenge social structure, thus they cannot directly confront people regarding oppression, and most develop strategies that challenge systems of oppression. The second form of activism, the struggle for institutional transformation, focuses on Black women changing policies and procedures that challenge government, schools, and the work place. Black women develop coalitions with others in order to fight for social justice.

These two forms of activism are distinct, yet they are interdependent. Black women may decide against formally organizing to fight for social justice in order to preserve their precarious careers; however, these women find other ways of resisting. Black women may give the appearance of acquiescing to oppression and following social practices and policies, but they find ways to construct self-identity through resistance.

African American women’s presence at PWIs in and of itself is a form of activism. By their very presence, these women challenge stereotypes of African American women’s intelligence. In addition to meeting intellectual standards, these women must also conform to certain social behaviors to prevent being stereotyped. As a result, these women give the impression of adhering to White standards defining the “ideal student,” meaning the way they dress, speak, and interact socially. However, Black women challenge and resist conditions in higher education. Black women
overachieve and start their own organizations. Nonetheless, the ability to achieve does not mean that they are able to “overcome” racism; rather, they have achieved *in spite* of the presumed “color-blind” system that oppresses them.

Academically successful African American women realize that they are oppressed; however, that does not mean that they are fully aware of all of the ways that they are oppressed and the ways their actions reinforce their subjugation. Color-blind racism attempts to give the appearance that everyone is “the same,” i.e., that there are no differences in the ways that people are treated or should be treated in society (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). In other words, color-blind racism creates the illusion of “sameness” for African Americans. Sameness can be defined through the conscious reinforcement of cultural norms, practices and beliefs (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Collins, 2010). Everyone (regardless of race, gender, class, etc.) is assumed to be on a “level playing field” and to have equal opportunities to be successful in American society through hard work and diligence.

Collins recognizes the way color-blind racism oppresses and racializes people of color. Color-blind racism allows people of color either to be conditionally accepted or to be further racialized by Whites through the process of “Whitening” and “Blackening.” Collins defines Whitening that occurs in a social context where Whites see Blacks as individuals in a particular context by virtue of their conformity to cultural practices (e.g., speech patterns, clothing, etc.). African American women are Whitened by gaining status and/or conditional privileges that are given to Whites. On the other hand, African Americans can be Blackened by being conditionally pushed down on the social scale. Collins argues that Blackness is a social construct and because of this people can be
“Blackened” in a number of different ways (e.g., religion, age, sexuality, etc.). African Americans may also participate in this “Blackening” by putting African American students under surveillance and by normalizing racist comments.

There is a delicate balance between the ways Whitening and Blackening occur when thinking about academically successful African American women. Academically successful African American women are activists who challenge systems of oppression by the fact of their success, yet many of these women have internalized color-blind ideologies. Academically successful Black women are affected by color-blind racism; however, each woman perceives and reacts differently to it depending on her subjectivity. Subjectivity is influenced by the ways the academically successful perceive and negotiate space. Indeed, African American women’s subjectivity is spatial and dependent on their own socio-spatial practices.

After completing my data analysis, I noticed that two themes throughout the narratives of my participants: coping with the experience of being racialized bodies, and power dynamics established through classroom interactions. The women struggled with people associating them with stereotypes and not being perceived as individuals (Collins, 2006). Anger and resentment over being reduced to their race and gender was articulated in a variety of different ways. I articulate these frustrations through the subthemes that I discuss in this chapter: a) coping with negative stereotypes of Black femininity, b) coping with stereotypes surrounding black intelligence and students “proving their intelligence,” c) struggling to create or at least not be diminished by relationships with faculty members and students.
The second major theme that I recognized was classroom interactions. This theme encompassed students’ interpersonal relationships with faculty members and with students both inside and outside the classroom. I focused more of my analysis on the socio-spatial practices of participants and how they perceived color-blind racism in their social interactions. More specifically, I tried to express how academically successful African American women were influenced by having to “prove themselves” intellectually at a PWIs that continuously undermined and challenged their academic abilities. While analyzing my data, I developed the following subthemes in this section: a) the ways in which colorblind racism and the invisibility of whiteness were expressed in the classroom, b) the ways in which Black women nonetheless asserted themselves in classroom interactions, c) the ways in which relationships with fellow students were constructed in the process, and d) the cumulative effect upon the participants from all of the above that explains Black women’s self-segregating spatial practices. I provide a visual representation of these themes to make them easier to see.
1. Black women as racialized bodies
   1. Coping with negative stereotypes of Black femininity.
   2. Coping with stereotypes surrounding black intelligence and students “proving their intelligence.”
   3. Developing relationships with faculty members.

2. Classroom interactions
   1. Colorblind racism and the invisibility of whiteness in the classroom.
   2. Black women asserting themselves in classroom interactions.
   3. Participants’ relationships with fellow students.

Table 2: Themes and subthemes in classroom spaces

The narratives in this chapter and the next detail how academically successful Black women construct their identities as racialized subjects, as well as the pain, fear, anger, and resentment that they feel when confronted with negative images of Black
femininity. These women’s narratives reveal their struggles toward self-identity, while at the same time often working within the mythology of color-blind racism.

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In this chapter and the next I explore the academic and social spaces of the university for the ways in which they reinvent and reproduce racist stereotypes against which Black women must struggle in order to succeed. I define academic spaces as classrooms, interactions with faculty members, and students’ groups. I define social spaces as private organizations, social clubs and other social venues, places of residence, and interpersonal relationships. This chapter focuses on academic spaces, while Chapter 6 focuses on social space.

**Black Women as Racialized Bodies**

African American women must contend with the constant racialization of their bodies, and the ways that social racism affects campus spaces in various ways. Racial scrutiny, in other words, is not just something that these women experience on campus but rather reflects their social and spatial locations and how others’ racial locations come to bear on their interactions with Black women. Educational spaces are not isolated; they are influenced by other spaces (Nespor, 1996; Thomas, 2011). School is not simply the place where non-White students are racialized; there are numerous spaces that affect
how academically successful African American women form their identities, such as home, neighborhood, work, and social spaces.

“**I Don’t Want to be That Black Girl**”

All of the African American women discussed one major fear: they did not want to be “that Black girl”: a woman who is not achieving or who is not accepted by her peers or instructors. To be clear, a Black woman who is not achieving, and who is instead illustrating the negative stereotypes of Black women, is therefore not representing her race to her best ability. Stacey, a junior microbiology major, says, “I do think that sometimes, I guess that I do not want to fail because everyone will think ‘oh, that Black girl. We knew that she could not do it anyways.’ That crosses my mind sometimes. I guess I try to ignore it.” Lisa, junior political science major, mentions that when she tries to be assertive, “I just tell people what I want, but at the same time I feel like they think ‘oh, it’s just that Black girl.’” Being identified in these terms is a great source of fear and anxiety for these women and many are determined not be labeled in this manner. The phrase “that Black girl” demeans them and reduces them to racialized bodies.

Interestingly, an African American woman can never stop being “that Black girl” because she can never overcome racialization (Collins, 2008, Thomas, 2011; Winkler-Wagner, 2009). When Black women speak their minds, they speak in a social space that sees them as racialized, and often they perceive that they are not taken seriously in predominantly White spaces. As a result, academically successful women distance themselves from these stereotypes by overachieving.
As racialized subjects, Black women’s identities are fragmented, conditional, and contested because they are being denied a cohesive identity (Collins, 2008). These women are constantly policing their identities in an effort to assert individuality.

Though these women attempt to cast themselves as “normal students” and prove that they are “the same” as White students, their differences are highlighted. Black women are defined as “different” from Whites and not allowed to express individuality. They fight to keep from being reduced to “that Black girl” – that is, to resist being reduced to negative stereotypes about Black femininity and achievement. Ironically, that very fight against stereotypes continues to be interpreted from within a racist framework: if specific Black women present as non-stereotypical, then they are seen as exceptions to the rule, rather than as challenges to the rule itself. No matter what they do, no matter how well they perform White norms, they are always already outsiders, the “other” – exceptional Black women who are able to perform according to White standards, merely reinforcing stereotypes because they stand out against the backdrop of “all those other” Black women who presumably fit the stereotypes.

Black women develop reference systems that counter stereotypes of controlling images of Black femininity (Collins, 2008). They follow norms of Whiteness in both social and academic spaces; however, they can never overcome being a racialized subject, given the visibility of their bodies in White spaces. Rejecting White norms (whether they agree with them or not) could mean the loss of privilege. Ironically they must give up their individuality as Black women in order to be treated as individuals in the academy – that is, as people worthy of respect and acknowledgement, rather than as negative stereotypes. These women know that they are culturally different, but their
narratives focus on the ways that they are the same. How are the experiences of African American women framed by the ways that Black women develop a reference system in these women’s spatial practices?

**Coping with Stereotypes**

When they started out as students, all of the research participants saw Marion University as a place of opportunity and growth; however, after experiencing and observing racial incidents and coping with personal struggles and entrenched social and cultural practices, many of them have re-evaluated who they are and how they relate to others. In the beginning of interviews they all said that they felt safest and most comfortable in the classroom out of all campus spaces. Nonetheless, additional probing revealed contradictions in the women’s perception of academic spaces. They expressed stress, anger, and anxiety when the conversation turned to racial tensions.

Many of the women were reluctant at first to discuss discrimination or racism at the university, insisting they had no experience with it. Their reluctance changed as soon as I asked about stereotypes of African American women. Some of them laughed and others rolled their eyes before responding. All of the women mentioned that words commonly used to describe Black women included “loud,” “ghetto,” and “hood.”

Leslie, a senior majoring in psychology with the hope of going to law school explains the cultural indoctrination into stereotypes of Black femininity: over time she learned to de-emphasize the stereotypes and accept it as a part of life being a Black woman. Leslie said, “Well, I think growing up…I guess I was very much more aware of [stereotypes of African American women] than I am now because I had to learn [them]. And I thought, oh well, you expect me to be that way.” Being expected to “be that way”
implies that there is assumed normal behavior and expected practices ascribed to them. Negative stereotypes of African American women provide a means of policing their behaviors, their interactions, and their achievement. Indeed, the fact that Leslie was more “aware” of stereotypes when she was younger than as an adult indicates that, rather than going way, these images are now so normalized that she does not think about them, either because she tries not to care or because she has become desensitized. For Leslie, stereotypical perceptions of African American women entail certain ideas: “I guess most of the time they think that you are really loud and really confrontational and bitchy and like to argue. You complain a lot, you mooch a lot, you like thugs and gangsters.”

Denise, a senior majoring in Psychology, agrees:

There is the stereotype that we are all ghetto, loud, and angry a lot, angry women like that is just… I don’t know like there are times when I can get like that. There are times when I can be all three but not at the same time, but I think anybody can be, I guess.

Challenging negative images of Black women becomes an everyday practice for my interviewees. Denise stated that anyone could be “angry.” Being angry is natural and human. But when a Black woman is perceived as angry, she instantly acquires all the baggage of that racist, negative stereotype. These women work to make themselves “the same” (that is, human), but in spite of all those efforts, they (and others) identify them as different. As a result, identity becomes a conscious and unconscious battle to be seen as a normal individual; their options for defining themselves as normal are limited by their social location.
These negative perceptions lay the groundwork for assumptions of Black women’s lack of intellectual capabilities. At times, African American women’s perceptions of themselves clash internally. Though Black women self-identify and form their own value systems, they are affected by the ways that others see them (Collins, 2008, Winkler-Wagner, 2009, Banks, 2005, 2009). Even when they identify themselves as achievers and are successful in their programs, they perceive themselves as outsiders in academic spaces. The assumption that PWIs universities welcome Black students because they need them to fulfill requirements is a common theme of narratives of women in the more competitive programs in business and the sciences. All of them discussed not “making it,” that is, being defined as intellectually inferior to White students and/or as benefitting from affirmative action.

Color-blind racism influences the ways African American women perceive their presence at PWIs. On the one hand, that color-blind racism transforms any achievement of theirs in the eyes of Whites to a negative – that is, as the result not of achievement but rather of deferential treatment. On the other hand, these women may internalize color-blind racism and perceive their own achievement as fraudulent. Stereotypical images of Black women at PWIs are articulated and expressed in different ways by some Whites at the university; however, Black women use their own descriptions to articulate underachievement.

My conversation with Felicia shed the most light on how microaggressions influence the academic experiences of academically successful African American women. Felicia is a microbiology major. She hopes to attend medical school after she receives her BS. She mentions that White students view affirmative action as a code
word for diversity and for people of color being allowed into PWIs based on color rather than merit.

Felicia: I feel like sometimes that people think that I would not be here if not for affirmative action. But I could have gone to Marion University without it. No one knows that. They just think, “Oh you got in here because you are Black. You are going to get into medical school because you are Black.” And then you have to prove to them that no, I am here because I am smart. I am here because I deserve to be here.

Felicia interprets the implication of the White student’s statement as assuming that she is not performing on the same level (or not out-performing them) academically. Though Felicia identifies herself as smart, it is difficult for Felicia not to be influenced by her fellow students’ comments; she recognizes that White students frame her level of achievement and admission into higher education are framed by the affirmative action stereotype. Felicia’s narrative communicates the paradox that academically successful women experience at PWIs. White space for them is exclusionary and difficult to navigate because of negative stereotypes about Black intelligence. Yet, they understand that their White counterparts assume that it is easy for African Americans to get degrees and achieve in higher education. These comments work to Blacken African American women – that is, they assume that White students undermine and lower the social status of African American women by minimizing their accomplishments (Banks, 2009; Fries-Giffin, 2007). Racist comments from other students reinforce the low expectations of their intellectual abilities.
In addition, this quote also illustrates the ways that White privilege is marked as invisible because White intelligence is not questioned. Felicia’s perception that White students view her Blackness as privileged worries her. She assumes that White students believe that Black women are not performing at the same level as Whites. Although higher education is defined as a meritocracy, in color-blind racism, Black students are seen as the exceptions to that meritocracy. African American women’s legitimacy as achievers is questioned when other students police academic spaces by assuming that Black students achieve because of affirmative action rather than through intelligence and hard work.

Felicia was irritated that other students automatically assumed that she was underachieving, unqualified, and an obstacle to the advancement of “deserving” White students. The fact that White students feel comfortable in openly challenging Felicia’s qualifications is troubling, but not surprising. Felicia knows that she works hard in school but she does not challenge her White counterparts. She distances herself from conversations about race and racism. She tells me that she knows that she is at the university because she has worked hard. Felicia silences her pain and frustration about being reduced down to a racialized body.

**Racializing Other Women**

Black women know that they are racialized, but that does not mean that they do not stereotype each other, and distance themselves from other Black women who exhibit what they see as undesirable characteristics. Indeed, these relations between African American women are fragile and dependent on how academically successful Black women perceive other Black women.
As Lisa states:

Well, I think stereotypes of Black women are not for the most part in the academic setting kind of non-existent. If I am the only one then a lot of times if there [are] two of us...I don’t want to say ghetto…but ghetto. And think it is like oh my God why is [this woman] talking like that?...Why is she saying it like that then I kind of feel bad about it because like that is her and not me but I do not want to be in that same boat. I guess I don’t really feel like I am stereotyped. I think that for the most part people take me just as a person once they get to hear me speak and that I respect you and that I work hard and I am on your level.

Lisa is a Political Science major with junior status. Her perception of negative Black femininity has given her the illusion that she can overcome stereotypes of Black women. She explains how she is different from other Black women by Blackening them in an effort to be seen beyond her own Blackness. Lisa reduces another women to a stereotype and goes out of her way to state the ways that this woman is not like her. She knows the implications of her actions because she feels guilty about her thoughts. She perpetuates spatialities of Whiteness on campus through her description of another African American woman who she says is “ghetto.” Lisa’s language conjures up negative images of Black femininity as constructed through the lens of color-blind racism. She knows that her own interpretation of her fellow African American woman student is unwarranted, because she herself is frustrated when she is stereotyped; yet she does the same thing to someone else in order to avoid further racialization in White space.
Lisa thinks that she can gain conditional privilege when she speaks – proving that she can follow practices of Whiteness. Lisa asserts agency because people take her seriously once she speaks, and that she can overcome her status as a racialized subject. Denise also feels as nervous about being associated with Black women who exhibit negative stereotypical behavior:

Denise: Yes. I remember we were in class talking about chivalry and then about how chivalry was dead. And someone says some of the girls were saying, well I don’t like when a guy holds the door open or if he pays for dinner for me, you know, because I think he's assuming that I can’t do it. And then the conversation veers toward Black men. Some Black African American women – I hate to say that, I really do but I notice in classes they always think, they're kind of rude to talk continuously even when the teacher speaking, and they always sit right behind me…it is a constant humming and most of the time I don’t raise my hand but one of them said they were talking under their breath of course – you know that a Black guy is not going to pay, and I'm like I'm pretty sure they would. I know a lot of Black guys that would pay for your food, for a woman’s food. I don’t know if that is really wrong, I think that should be focused more toward men not just Black men.

Denise “hates to say” that there are some women who subscribe to stereotypes of Black femininity. Denise feels solidarity toward other Black women, but she does not hold the same opinion nor agree with their practices. The Black women in the class were not being respectful toward the teacher. Also, Denise reacted to fellow Black students’ disparaging comments toward Black men. Denise speaks in class to challenge negative
images of African Americans that the Black women behind her reinforced. Denise is also distancing herself from the other women in the course. She does not agree with these women’s statements or their behaviors in class.

This negative behavior occurs in other classrooms, which annoys Denise. She believes that fellow Black women students should be quiet and respectful of the teacher in the classroom. Unlike Lisa, Denise is distancing herself from the other Black women in her class because she is angry that they are actively reinforcing negative stereotypes of Black men and Black women. Denise attempts to police the ways other African American women identify themselves. She wants the Black women and the other students in class to know that she does not have the same perspectives as these students. Also, it is understood that being in a classroom with White students is not the time to speak negatively about other Black women or men out of solidarity and the fear of reinforcing negative images of African Americans.

The narratives of women like Denise and Lisa imply that they believe that they are different from other Black students. They cannot escape the effects of being racialized on campus and cringe at the sight of a Black woman who they think more accurately fits negative stereotypes. Their statements show the intersections of identity and the ways that racism shapes the ways that other Black women perceive themselves.

Both Lisa and Denise Blackened other women by placing them under observation and reporting to me why these African American women were different from them. Also, both women felt guilty about making negative comments about other Black women. Lisa and Denise give descriptions of these women and not only state the
difference between them, but also judge their behaviors. These women also deny fellow African American women individuality, and expect them to conform to White norms.

**Relationships with Faculty Members**

Most of the respondents indicated that their relationships with faculty were positive. Because of their success, they were usually defined as ideal students by their teachers. However, these women did not pursue relationships with faculty members outside the classroom. Instead, they sought the advice and counsel of other students about coursework and career goals. There were, however, a few negative incidents with faculty members. Of the few women who did have negative encounters with faculty members, only one described it as discriminatory. Lisa recounts the following incident:

Last quarter, this is why I changed my major from English. I had a professor that said that we could write about whatever we wanted to write about…whatever this, whatever that. So, I decided to write about Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou and somebody else I forgot; it was not a really big person I think. Keep in mind that I have never gotten anything less than an A on anything in my English classes since the younger grades – and even in college. In college, I took two English classes, and I made As on my papers and even made a 100%. So, I come here and get a C- on my first paper and this is my third English class and I am not understanding where this grading is coming from. And to top it all off, this guy is the first year writing coordinator, so something must not be right if everyone is telling me that I am great and I come to you and you are telling me that I am average. He gave me a “B” on my second one and on my last paper I got a “D.” It was on Langston Hughes about a night funeral in Harlem and the
second one was on *I Know Why the Cage Bird Sings*. So yes, I discuss racism and slavery because those are the allusions and metaphors I was getting from those poems. Now you as a professor should not have said that you could write about whatever you want to write about and then get whatever. You should grade on grammar and not on content. Well, you should grade on content but your topic should not be graded. And my dad warned me, he said, don’t write about that Black stuff if you want to get good grades. He has a master’s in psychology and almost got his PhD too. But I did not believe him and he said you see what you got. I got a C in the class. But how weird does that look to you I got As in English and then have your grade dropped to a C like that.

Initially, Lisa constructed this classroom as a place where she could express her racial identity. Lisa’s description of her interactions with her professor give insight into the ways she is affected by constant racialization in education. Lisa is cautioned by her father not to discuss “race stuff” in her paper and he implies her grade will reflect the lack of interest by others to hear about race. Lisa concluded that her grade in the course was not a reflection of her abilities but reinforced experiences of her hard work not being respected because of her racial identity. It also reflects a need to police or silence her racial identity because of racism on campus.

As the semester proceeded, she redefined the classroom as a racialized space that would strip her of her individuality. Lisa considered her professor’s actions discriminatory because she thought that her grade was based on the topic that she chose, not on the merit of her work. Lisa’s strong performance in other classes reinforced this assumption. For Lisa, there is a correlation between initiating a conversation about race
in her own terms or “stepping out of the box” and her grade being lowered. Lisa makes
the comment that she did not believe her father stating that she would be judged harshly
for writing about race.

Whether or not Lisa’s professor lowered her grade because whether he was racist
or Lisa actually earned the grade is not the most important thing to take away from this
narrative. Lisa's interaction in White spaces has affected her to the point that she now
expects faculty members to be racially motivated when they grade her work. Lisa has
become skeptical of White authority. In one instance, this allows her to question the
power structure of the university and to find ways to avoid being oppressed; in other
instances it makes her suspicious of whether or not her race is what causes her to be
treated in ways that she considers to be unfair.

Brenda and Janet also had negative interactions with professors, but, unlike Lisa,
they did not mention race until I prompted them. These incidents were not seen as
discriminatory, but rather as miscommunications. Brenda is paying for her education
out of pocket and struggling to work and keep her grades up. Brenda is majoring in
folklore. Janet is a junior majoring in international studies. Brenda said that she had
negative interactions with an instructor but did not think that it was racial:

Brenda: Yeah well, I had a teacher sophomore year I don’t know if she just did
not like me or what. I did show up late for class but it was, sometimes, it was
actual real reasons this happened or that happened maybe she just did not like
me. It came time to turn in our finals. I misread the syllabus and I sent her an e-
mail and said that I am really sorry; you know can I write it today and send it to
you. At this point, I did not have my books and things like that and I had all of
my notes. I knew that this quote came from this person and this quote came from that person. I knew for the final exam as long as you say that this quote came from this person and this quote came from that person and give reference to this you are fine. I kept waiting for my grade and sent her an e-mail and said that my grade has not posted and it was about two weeks after the quarter and she accused me of plagiarism and I had to go before the board. And when I was trying to figure this whole thing out with her and I wanted to come in to talk to you and defend myself to you. She basically sent me an e-mail saying along the lines of there is no need in you defending yourself I know that you are guilty. And she refused to answer any of my e-mails; I called the chair and tried to talk to them. She ended up bringing me in front of the board and in the syllabus it stated that as long as you cite the person then you are fine. But it was just how she responded to me she had no respect for me you could see it in her face. Afterwards she did not come up to me and apologize. She just cut me a dirty look and walked away. She was a White teacher and I do not know if there was something going on with that but she did not respect me as a student.

Janet also had a negative experience with a faculty member. Like Brenda, she did not know what to make of her interaction with an instructor. Janet was in a bad car accident and had to drop the class. She supplied documentation of the accident from doctors, but her instructor did not believe her. Janet's accident was so bad that she had to go through a number of surgeries (including plastic surgery) after the accident. Speaking of this interaction, Janet said:
I also had another teacher that thought that I was lying and had made the whole thing up. I never returned to the class because I was ill and it was at 8 in the morning and [she] tried to fail me from the class. She thought that I was lying. We went through this whole thing and I went through student services and eventually got a “W” in the class but she took a special interest and sent me nasty e-mails telling me what she thought [what] I was doing was dishonest.

Christina: Was she older or was she younger?
Janet: She was probably in her 40s. Forty-five, I would say.
Christina: Were you doing well in the class before?
Janet: I did a presentation and I thought that I had done pretty well. So I am not really sure if she had a personal issue or she did not like girls.

Janet’s accident prevented her from completing the course, and she asked for a “W” in order to withdraw from the class. What connects these two narratives is that their instructors defined them as “problem students.” Interestingly, the idea that these faculty members may have spent a large quantity of time ensuring that these students would not be successful did not raise red flags for Brenda and Janet. Black students are often placed in awkward situations that have negative effects on their interactions in college (Feagin, Vera, Imani, 1996). Participants in my study articulated the lack of academic expectations and unethical behavior as stereotypes used to describe them; however, these women did not interpret race as being an underlying factor in their interactions with their instructors. They viewed these events as misunderstandings between them and the professors, interpreting these interactions as the result of being misidentified as bad students.
Subjectivity is important in understanding why some Black women interpret events as racist while others do not. These women could not explain their professors' actions and could only guess their motives. Black women recognize that being immoral and untrustworthy are common stereotypes of Black women, but Brenda or Janet did not make these connections with their individual experiences. Brenda noted that her teacher was White, which implies that she might suspect that race had something to do with her interaction. The teacher does not state or imply that race is an issue, so students do not see race or perceive themselves as being racialized. Lisa thought that her grade was lowered because of her topic. The grading of papers is subjective, but she still interprets this as racist.

Though both women had documentation (course syllabus and medical records), there is evidence of protocol regarding how the instructor should handle this situation, but race was not mentioned. Living in a color-blind society may have something to do with why these women did not see race. These women believed that they had been mischaracterized as bad students, rather seeing the ways that Whiteness functioned in this situation. African American women are challenging the system, yet they are still experiencing “bumps in the road” that must be overcome through diligence rather than questioning the role of race and gender in their experience.

Classroom Interactions

There was a consensus among the women that classroom discussions were a source of anxiety. Some women said that they felt pressured to speak when the topic of race arose in class. For instance, the women noticed that other students and/or faculty members looked to them to confirm or make statements about issues of race and gender.
In courses on race and ethnicity, they feel as though they are being singled out as “the race expert” (Banks, 2009; Feagin et al. 1996; Winkler-Wagner, 2009; Willie, 2003). Participants stated that when other students made inaccurate comments or generalizations about African Americans, they made comments and/or facial expressions, which embarrassed the other students. For African Americans, these moments place them in an awkward position. African American women feel an obligation to dispel stereotypes, yet when I asked students if they felt compelled to speak about issues of race, the women's responses depended on how they perceived their racialization.

Sonya said she felt comfortable speaking in class. Sonya is a senior majoring in business and is very active in Black organizations on campus and committed to empowering other African Americans.

Sonya: I felt comfortable because I felt like I have a responsibility. A lot of times White kids are so ignorant and they have no clue so when I have the opportunity I speak my mind sometimes a little too much. It’s like sometimes there are good things to say and it can open your mind about things but sometimes it can be too harsh and it kinda defeats the purpose. And they are not going to listen because they think that you are going to attack them.

These transformative spaces are predicated on Sonya managing her anger about how to approach White students on issues of race. She views her conversations with Whites as a way to change discussions about race that are based on stereotypes into discussions based on factual information. Additionally, she challenges students to see topics from a Black person’s perspective. Sonya interprets these discussions as spaces of
transformation. These transformative spaces show Sonya identifying herself as an activist building coalitions with White students. Sonya identifies herself as a teacher who hopes to bridge the gap between African Americans and Whites. Sonya thinks that if Whites gain more knowledge about African Americans’ experiences, then there would be more harmony.

Sonya seeks conversations about race as a moment for activism. Her desire to provide White students with information to change racial climate on campus compels her to speak. However, she must restrain herself in order to open the minds of White students or risk being marked as “that Black girl.” She does not voice her anger and resentment to White students but rather, she takes the opportunity to challenge negative stereotypes. Sonya does not attack White students in class even when she recognizes their comments are racist and discriminatory. Sonya follows the norms of the university’s socio-social practices, yet her message is one of racial pride that is designed to challenge racism. On the surface, she is following the rules of classroom discussions, but she actively pursues social justice and equality for Blacks in the process.

Though Sonya wants to make sure that White students are introduced to realistic perceptions of Black women, she is also nervous about asserting herself. Students of color may feel anxiety and frustration when speaking in class because they worry that by misspeaking or doing something incorrectly they will reinforce negative stereotypes (Banks, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2009) White privilege operates in this case because White students are not expected to know about Black culture. Black students are put in the position of potentially having to defend behaviors and practices that they may have limited knowledge about because Black culture is far from monolithic. Sonya’s choices
are limited by the need to not appear to be exaggerating the oppression of African Americans. She also walks the line between remaining composed and professional during these classroom interactions by not being too blunt, because she fears that her White classmates will dismiss her as “that Black girl.”

In addition, Denise feels a responsibility to speak about issues of race in her classes:

I feel compelled to talk especially when you are the only Black person in the room, especially in smaller classes. I took a community service class and we were discussing a lot of the race issues in class but I was not the only Black person in there. But I guess like 50 other students in the class, I know them and we were kind of talking about it and we felt like we were compelled to talk, especially me.

Denise also seeks to empower other Black students to “free their minds” to speak about issues of race in classes. Pointing out that she is the only Black person in class reveals that she has no expectation of White students to challenge stereotypes of African Americans. She is spurred on to speak in class because she feels she has no choice. She must be the instrument of change or else there will be no change. Her racialization causes her anxiety, but it also compels her to assert herself in courses, particularity when she is the only Black person present. Interestingly, all of the interviewees mentioned feeling nervous when speaking in class but they spoke out anyway. These women are conditioned to expect racial tensions in discussions about race, and they understand they may be misidentified as a person who is complaining instead of making a point. These narratives also illustrate the limited choices that these women have in order to not be
negatively stereotyped. Though they are frustrated, they must speak. Black women’s standpoints compel them to speak; however, this does not mean that they do not feel stress and anxiety. In some instances the more anxious they feel, the more compelled they feel to speak out.

Denise and Sonya’s counter narratives act to police identity because they are trying to disrupt and challenge stereotypes. Denise is aware that she is a racialized body in these socio-spatial interactions and that is what compels her to speak.

Not all of the respondents always challenged ignorant comments made in class. Some women preferred not to always have to speak on issues of race in the classroom. Some students were frustrated by the racist comments, but they chose not to engage in such conversations because it did not seem worth the energy. For example, Janet discusses being pressured to discuss race:

I make a point of not contributing because I do not like people putting me in that position. I do not necessarily like participating in every situation. I kind of avoid it. I kind of just talk about class and try to make good point when I participate.

Though these women attempt to assert their identity as well-rounded students, they are racialized whether or not they respond to issues of race. Janet wants to be identified as a good student rather than a good Black student who participates in a class discussion, rather than being assigned the role of talking about race. She feels racial tensions around discussions of race, but she is trying to avoid being reduced to a racialized body. Her attempts to assert agency over her identity illustrates the fragmented and partial identity that is inherent in the experiences of African American women.
Leslie made similar comments:

I have this rule. In my life I believe that you cannot argue with hate or blind ignorance. When we reach that level I am going to just disengage. Like okay if we are talking about the Middle East and someone says, “I hate those damn Arabs.” And I have been in a class where someone has said this before. Like I can’t, I can’t go there because we are not going to have a meaningful conversation. We are not going to change each other’s minds. We are not going to change each other’s perceptions.

Leslie’s frustration is triggered by the ignorance of other students. She is disgusted by other students’ blatant disrespect and overt racist comments. She distances herself from students who do not want to co-exist with other races. Racial slurs disempower and isolate minority students. Leslie does not try to be a teacher or bridge the gap between different races, and she develops spatial practices that distance her from people who are not inclusive. The student who expressed hatred of Arabs made it clear that he has nothing in common with other students of color and that he would not entertain any conversations about anything that he has in common with people of color. Overt forms of racism dismiss any chance of reconciliation.

These women’s silence is conditional and contingent on the spaces in which they interact (Thomas, 2011, 2009). Depending on the practices of each woman, silence can empower, control and/or cope with classroom interactions. In courses where there were many African American students or a Black instructor, the women felt more comfortable. Leslie’s disengagement from the classroom discussions about race depended on the personal and social practices of the other students.
All of the women indicated that they felt most comfortable on campus in the classroom. Interestingly, these women have developed classroom practices that depend on how they feel about being racialized. This implies that there is an expectation of racial tensions when discussing issues of race in the classroom. The women recognize that they are creating transgressive space when discussing issues of race and must negotiate social interactions. Their apprehension is inherent in their experience of dealing with issues of difference. Both groups of women were frustrated by the comments made about minority groups and felt racialized by them. These women stated that class discussions did not deter them from speaking. When topics of difference arose, however, the classroom became less comfortable.

**Invisible Whiteness and Academic Interactions**

In addition, marking Whiteness as invisible limits the discussions of race and culture in some majors. Students in biology and business classes said that they did not discuss race in class at all, accepting the lack of discussion as simply “the way it is,” rather than seeing the silence about race as itself a normalization of race.

There is also considerable anxiety about speaking about race in classes that do not emphasize race and gender. For the most part, these courses are stadium style classes (meaning that there are at least 100 students in the course and predominately lecture based). These women second-guess themselves before they speak in class. They question their abilities and feel pressure to perform in class. When students speak in this class they do not want to take a chance on being wrong because it will be attributed to their race. Valerie, a business major from Colorado, explains how people discuss issues of race in business:
People like to think there is only one color and it is green, that is what business people like to think; but I would say the only time, two times. Once in my marketing class we talked about ethnographic research and um Coffeemate discovered that many African Americans like to drink cream and sugar in their coffee, so they started running ads in *Essence* and they received a huge response that is about it. And then yesterday… I noticed that there is a lot more discussion about Africa than [about] African Americans, if that makes any sense. Yesterday we were discussing how China has started heavily investing in the African continent, and they have provided more aid then the United Nations ever could.

There is a lot of controversy – people say it is corrupt, but people have jobs and they are really turning things around. I think that it is really interesting like in the context of globalization people are more willing to talk about Africa but not really like African American, like the people who are always here are overlooked, but they are willing to talk about Africa.

Valerie’s comments reveal how color-blind ideologies are used to mark Whiteness as invisible in higher education. Racism can be overcome through hard work. Competition is the equalizer. Race is marked as invisible in discussion about success. Valerie has only a few incidences that involve race in the business school curriculum. The fact that Blacks aren’t part of the curriculum normalizes excluding Blacks from the curriculum. Valerie repeats this color-blind rhetoric until she thinks about how exclusionary these curriculum practices are in the business school. Students are expected to refrain from talking about issues of race unless they are prompted to do so by faculty. Additionally, business school rhetoric regarding issues of race minimizes the relevance
of race not only in the classroom, but also in the ways that Black students relate to others on campus.

**Asking Questions in Class**

Though participants are nervous about speaking in class, they “overcome” their anxiety. In biology and business courses, there can be at least 100 students in a classroom. African American women felt hyper-visible in these classrooms because they were usually one of only a few Blacks, yet they had questions that they could ask either in class or during office hours. They chose to ask questions in class. Asking questions can be defined as a sign of incompetence; however, these women recognize that it is part of being a successful student. Valerie comments on speaking in class:

> There have been some times, like yesterday it was a genuine question. I was not trying to ask questions; they know it all, like some of the kids they feel like all-star kids trying to get their shine on all the time. I had a legitimate question. It was that my teacher asked me a follow up question about “did I know the BRIC countries”6...“did I know what BRIC stood for” and then like I heard it was a handful of students, like how did I know that and it was in a huge lecture hall and like all of the students... I was kind of embarrassed... I felt yesterday like everyone was watching me you know I want to do well but sometimes could you at least pay attention to someone else?

Asking questions makes it possible for Valerie to engage with her teachers. In addition, she realizes that she knows more than other students in the course. Valerie’s

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6 The acronym BRIC is used to identify Brazil, Russia, India and China. These countries are all at similar stages of economic development and have the potential to develop into the world’s most influential countries.
hard work allows her to be prepared and not to care about other students' evaluation of her intelligence.

Alice makes a similar observation when discussing others' perceptions of her intelligence. Alice, a senior majoring in engineering, comments on her experiences with other students:

That is another thing that I don’t like is they have an arrogant vibe I don’t know. I think that they do approach me with a bias and kinda equate with me that I do not know what is going on because I ask the questions. I don’t project everything I know for no reason so, but I let them think what they want to think to be honest at the end of the day. I know this happened for my thermal class. I will look at the curve and I look at the test. I had a combination of wanting to laugh and wanting to cry because the test was mind-numbingly hard. People were leaving like it was hard but I think that I did great. They were putting me down like “Oh you did not get this one right, oh you did not get that one right. Oh man you are going to be messed up.” And the average on the test was like 42 I think and most of the class had probably below 50% on the test and only I think four people got above that and I got a 63 and I think I got like the 4th highest in the class, so obviously I know something. I guess that I could have been like them and been like I got a 63 on the test and everyone else failed so you know what I mean. I am one of these people “keep thinking that I am stupid, but I am on the other side of the curve pushing it up.”

Alice chose not to brag about her grades or her accomplishments, but she was no longer intimidated about asking questions. Initially, this narrative shows how African
American women’s confidence is constantly being challenged and undermined at PWIs. At first Alice automatically assumes that her answers to the test were wrong rather than questioning her fellow students’ response to the questions. Students feel they have the authority to tell Alice about her performance and to insist that she is going to be “messed up” because of her grade on the tests. These students are confident in their academic abilities and question Alice’s abilities as a student.

By the end of the narrative, Alice feels empowered because she makes one of the highest scores on the exam. Alice not only feels justified in answering questions in class, she also realizes that fellow students perceptions of her abilities have little to do with her actual academic abilities. Alice identifies herself as an achiever because of the grades that she earns in class and begins to place less value on the opinions of others.

Alice “picks her battles” and is confident that her grades are evidence of her intelligence. Alice resists the critiques of others and will not allow them to devalue her work. Indeed, we see here the demystification of the White male power structure as these women developing more resilience to criticism. Both Valerie and Alice are in competitive programs (business and chemistry), but they are not intimidated by the culture of silence when it comes to asking questions in class. Alice is “proving herself” as an achiever yet she does not need to tell others about her accomplishments.

Alice does not reveal to the White male student that she earned one of the top grades in the class, but it is clear that she is privately pleased with her accomplishments. Alice is out-achieving most of the Whites students, yet she does not openly flaunt her accomplishments. In other words, she gives the appearance of acquiescing to White male dominance, because she does not brag about her grades. She allows others to
publicly devalue her abilities, but does not allow it to prevent her achievements. This is not to say she is not affected by the constant questioning of her abilities, but rather that she does not crack under the pressure by under-performing and losing focus regarding their goals.

By appearing to be humble, Alice demonstrates that she has gained confidence in her abilities. Challenging stereotypes does not always mean that you have to “show” Whites that you are better, but rather, focus on showing yourself. Alice comments that people can “keep thinking that I am stupid,” but she is the one who is successful. She recognizes that she is being racialized, but she defines herself in positive terms.

**Group Projects**

Group projects outside of the classroom are not an ideal scenario for African American women. These social interactions present potential opportunities to be racialized by other students. Stacey states:

Sometimes I guess in my classes when we do group projects I think what I face is my statement may not be correct and I will have to get others to back it up or people will have to look in the book to make sure that it is correct. If I make a suggestion or people question me...they think that African Americans do not know what they are talking about when it comes to education.

Because of the ways that Stacey has been racialized in the past, she expects to be racialized in the future. In this instance, Stacey’s fears are realized because she has to get others to ”back her up” or she will be questioned. The social aspects of academics are what isolate them. In the classroom, students can sit where they like and interact if they choose to. In the classroom, Stacey’s intelligence is authenticated through her
grades and perhaps where she sits. In small groups, Stacey needs allies who will vouch for her. Her race presumably forces her to “prove herself” before she can be accepted and respected.

Tia echoes similar sentiments in her interactions in group sessions. Tia is a business major and she has had many negative experiences with Whites while attending Marion University. Tia explains:

I’m pretty much the only Black girl in a lot of times in my classes, so if we have group work, then I have to work with somebody from a different race. And, I mean I get along with people fine, I just think, being up here, I just realize that racism was still alive and well, unfortunately. I think that was the big thing. And, like, even, like, with work and things like that, like, I’m still most times the only Black girl, so…I get along with people fine, like, I don’t have a problem with you if you are White or Asian. I think it’s just that, I think I have a defense, like I have a wall, like, I won’t let you get too close just in case they turn out to be racist, or, I don’t know, that kind of thing. But I don’t think… there are people I’m close to who are outside of my race, so…

The option of being paired with another person of color is slim in Tia’s field. Tia does not doubt her abilities, but she is forced to reconcile herself to the fact that she will encounter discrimination at a PWI. Although she “gets along” with other people, she does not trust White students. Tia is untrusting of people from other races and works to police her personal boundaries just in case students are racist. For Tia, getting along is defined through ensuring that others keep their distance from her. She has been so racialized that she does not have any desire to associate herself with people outside of
her race. Thus, Tia’s self-segregation is more about avoiding pain rather than asserting racial solidarity. Segregation is more about how she can survive and an expression of hopelessness regarding the ability to and/or desire to overcome racism.

“*Self-segregation*”

Color-blind racism assumes that self-segregation by Blacks derives from their desire to be around people from their own race. This is a White interpretation of the phenomenon, however, as Whites do not recognize the ways in which they create spaces that are not safe for people of color. When African American women students are in groups with White students, they must constantly deal with having their intelligence and abilities questioned. Achievement for African American women is not simply about intellectual abilities; instead it is also about having the fortitude to cope with being racialized everywhere they go.

Because Black women feel racialized in these programs, they begin to form small groups of African American students to support one another. Their identities as activists propel them to be leaders and help other students in highly competitive programs. The groups and organizations that these women form are designed to help themselves and other African American students. These groups provide mentorship, encouragement, notes, course selection advice, and other resources. High achieving female students argue that they do not like studying with other students because they are serious about their work and do not like to socialize because it wastes time. The organizations and study groups that these women form are designed to assist African American students. Both Chelsea and Tia discuss the importance of these groups for Black students. Chelsea states:
The two clubs that I am involved in they are really good support groups. They do a lot to help keep women and Black people in science really because you would be amazed at like looking at the statistics. A lot of Black people come into the sciences and many of them change their majors to something else. I think that they get intimidated and I wanted to set up this organization like when you feel intimidated you have this organization where there are people going through the same things as you and you work together and help them push. You and help each other so you are not like…When you feel doubt or when you cannot do it anymore and you have someone telling out hey I am going through it too and suck it up.

Tia adds:
But when you do have African Americans in your class, you always tend to link up somehow, but… that always happens, just ‘cause you kinda are a familiar face after a while. And then, with business, everyone ends up being in the same classes anyway; so then you start to recognize people so you can sit next to people. It makes it a little more comfortable, I guess.

Finding ways to self-segregate is not simply about comfort, it is also about how segregation has become normalized. Tia states that she bonds with Black people in her course because they are “familiar faces.” African American students’ experiences with many White students makes them want to self-segregate. Tia states that in class she starts to see “friendly faces,” meaning she sees faces that are the same as hers. For Black women in my study, there was less boundary crossing, thus more hope of being defined as “whole” rather than being racialized subjects. These women can never fully
escape being racialized bodies, but they can create spatialities that remind them less of their status as outsiders in White spaces. Black women experience how segregative practices are acting on them through the policies and practices of the university, the formal and informal spaces that are designated for Blacks on campus, and social interactions that they have with fellow students. Tia looks for sameness and establishes spatialities of camaraderie with fellow African American students.

For these women, real friendships cannot be forged with Whites because they are untrustworthy. Tia perceives relationships with Whites as professional, meaning that she is friendly with Whites but she does not want to put herself in the position of being hurt or undermined by them. For instance, Tia has been so racialized that she has no expectation of forming real friendships.

**Conclusion**

Recognizing the importance of subjectivity is pivotal in understanding how these women consciously or subconsciously are influenced by their racialization. This racialization causes some women to question their interactions with Whites, but some interactions are just interpreted as misunderstandings, or as “just the way it is.” Black women recognize that there are factors that limit their social involvement on campus, but that does not prevent them from forming relationships. They sought relationships that connected with their personal and social interests, but were at times limited by how others chose to include or exclude them from integrating into the group. These women understand that not all social spaces provide inclusiveness and cultural acceptance. They understand that potentially they are always under observation and at risk of being attacked.
These women’s statements are not simply about spatial practices of higher education, but the way space is loaded with racialized and gendered practices that perpetuate segregation. Color-blind racism remains hidden and silently undermines integration and racial conciliation. The women desire to be perceived as equals, but Whites are allowed to use racist rhetoric that legitimizes undermining and dehumanizing African American women, and the power relationships undergirding these practices remain unasked. Color-blind racism also facilitates Blacks seeking solace around other African Americans because they fear opening themselves to be further racialized in relationships with Whites.

In all of these narratives, there is the spirit of resistance to stereotypes through achievement and self-presentation. These women view their individual accomplishments as evidence of their humanity and their right to be treated as equals by their White counterparts. They must endure doubts from other students about their intelligence in a society that racializes them and normalizes their failure. The fear of being racialized and stereotyped propels them to succeed, but it also causes stress and anxiety if they do not meet society’s expectations.
CHAPTER 6: SOCIAL SPACES

Marion University gives the appearance of a typical research one institution. It has about 45,000 undergraduate students and of this about 3,300 are African American students, about 6% of the total student body population at the time of my research. The university is more than just an educational institution for students: for many, it is also their home. The women who participated in my research had left the safety of their families for a temporary home that is deeply entrenched in White cultural norms. The move from a family to a campus home is spatialized by racial difference; home is a space that in usually dominated by relationships with African Americans and campus is a space that is predominantly White. Therefore, the women must orient themselves to a new racial environment where there are fewer opportunities to form safe spaces with other people of color.

As at other PWIs, racial tensions are normalized as “just the way things are,” that is, as natural occurrences with which the women must cope as individuals, to be resolved through fellowship and understanding, with the burden of resolution placed on them. This narrative marks as benign the systematic, cultural, and historic forces that continue to oppress African Americans. In the everyday lives of African American women at PWIs, these tensions have consequences, keeping them on edge. They must somehow negotiate these interactions without reinforcing stereotypes, but also by avoiding oppression whenever possible. The undercurrent of racial hostility occasionally boils
over into violence and overt forms of racism (Feagin et. al, 1996), as exemplified by a terrifying incident experienced by one of my respondents, to be discussed below.

The academically successful African American women interviewed for this study expend the majority of their time and energy on ensuring that they achieve in the classroom. They enjoy socializing, but they manage their time to ensure that they were prepared for their courses. In the classroom, they attempted to prove themselves by offering counter narratives to negative stereotypes of Black femininity, hoping that would earn them the right to be defined as individuals. The fluidity of academic, public, private, professional, and social spaces is evident in the ways that they are mutually constructed through the perceptions of students and their interactions at the university. As we shall see, in one space African American women can be both victims of discrimination and disempowerment and turn this space into a site of empowerment.

During my coding and analysis process, I followed processes for my social spaces chapters similar to those for the academic spaces chapter. I established codes for social spaces and then created smaller subthemes discussed below regarding how African American women cope with color-blind racism in social spaces. I examine the ways that social spaces are different from academic spaces. More specifically, I examine the “rules” that govern race relations when there are few if any consequences for expressing opinions regarding racism. While coding my data, I developed the following subthemes: a) interactions in residential spaces, b) friendships, c) social organization and d) conforming/resisting racialization. After I finished coding these major themes, I began to develop sub themes in each of these broader themes. Under the category of residential spaces are two subthemes: a) feeling victimized by racial tensions and b) feeling
resentful of being stereotyped. Under the category of friendships I identify: a) creating conditional and contingent relationships with White students and b) perceiving friendships with fellow African American students as “natural” and not an effect of colorblind racism. Under the category of social organizations I distinguish among the women’s experiences with both White and Black centered organizations, specifically: a) the reasons African American women have difficulty achieving positions of authority in White organizations, and b) the reasons African Americans “choose” to focus their primary attentions on African American organizations. Within the category of conforming to versus resisting the policing of their identity I identify two themes: a) the ways in which African American women challenge the policing of their identities by fellow students, and b) the ways in which they seek to be defined as more than a racialized body.

Table 3 below provides a visual representation of these categories and sub themes.
1. Residential Spaces
   1. African American women as victims of racial tensions.
   2. African American women’s resentment for being marked as “invisible” by fellow students.

2. Friendships
   1. Conditional inter-racial friendships.
   2. Friendships with fellow African American women.

3. Social Organizations
   1. Believing it is “natural” to self-segregate in social organizations.
   2. Attempting to become a part of the university while still feeling ostracized.

4. Conforming to/resisting racialization
   1. Resisting the policing of identities
   2. Seeking to be defined as more than a racialized body.

Table 3: Themes and sub themes in social spaces

In this chapter I analyze the ways my respondents discuss their non-academic relationships and interactions. I investigate the way these women process their socio-spatial interactions, and how they develop friendships and peer relationships. In the first section I discuss the particular perils of housing on campus for these women. Next I take up student government and other formal organizations. I examine what promotes and prevents many students from joining organizations outside of their comfort zone, which, in many instances, are connected to how they conceptualize their racial relations.
No Place Like Home: Black Women in Dormitories

For many White students, living on campus as opposed to with their families is a liberating experience. They are free of parental rules and oversight while at the same time having their physical comforts (food, shelter) provided for them. The dormitories thus become safe havens for them to experiment with making choices about when, where, and how to study, whom to date and with whom to socialize, when, where, and how to party or entertain themselves, and so forth. They are in a transitional stage between being dependent on their parents and being completely on their own, while at the same time enjoying a sense of safety similar to what living at home might provide.

For Black students, and Black women in particular, dormitories are not safe spaces. The freedom provided to White students also gives them the freedom to express racist attitudes; White freedom is fraught with peril for Black women. No longer under the protective shelter of their family homes, they must now share their most intimate spaces with people who may threaten to harm them, or at the very least attack their right to be on campus at all.

Silencing/resistance

African American women are the most vulnerable in residence halls and other places where both covert and overt racism occurs. During my time in the field, some of the women mentioned that African American students were receiving threatening letters in the mail from an anonymous source. The letters stated that Black students were not welcome on campus. Students on campus were angry and fearful and they pressured the administration to assure the safety of African American students. This incident set the conditions surrounding the frightening experiences suffered by two of my respondents.
One of my participants, Tia, lived on the north campus. Because she had attended a racially diverse high school and had not encountered any overt racism up until this point, she believed that people from different backgrounds could “coexist together.” However, after White males in the residence halls harassed her and other African American women in the dorm, this belief changed. The harassment escalated to the point that a friend of Tia’s and one of the White males almost had a physical altercation in the dorm. Tia recounts:

They wrote on our door; they wrote “monkeys.” I know that it is just a dorm room but that was my home for one year. For you to be that close and do that sort of thing to sit there and write that and you are on the other side of the door that made me uncomfortable.

She added:

My roommate’s boyfriend he loved R&B music and he would be blasting R&B music. I would come home and he is actually Asian then one day he was saying the word “nigga” because he did not know that I was in the room. That kind of thing makes you want to be around your own people and I had never experienced that before.

This first incident was intended to humiliate and dehumanize Tia and her roommate. The word “monkey” conjures historical meaning for all African Americans, casting Tia as an animal who lacks humanity, intelligence, and culture. Indeed, Tia recognizes how vulnerable she is. Her roommate’s friend’s use of "nigger" (for which he later apologized) also indicates his comfort with dehumanizing Blacks if he believed there would be no consequences. He could not get away with using the word in the
classroom or in the workplace, but clearly at the time he felt it was acceptable in private spaces.

Tia does not talk about how painful it was to walk to her room, which she describes as “her home,” and have it violated by another student. She does not raise her voice nor does she talk about her anger regarding the boldness of her fellow students. The pain and humiliation of being racialized also silences her; it reduces her to a racialized body. This body is under the threat of being abused and violated at the whim of a White student.

In addition, Tia’s interactions with her roommate’s boyfriend are disheartening because she mistakenly equated his love for rap with an affinity for African Americans. When her roommate’s boyfriend uses a racial slur to talk about African Americans without noticing that she is in the room, Tia connects the experience with all of her interactions with non-Black students. Someone may “seem nice” on the surface and appear to be accepting of Black culture, but that is not necessarily how they really feel. Tia’s feelings about race change drastically after these events; she becomes suspicious of people who are not Black.

Tia had expected college to be a place of toleration and respect, but she no longer believes that racial harmony is possible. Fearing violence, Tia moved to an off-campus apartment with friends. Being bombarded with racial hatred made Tia perceive herself as an outsider, and as one with no desire to become an insider.

In some ways this condition was liberating for Tia, but she also is fearful of being hurt and racialized and is more aware of how her race is read. Indeed, Tia unmasks the potency of color-blind racism: behind microaggressions and overt racist
acts is the threat of violence. The ability to make her college campus a “home” is difficult because Whiteness polices spaces on campus. With the exception of resident advisors, who are peers, there is no policing of this behavior. Tia expects safety and security in her dorm room; however, being attacked in her personal space proved to be life changing. These events forced Tia to cope with racism and the potential for violence.

The desegregation of higher education has not changed the traditional power dynamics. Because the picture of a monkey on Tia’s door can be “explained away” as the act of a few as opposed to being indicative of the potential for violence on campus, Tia’s fear, anger, and disillusionment are minimized. The result is that she no longer believes in co-existing with Whites.

Tia’s dorm is a White living space and she no longer believes that she can “carve out” a space for herself there. While the White students are free from surveillance, Tia is not. Rather, she has been placed under surveillance by White students. The students knew which room was hers and violated her personal space and her property by writing on her door. Because she is a minority she does not have the luxury of anonymity. She and her roommate are socially and spatially “out of place.” These incidents were reported, but no one in authority followed up, thus giving tacit approval to the students’ actions or at the very least suggesting that they were “no big deal.”

Despite these hostile incidents, the women developed socio-spatial practices that helped them to cope with this newly constructed (for them) space, taking into account their feelings about not being safe on campus. For instance, Tia does not pursue relationships with Whites and no longer lives in the dorm. By actively distancing
herself, Tia tried to avoid situations in which she could be victimized. Thus both Whites and Blacks police the space in the dormitories: Whites through intimidation, Blacks by seeking safer spaces.

This incident was by far the most blatant account of racism that I heard in the course of my fieldwork. However, other accounts, while less physically threatening, explain the more generalized discomfort felt by the majority of the research participants. For example, Lisa is also uncomfortable in her dormitory. Her experiences were by no means as traumatic as Tia’s, but still she has been made to feel like an outsider. Lisa states:

Our new resident advisor, she does not speak [to me], which I find to be very funny. We had a gay male and he was very friendly. So, every time she walks past me I just laugh, and it may be really ignorant but I don’t care. You know that I live here. I have been living here for two years and she came at the middle of last year. How do you not speak to all residents? I feel like telling somebody that you have a hall director that does not speak to your residents, but there is a lot of favoritism in the Arts. I can tell because they speak to [whom] they want to speak to. I am an Arts scholar and they pick their favorites. And their favorites are very seldom if ever Black, and I am fine with that too, but I may be a little bitter acting toward them, which I need to work on. You do not speak to me because you know that I am Black. But if I was little Susie with blonde hair you would probably be hugging me and asking how was class.

Unlike in the classroom, Lisa cannot use her intelligence and her ability to achieve as a proxy for challenging negative stereotypes. Outside of the classrooms,
interactions are not based on achievement, but rather by personal preferences. Lisa bitterly claims that favoritism is racially motivated. Her feelings are defined though her difference from White students and they reinforce racial tensions and segregation.

Lisa believes that if she was White, or rather, if she were the ideal feminine subject with blonde hair (blue eyed and middle class), White students would be more friendly and accepting. Lisa is middle class African American women with college educated parents and dresses and acts professionally, but the RA’s failure to speak to her and acknowledge her indicates to her that that the RA thinks Lisa’s not good enough.

Being trapped in a racialized body angers her. Lisa knows that she can never be defined as a “favorite” because she is Black, and thus, not the ideal. Her narrative reveals how Whiteness works to limit the subjectivity of African American women in social spaces at PWIs. By virtually all accounts, while academically successful Black women are exemplars inside and outside of the classroom, they can never be defined as the ideal.

Lisa believes that she is being ignored and denied basic courtesy because she is Black. Lisa’s position is a paradox. Her standpoint liberates her because she recognizes that her socio-spatial location is what marks her as different, rather than her worth as a person; yet, her standpoint is what limits her opportunities to identify herself. Yes, Lisa can self identify, but she cannot escape feeling her outsider status as an African American woman. Lisa’s standpoint both binds and liberates her.

In the dorms, students of different ethnic groups are forced to live together and confront stereotypes. Conversations about racism in the dorms enable them to see how deeply entrenched stereotypes of Black women remain. Lisa's laughing at the RA not only acknowledges his behavior but also shows its ridiculousness, making her visible.
Lisa admits being bitter, but she prefers not to be. Lisa’s implies that she wants to “rise above” her feelings of hostility toward her floor’s RA. Not being bitter could signify her desire to maintain existing socio-spatial practices when dealing with Whites on campus, but she is unsure of how to do this. Lisa’s interactions also reinforce her perceptions of herself as a racialized subject on campus; she is marked an outsider by some Whites in her dorm and the experience deepens her socio-spatial practices of interacting almost exclusively with African Americans.

**Resisting through Organizations**

Black feminist thought emphasizes activism to empower other members of their communities and to challenge norms and institutional practices (Collins, 2008). My respondents found ways of resisting that can lead to empowerment and the pursuit of change in the university. Taking leadership positions at the University empowers the women to empower others. Many of the women interviewed were involved in a variety of clubs and organizations. Some of them had found activities that they enjoyed. For many of the women, involvement entailed holding leadership positions. The statements below illustrate these women’s self-perceptions as students and their role in activities to improve their university:

Alice: I was active on campus, like I said, doing [Marion’s] leadership society, but I really had not taken an executive board position and I was involved, but I decided to be more involved. When I decided to join AKA, I decided that I was going to do something. I was thinking about vice president. I do not know how I became president. I wanted to have a leadership position. I really, really wanted to be a part of Marion University
Leslie: Yeah that is one of the things that I know that it is really shallow, but I will admit it. I can go to a place and know 10 people just because I get involved and one thing that I really did that I really enjoyed in “leader shape.” It is a thing for “top” – or whatever that means – students. It was great, it was for people that are super involved; and I love Marion University – that is something that I really enjoy … and getting awards, like I will do all of the service, but those are like my favorite things.

Women like Leslie see their involvement in student organizations as a means of demonstrating their school spirit and their appreciation to the university. Participants commented that the university had been “good to them.” These women want to feel as though they are a part of the university, despite their experiences of being racialized. They are grateful for the opportunity to be educated and want to feel as though they are a part of something by doing something positive for themselves and the university.

Both Leslie and Alice want to feel confident in their abilities to lead. When given the opportunities, both women excel in leadership positions and seek other avenues for leadership once they have proven to themselves that they can do the job. These women want to make changes to the university and feel as though they can be effective in the organizations they join.

Participating also means taking a position of leadership. Indeed, all mentioned different reasons for seeking leadership positions. They did not notice that most of these positions were in Black organizations or in organizations that needed to be re-established on campus, and so positions of power within them would be more open to their participation than in more solidly established organizations. Leslie enjoyed having
others on campus know who she was. Many of the organizations in which she was involved emphasized service and volunteerism:

I think that is fun to do the service, but [also] to be double recognized for what you are. I think that it is good to apply for those things to show the diversity because at Marion everybody is involved in certain things. I have not been involved in like traditional things, and so just … giving those organizations some limelight is important to me also.

Leslie claimed to love the attention and acknowledgement she received, as well as the work she did to improve the university. Amber’s desire to hold an executive position highlights her desire to improve her sorority’s reputation on campus. Though the White university can be isolating for African American women, they have created a niche for themselves through such means as developing organizations by and for people of color. For instance, African American sororities allow Black women the opportunity to socialize with one another and to set their own agendas regarding service (Giddings, 2007). These women are constantly looking for ways to achieve and distinguish themselves in both academic and social spaces, and they create spaces for themselves where none existed previously.

Nonetheless, my respondents were limited in their abilities to cross racial boundaries and become leaders. In non-Black organizations, they still faced racial tensions and the expectation that they must prove themselves and their leadership abilities because they are not White. They acknowledged racism and discrimination on campus but still affiliated themselves with these organizations.
In campus climate research, many of the African American women students interviewed said they felt like outsiders; however, the women interviewed for my own project had active social lives and worked to improve the university, and still they identified as outsiders. For example, Lisa identifies herself as an outsider. She does not have the social connections or economic status that other students have who are active in campus activities. Socioeconomic status, social connections and race are all preventing Lisa from gaining status in student government despite all of her efforts. Lisa feels racialized in student government:

There are no Blacks in undergraduate student government, either, because it is so political and you say, yeah government politics, but they are overly political when they run for president and stuff. Like there is so much money involved and it is like, “my mom is a lawyer and I can do whatever I want to do” and that kind of deterred me from running in that organization, and it was kind of disorganized. Marion is really not really welcoming to Black people. I mean like I love it as an individual and what I get from it, but it is not the most open-arms place, because everyone already has, “this is mine, this is mine.” They already have their claims on everything.

These factors all contribute to Lisa’s feeling different from other students, and yet she blames being racialized for her marginalization. Lisa defines the university as not welcoming to Blacks and cites identity politics that limit her involvement in certain organizations. Lisa is a self-starter and wants to work in student government, but she does not have the finances to fund her own campaign to compete with the other students. Lisa says that “everything is taken,” which signals to her that the climate in student
organizations is chilly toward her, and that she has difficulty transgressing spatial boundaries. Lisa sees few opportunities to prove herself, and she does not possess the social capital needed to cross these boundaries. The university is “claimed” by White students, and Lisa has difficulty competing for space in these organizations.

The multi-layered meanings of Lisa’s experience in student government can generate a wide range of emotions from isolation and anxiety to empowerment and excitement. Lisa claims that she has been unable to find a place in student government because it appears to her that positions were parceled out on the basis of authority and status. Her class, race, and gender limit her access to and status in this organization.

Lisa discusses her frustration with student government meetings, the racial tensions that she feels, and why she self-segregates: “It makes you not want to be around them … I do not even take off my coat when I go to the [predominately White] meetings. It is really hard to make me feel uncomfortable.” It also illustrates how disempowerment works in discussions about campus climates, because no one organization made a direct attempt to discourage Lisa from coming to meetings. Still, she did not have access to the political power needed to gain insider status. Lisa reinforced these socio-social boundaries, but was deterred from running for office despite her extensive leadership experience.

Lisa is outgoing and formidable, but she still feels racialized during meetings. She said she couldn’t find her niche because she feels as though these organizations are “chilly” toward Blacks. Lisa says that when she speaks to White people, in her experience they speak to her “like she is an animal.” Lisa not only feels as though she is being placed under observation and looked at as unusual, she also believes that people are not sure how to take her presence in the organizations. She feels like an animal on
display while trying to negotiate relationships with Whites. She wants to enjoy certain activities, but her desire not to be racialized and to be put under observations overrides her desire to join certain clubs and organizations.

Only one student, Emily, an economics major who had just transferred to the university, felt totally alienated while attending Marion University. She left her previous school because she did not feel connected to the university and hoped for a fresh start at Marion. When I asked her if she belonged to any clubs or organizations, Emily said:

Yep, I have tried to join some organization, but I have found some of the same type of things. Like for example, I joined the Campus Crusade for Christ, which is on campus on Thursday nights, and I feel kind of the same vibe as far as everybody is really kind of tight knit and very cliquish. So it is kinda getting to the point where I am looking outside of that group and looking at other options, because it is very hard to kind of break into a circle of friends that can congeal very well.

Emily’s isolation shows how women like her struggle with being outsiders. There is no space for Emily in these organizations, at least as far as Emily is able to see. Emily has established her identity as an outsider by going to movies alone and by not fitting into groups. Her inability to find an organization that suited her may mean that she was influenced by her own perception of race. The participants cannot put their fingers on why they do not fit in, but simply say that they do not fit in. Emily strongly desires to find a niche and build friendships with students on campus, but she has great difficulty with that. Asked if she had any friends at the university, Emily answered:
I usually end up going by myself… It is all…The whole thing about feeling like I am on the outside and sometimes I just feel worse when I am in a group and I am feeling like I am not fitting in. I would rather just do things by myself.

Both Emily and Lisa describe organizations as “cliquish.” However, Emily views it as a personal rather than a racial issue, while Lisa blames much of her isolation on her racism.

The more these women feel socially isolated and marginalized the more they view the university as cliquish. They seek smaller communities of people to accept them. Personal perceptions of the welcoming environment of specific organizations and the level of involvement the students have dictate the social spatial practices that they adopt. These social organizations are student run and organized; they have to work together for a common goal. People socialize, form relationships, and have fun. White students do not have to work with Black students and there are few if any consequences if they remain segregated by race.

**Friendships**

The consensus among participants in this study regarding friendships was that they connect with people whom they assumed shared their perceptions, morals, and thoughts about education. All of the women, except for Lisa and Tia, have White and other non-African American students as friends; however, most of them said their best friends were African American women. Janet, Lisa, Leah, Jada, Alice, and Amber said that they preferred the company of other Black women because, among other things, they did not have to explain cultural practices and meanings behind jokes, family relationships, and struggles with issues of race. The majority of the women said that
they were friends with people outside their race, but the people they considered their closest friends were African Americans (and in one instance African).

Stacey: I am finding that [close friends] are usually African Americans.

Jada: We can have different conversations and I do not have to explain the backstory. There are certain things that I do not have to say because they understand, and some of my White friends they are so mesmerized they just want to touch my hair and you know talk about things like that.

Janet: Well there are certain things that we can relate to one another that we have in common. Certain traditions that we can laugh and joke about which I cannot do as effectively with other friends even if I have known them for a long time.

Certain things only come up with certain people.

Familiarity with other African Americans is a clear indication of insider status within a group. Not having to explain or justify cultural norms and practices is important in these women’s friendships with other African Americans. For instance, certain jokes and topics are reserved for conversations with other Blacks. When they are among White students, they refrain from bringing up issues of race in order to prevent being marked as “different.”

These women’s desire to develop different types of friendships with an array of people indicates the complicated and fluid nature of their identities. They reserve the right to participate and form relationships with whomever they chose. Having non-African American friends does not mark them as less “Black,” but rather recognizes shared interests (Fries-Brit, 2000). For instance, Brenda said that most of her friends were White or non-Black, but these are people that she had met in the city. These
women liked having relationships with African Americans, but they were highly selective about with whom they formed relationships, whether Black or White. Sharing a racial identity was not sufficient basis for a friendship; these women sought friendships that were based on interests. African Americans also police space by ostracizing and socially distancing themselves from other Blacks who do not conform to certain practices. Brenda stressed the importance of not letting others’ views of African American women dictate her actions:

Christina: It seems that you form relationships based on your interest and not necessarily along racial lines.

Brenda: I was out with a friend. We were dancing to this kinda techno music and having a good time and were dancing and there were these Black guys there and they were looking at each other like, why is she dancing to this? I could see it in their faces and it puts up a wall between us because it might seem at first that I do not have anything in common with them. I like to do so many different things.

Brenda chooses to participate in a practice that some people consider “not Black” and bases her reactions on how she defines “Blackness.” She defines herself outside of conventional roles and stereotypes. Brenda feels racialized by other Black students because she participates in behaviors associated with White culture. Brenda stated that the men appeared to be placing her under surveillance and judging her negatively. Brenda on the other hand keeps dancing and defines for herself which types of activities she will participate in. Her ability to see beyond the racial boundaries makes her identity transient, situational, and subjective.
By developing relationships with Whites, Brenda made others question her allegiance to Blacks. These men had internalized the practices and norms of White society and they attempt to police Brenda’s behavior. This demonstrates the contested nature of identity, and the ways that gender, class, and race are contested within Black communities (Collins, 2008).

The women who have a majority of Black friends found security and comfort in these relationships. The socio-spatial practices of Black women operate within racial boundaries that they cannot change but that they can challenge. Though these relationships offer security, they illustrate successful Black women’s perceptions about cultural boundaries. These women have developed practices that are based less on choice and more on the policing of racial boundaries.

*Racialization/resistance.* Denise comes to similar realizations when she and her White roommates discuss their first impressions of each other.

Denise: I remember my first example is after my freshman year, and we got to know each other. Someone said, “What did you really think about when you first met them?” And we went around and I remember when everyone got to me and it was kind of like, oh okay well, I don't want to say this to you. Well, I thought I was going to have a really hard time understanding what you were saying you are going to be aggressive and out of sight?...I remember it's one of my first experiences at Marion I was just it kind of took me aback.

African American women cannot escape being negatively stereotyped. Denise’s White roommates express stereotypical images of Black femininity. The dorm makes it possible for students to have honest conversations about race; however, Black students
are stunned by what Whites really think about them. Denise assumes that she was viewed as a new roommate and the same as the other students. Denise assumes that there is no vetting process in social relationships. Denise is the only roommate to whom the other students felt awkward expressing their perceptions, because the White students acknowledge that their perceptions are based on stereotypes of Black women. Denise is again trapped in her racialized body with no hope of truly over coming the ways that people perceive her. Denise has presented herself in ways that she deems respectful, but that does not matter in other people’s analyses of who she is- they simply see her race.

Conformity/resistance

African American women do conform to color-blind racism. They want to challenge racism, but sometimes they develop practices that reinforce these norms. They minimize how much racism influences their experiences and allows Whites to be defined as victims of “reverse-racism.” For example, Whitney is a bi-racial student who works as a resident assistant, or RA. Students are unsure of her racial identity. Whitney says she has “insider status” because White people think that they can speak to her about race and that she will agree with them. Whitney describes an exchange with White women resident assistants:

There is this one girl and I love her to death but she came up to me. And one of our co-RAs was getting a lot of recognition because she was a really great residence advisor, really cared a lot about her floor, and had the highest GPA. And she said I feel that she is getting a lot of recognition because she is a Black female and it is based on her race, and I am sitting here like are you serious did you really just say that to me? And that happens a lot, though, and people just say
what is on their mind and they will say, “Oh, Whitney will kind of understand” because my mom is White you know and everything and “she will get it you know.” She will get that they were frustrated and stuff and they will say that to me without thinking and it kind of hurts and it really does hurt me, but I mean I try to be kind of sympathetic, like, why do you feel this way blah blah blah.

Well she does have this and that and try not to blow up at her because I try to see it as an opportunity to educate quote unquote versus scaring her to death and not being able to talk about those issues.

That Whites are comfortable speaking to Whitney in negative terms about race racializes her success at the university. Whitney does not want to be granted this insider status with White students regardless of its basis. The comments from White RAs racializing another Black woman in Whitney’s presence upset her because the White woman sees Whitney as “the same.” Whitney is stunned by the things that the White resident says about an African American woman who is doing her job. Whitney is being Whitened by other White RA’s in their discussions about a Black RA who is receiving accolades for doing her job well. Whitney does not like her “privileged” position.

Whitney admits that it hurts her that White students would undermine another Black woman who is doing her job. Their complaint seems to be that excellence by a Black woman should not be applauded because it is the exception and not the rule. White RAs are always exceptional and their accomplishments go unnoticed.

Whitney also offers comfort to fellow RAs and asks them about their feelings in order to try to be “sympathetic” to the White resident advisors. She offers an ear to listen to these women’s concerns and frustrations about a fellow Black woman who is
accused of receiving accolades she does not deserve because of her race, and Whitney does this with little to no regard for her own feelings. Whitney interprets the statements as the usual excuses from Whites that justify mistreating and vilifying African Americans. Whitney does not agree with the women’s statements and is deeply hurt by them, but she does not voice her pain and anger. It seems that the more overt forms of racism that these women encounter and the less hope that they see for reconciliation, the more silent they become regarding their feelings on race. Whitney recognizes color-blind racism, but she does not openly challenge their racism or express how frustrated she is with their comments. Whitney’s silence or lack of reactions about issues of races does not empower her, but rather further reinforces and normalizes Whiteness.

These young women spent most of their time and made most of their social and professional connections on the university campus. Because of their multiple and complex subjectivities, these women encounter a variety of people. When the women who had a majority of friends who are non-Black were asked why they did not have more Black friends, they said it had not been a conscious decision. However, individual constructions of subjectivities influence the drawing of racial boundaries and the formation of relationships. Black women who had positive interactions with non-Black students enjoyed socializing with people of other racial and ethnic groups and were more open to interracial friendships. In contrast, other Black women felt pressured to refrain from developing friendships outside of their race.

These women feel pressure to self-segregate because that is what is normal and acceptable for Blacks. African American women in my study felt racialized by other African American students.
Amber: I thought that I was being hypocritical but I am glad that I know that now because I met people that were so different from me yet so similar. Yeah I think it is important to have groups of both friends. I think that is important to have Black friends because you need someone to really understand you but I think it is important to have people from different groups.

Jada: What I was talking about earlier when I was saying feeling pressure to have Black friends because they are Black. I found that I made friends so much easier when I just made friends and [didn’t worry] about having to make friends with [just Black] people. I am so much happier now. I am so much happier I just see people and I do not see this master status of race.

However, the fact that Jada, sociology major minoring in dance, wants to form friendships with non-Whites and claims that race does not play a factor in her decisions is problematic. Race and racism are what drive her to create a “race-free space.” The pressure to negotiate boundaries created by Blacks and Whites is difficult and frustrating, and Jada states that she is “happier” when she just forms relationships with people without regard to race (McNay, 2008). Jada is happier when she can ignore power relationships that cause the tensions that make her want to ignore race and difference. She cannot overcome the spatial practices but rather marks them as invisible. She ignores the barriers that prevent her from feeling pressured to “chose” and/or acknowledge that she is asked to choose to self-segregate herself from Whites.

Jada says that she just “sees people,” but she is aware of her race and how she is treated because she is an African American woman. Nevertheless, she states that she does not see race as “the master status.” Jada argues that she feels pressure to form
relationships with other African Americans and to police their interactions with people who are not African American. Jada did not stay in the dorm specified for Black students, emphasizing her desire to make her own choices regarding friendships. Jada insists that race does not play a role in her decisions to make friends. However, race is inherent in all socio-spatial interactions, and I believe Jada is trying to articulate her desire to not have either African Americans or Whites control the relationships that she forms. She wants to feel free to make the choices how and why she polices relationships.

Indeed, Jada does not see her differences from White students as so large that she avoids forcing friendships with her White friends, and does not allow others to racialize her. Contrary to traditional assumptions, Jada’s racial identity is not validated by forming relationships exclusively with Blacks. These women’s racial identities are important to them, but those relationships do not necessarily dictate who they are or with whom they will associate. The kinds of relationships that African American women form with non-Whites are dictated by the ways they construct spatial practices.

Many of the women said that they did not discuss race with their White friends and insisted that the subject “never came up.” The ideology of color-blind racism allows the formation of cross-race relationships and makes it appear that race is not a central issue in them. However, the fact that race is generally not discussed is actually evidence that racism is in fact a factor: concern that discussion of race will lead to misunderstandings and racial tension marks the invisible nature of intransigent racism in a “color-blind” society. In the interest of maintaining the outward goal of “racial harmony,” both sides silence themselves. Though these women seem to have crossed
racial boundaries, they merely mark their racial identity as invisible. Resisting normalization of racial tensions on college campuses does not mean that Blacks and White cannot be friends, but rather, they must develop practices that do not promote and/or limit discussions of race.

**Conclusion**

A key finding of this study is the way that the women in this study sought safe spaces outside of White surveillance and control to prevent further victimization. Collins (2008) defines safe spaces in part as Black female communities and relationships (e.g., mother/daughter bonds, friendships, etc.). Additionally, Black women seek refuge among African American women because they have they experience similar oppression and surveillance in society. Collins (2008) argues, “These spaces simultaneously remove Black women from surveillance and foster the conditions for Black women’s independence and self-definition. When institutionalized, these self-definitions became the foundation to politicalized Black feminist standpoint” (p. 122).

How these women form and express their identities is influenced by the kinds of spaces in which they interact. For instance, Tia reconsidered her understanding of race relationships and how she interacted with students who were not African Americans. Tia and Lisa experienced the dorm as racialized space where they had few means of defending themselves. The dormitory was not a space for them to form friendships and develop close bonds with people; they had been forced to live among people who resented their presence, so they had to redefine themselves and/or seek out safer forms of home.
Collins recognizes the need for Black women to develop spatial practices that promote their individuality and uniqueness. She argues that safe spaces for African American women are under attack because of color-blind racism. Members of oppressive groups challenge the validity of having African American groups because they are excluded from them and cannot place Black women under observation (Collins, 2008). These groups are under attack because the stratification of African American women into different classes, regions, and levels of education has created different levels kinds of spaces to which oppressive groups have restricted or no access.

African American women are influenced by color-blind racism differently from White women. Some of the women transgress racial boundaries to form friendships outside of their race; however there is diversity in how and why Black women in my study develop these relationships. They develop relationships, join organizations, try new activities because they do not want to be limited by others perceptions of their race and gender; however, these women do, at times, feel stifled and policed when they cross racial boundaries. In short, they work very hard at resisting boundaries that restrict them from achieving their full potential, while at the same time they create boundaries that protect them from the pain of racialization. Sometimes the boundaries of one coincide with the boundaries of the other, thus recreating and reinforcing racialization by the very process of resistance.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I applied Black feminist standpoint theory and feminist geography to construct a framework for understanding the processes whereby academically successful African American women students construct their identities while attending PWIs. I argue that African American women walk a tightrope due to their anxieties about trying to be successful at PWIs while at the same time struggling with being constantly racialized. On the one hand, they constantly worry that their actions are interpreted from within racist frameworks; on the other hand, they must act as if a meritocracy actually exists. They know from experience that meritocracy is an illusion, and yet they must believe in it – or at least pretend that they do – in order to succeed. They fear most of all being honest about their experiences out of concern that the honesty will be misinterpreted – that they could be accused of “playing the race card” in order to get sympathy, or that they will be seen as “that Black girl” – presumed to be unjustifiably angry. Consequently they feel barred from speaking honestly about their feelings with the people who have hurt them. They are afraid that such honesty will end up hurting rather than helping them. And so they suffer in silence, receiving whatever support they can from their Black cohorts and from the very few White people they feel they can trust.

This study reveals that African American women experience racialization and discrimination in multiple spaces on campus. I argue that the normalization of racial
stereotypes, and the expectation by White students and faculty that Black women will not succeed academically, result from color-blind racism. Color-blind racism normalizes the dehumanization of academically successful African American women.

White privilege allows the questioning of Black women’s academic credentials on campus. Black women students expect other students to openly challenge their ability to achieve, and that is a source of resentment, anger, and frustration for Black women. They believe that White students dismiss those feelings as hypersensitivity and/or, in the popular parlance, as “playing the race card” – in short, minimizing and invalidating those feelings, taking their own measure of reasonability from the standpoint of White privilege, as if Black students were incapable of seeing and accepting the truth. If White students perceive Black students’ feelings as invalid, it must be so. By privileging White perspectives or by failing to counteract them, the university also disregards the particular knowledge and experiences of African American women students. It invalidates those experiences when it defines the problem as one for individuals to solve, placing the burden on the shoulders of individual Black students. This creates an impossible burden for African American women students, who are always already walking a tightrope between appearing to be “that Black girl” who can’t possibly succeed on her own merits, and losing their status as successful Black women by calling out color-blind racism for what it is, risking the possibility that the other hateful category, “that angry Black woman” will be applied to them.

Running throughout all of the narratives of the women who participated in my research is a spirit of resistance to racist and gender stereotypes about Black femininity. These women view their individual accomplishments as evidence of their humanity and
their right to be treated as equals by their White counterparts. They constantly endure doubts about their intelligence in a society that racializes them and normalizes their failure. The fear of being racialized and stereotyped propels them to succeed, but it also causes stress and anxiety if they do not meet the expectations of color-blind society.

Black feminist standpoint theory states that Black women’s identities are fragmented and partial because they are always in the state of becoming. This fragmentation affects the ways that African American women position themselves in relationships and how they develop practices. This partial and fragmented identity makes African American women seek a variety of communities and relationships in order to find spaces that do not place them under surveillance and/or at least provide them with a level of anonymity. As revealed by the subjects of this study, it is clear that Black women develop home spaces and spaces of camaraderie in opposition to predominant White racial formation. Their socio-spatial identity practices seek to reconfigure the qualities of Blackness on a White campus.

The multiple meanings of social spaces at the university are illustrated through the women’s recognition that, while there may be spaces where they can feel they belong, there is always the potential to be cast out or to feel isolated in these relationships and contexts. Despite expressing feelings of isolation and their experiences with racism and discrimination, many felt some affection for Marion University and see it as a locus for potential change. They know that they cannot escape racism, but that does not deter them from wanting to improve the university through their service and/or contributions. In organizations dedicated to those improvements, these women felt a sense of belonging when they were able to set the agenda and participate in events.
By their very presence and success on campus, the women in this study challenge negative stereotypes of African American women. They seek to be defined as “ideal students” and say they must work twice as hard as their counterparts in an effort to earn some of the privilege that is automatically ascribed to White students. In response, these women create a professional persona in which they accept that they have to be twice as good as their White counterparts, and they must dress professionally and gracefully negotiate being racialized on campus.

Racial climate concerns and other forms of discrimination did not prevent these students from forming relationships with non-Black students. There is a strong belief among academically successful Black women that if fellow students “just got to know them,” then they would like them and be able to see past their racialized bodies. This belief creates a sense of self-responsibility and a burden to be perfect and ideal, simply to be afforded an opportunity to be considered equal by others. Although their narratives revealed an undercurrent of pressure from other African Americans to make their racial identity the primary criterion in their relationships, these women formed their own criteria about with whom they chose to interact, not only as an expression of personal choice, but also as an illustration of the way they chose to define and express their racial identities.

**Paradoxes of the Racialized Body**

The day-to-day experiences of the women in this study illustrate the difficulties encountered in the effort to be defined outside of negative stereotypes. These women react differently depending on how they perceive relations and others in academic spaces and social spaces. They are aware of the specificities of different campus spaces and
how they must adjust their own identity and practice to conform to predominant 
Whiteness. They attempt to prove that they are deserving of individuality and humanity 
by achieving in school and illustrating their professionalism in their interactions on 
campus, yet they are not defined as “the same” as their White counterparts. This 
sameness is seen as a way to strive to be defined as a good student and all of the 
professional and social accolades that are attached to this identity. African American 
women are not seeking to be White and/or “acting White,” but rather, they want to 
access the privileges that accompany the definition of exemplary student.

Black women’s standpoint causes them to recognize that they are treated 
differently, and that recognition leads them to challenge the system. At the same time, 
in order to survive, they must accept their social and spatial locations on the margins. 
These women develop their self-definition and self-validation through acknowledging 
that their social devaluation does not reflect their individual capabilities but rather 
reflects the racism and sexism of society as a whole. Without this standpoint, African 
American women would have no sense of their value. In addition, they would not be 
able to withstand the constant attacks that they endure at the hands of a system that seeks 
to oppress and subjugate them.

These women’s methods for challenging the higher educational system are not 
developed in a vacuum, but rather are mediated through American cultural practices and 
values. This means that the lenses of color-blind racism affect them. These women do 
not fully see the ways that they are oppressed because their identities are partial and 
fragmented due to their oppression. Black women are influenced in conscious and 
unconscious ways by color-blind racism, which causes them to challenge, reinforce and
reproduce it in social interactions. Color-blind racism gives these women the illusion that they can “overcome” many issues of difference through hard work and diligence. They are heavily invested in being independent and in challenging stereotypes of African American women. They are so invested in color-blind racism to the extent that they have incorporated some of the rhetoric of color-blind racism into their practices regarding in how succeed at PWIs.

There is a paradox because their standpoint makes them challenge power and question why they are outsiders; yet it is also what makes them invest in color-blind racism because they have constructed ideas about equality, merit, and work ethic that are inherent in their investment in achieving equality and first class citizenship. On a daily basis, African American women are seduced into believing they are about to overcome their racialized bodies, only to be taunted and tormented by fellow students who will never allow them to fully escape their bodies. Nonetheless, they are able to assert a level of agency in their social interactions. They are able to choose with whom they interact, but it should always be understood that their choices are limited. The ways that these women cope with being racialized is spatially contingent on how they perceive their racialization and how they identify themselves in these social interactions.

**Paradoxes of Silencing**

The women in this study desperately want to be defined as more than their racialized bodies and feel deep-seated resentment against being racialized. Their silence is conditional and contingent on their socio-spatial interactions. Also, their silence can be interpreted as demonstrating confidence because they know their level of intellectual abilities and do not feel the need to prove themselves. African American women “pick
their battles” regarding when and how they assert their intelligence. In some instances, silencing is a way that Black women empower themselves; other times it is a way of silently falling prey to racialization.

Some Black women are compelled to speak about issues of race in academic spaces. These women see a role for themselves in teaching Whites about their race and/or forming potential coalitions with members of other races who feel compelled to speak. African American women believe that their experiences and knowledge about African American culture matters and will be respected by fellow students. They know they must restrain their anger, fear, and resentment in order to be spokeswomen that appropriately “represent the race.”

When Black women are robbed of the illusion of “overcoming racism” they sometimes silence their resentment by not discussing their feelings and by explaining away these negative interactions as simply “the way it is.” Conversely, some Black women view their silence as an act of activism also because they want to be defined as “a normal student.” These women do not want to simply speak about issues of race but rather, their silence speaks to their desire to be defined as more than their race. Their silence speaks to their desire to be defined as an individual and “the same” as their White counterparts in the sense that they want to be an individual. Additionally, these women’s unconscious resentment over having to be “the race expert” in the class itself challenges the notion that African American women can be experts only on issues of race.

Black women silence themselves because they sometimes feel frustrated because they are trying to “overcome” their racialized bodies. When they form relationships
with people who are not members of their own race and then find that their friends racialize them through negative stereotypes, their illusion that they can overcome being racialized is shattered. These women face anger, pain, and anxiety over how they will react to being reduced to racialized bodies. Publicly they seek ways to disprove how deeply affected they are by stereotypes, and yet they reinforce their marginalization by silencing their racial resentment as “the way it is.”

In the classroom, some of the participants feel compelled to speak on issues of race, because they want to be a good representative of their race. They view themselves as teachers to White students and take responsibility for challenging inaccurate and/or racist comments. They attempt to temper aggressive responses for fear of being marked as an angry and complaining Black woman by Whites. Other participants said that it was not worth their time to comment on issues of race because too often White students were incapable of holding intelligent conversations about issues of diversity.

Academic spaces are not spaces where women of any color can be aggressive, and these women must be careful to walk the line between asserting their points (if they feel compelled to speak) and not causing too much racial tensions (thus alienating Whites). These women’s sameness to their White counterparts is predicated on their finding a balance with which they are comfortable in academic spaces, or risk losing the privilege that they have earned due to their academic success.

In social spaces, African American women experience similar feelings as they cope with being racialized. These women often avoid conversations about racial difference with people who are not members of their race. When issues of race are brought up (usually by Whites) Black women feel racialized by these comments. Black
women are still forced to prove themselves but they are stripped of the same privilege that they receive in academic spaces. Academically successful African American women’s academic performance is not really relevant in social spaces. Students are more open about excluding Black women from their residential and social spaces. They conditionally accept the policing of their identities by not voicing their opinions about race and discrimination. African American women are more vocal and assertive about policing their social spaces and challenging people that disrespect them.

Choosing different approaches toward self-expression exemplifies the contingent and situated nature of identity. These women identify themselves differently in different social spaces, for instance as successful student or as African American students. Thus, they define their agencies in order to avoid what they see as racial vulnerability. These women appear to be unaware of the conscious and unconscious ways that they are identifying themselves in different spaces. They do not always recognize how they react to their racialization on campus, which can affect their self-esteem.

Academically successful Black women’s desire to be defined beyond their racial identities causes them to seek “sameness” with White students to avoid being racialized. This sameness is defined through women’s abilities to recognize and adhere to White codes of conduct and social norms, but the women studied here were not always aware of the conditional and contingent interactions regarding race and gender on campus. They reacted to events at PWIs that are specific to the ways that they frame their experiences and thus their reactions and perceptions of racialization are situational and spatially contingent. Black women’s subjectivity is not created in a vacuum but is
influenced by the socio-spatial practices and processes with which that these women interact.

**Paradoxes of Sameness**

Academically successful African American women attempt to prove their “sameness” to White students by achieving in the classroom, relying on the promise of meritocracy that hard work will produce success. The sameness that African American women seek is tied to being defined as an individual. This individuality, ironically, is tied to the sameness inherent in earning the privilege of Whiteness – or rather, of not being stereotyped as “those Black girls.” These women prove their worthiness for individuality by being exemplary students, as well as morally upright, encouraging, and supportive colleagues. The tragedy of such an effort is that Black women can never approximate the goal of individuality in a color-blind society, as individuality itself is idealized as autonomous and masculine Whiteness.

At the same time, academically successful Black women experience pressure from other African Americans regarding how and when they cross-racial boundaries. These women believe that they should have a choice regarding the friends that they have and the activities that they are involved in. This does not mean that African American women do not feel as though other African Americans judge them, nor that they are not placed under observations and judged for these choices. Black women react differently to this racialization by enduring this tension and forming coalitions with individual non-Whites or defining forming relationship relationships with Blacks. These women encounter the policing of boundaries by Blacks also and must develop ways of negotiating these relationships.
Academically successful African American women students also participate in the racialization of other Black women students. Some participants in the study perceived negative attributes of Blackness in other students and worked to challenge and distance themselves from women that subscribe to this behavior. They worked to police how African American women’s identities are perceived and expressed by other women. They were not fully conscious of the ways they are influenced by color-blind racism.

These women work hard to challenge stereotypes and are unforgiving of Black women who do not subscribe to the behaviors of color-blind individuality and/or make missteps.

**Self-Segregation**

The campus climate literature argues that there are racial tensions on campus between people of color and Whites, and that colleges and universities should create more inclusive environments. In many instances, predominately White universities emphasize their desire to promote diversity on campus, but these institutions of higher education do not problematize how diversity is defined or what it would take to change the culture of the university.

African American women constantly negotiate spaces of “diversity” on campus, but their success is contingent on the level of power that they can assert in social and academic interactions. Academically successful African American women seek to develop relationships that empower themselves and other students. In academic spaces, participants formed clubs and study groups with other African American students. These groups are designed to aid Black students in navigating through their respective programs through offering advice and support. These groups created spatialities of camaraderie through educating and empowering students to feel comfortable in a group
of members of their own race. These spaces offered alternative and more welcoming spaces for Black students (particularly in more competitive majors).

However, while these groups offer solace and camaraderie, they also reinforce segregation on campus. Segregation is a phenomenon that results from spatially controlling Black students at PWIs. Paradoxically, while providing safe spaces for students of color, segregation nonetheless reinforces racial hostility and racism by making it appear to be “natural” and the result of freely made choices. African American women students’ “choice” to self-segregate is a consequence of White spatial practices that are perpetuated through microaggressions, racial hostility, and the policing of identity. Scholars who fail to recognize the process whereby self-segregation becomes necessary promote the assumption that spaces are not raced and gendered; it reinforces the illusion that space is neutral and not influenced by White spatial practices that racialize African American students.

Race, gender, and class are reflections of broader social and spatial ordering. The practices that are reproduced on college campuses are interconnected to larger spatial practices of American education system and society that are marked as normal. Black women making “choices” to associate with certain groups becomes an expression of the intersections of their identity. These women still find ways to segregate themselves and “choose” to select into groups that serve as a proxy for their allegiances on campus. These women cannot escape the ways that institutional practices shape their experiences because these campuses limited the choices that these women can make in the ways that they can identify themselves.
Black women do seek ways to transgress and cross racialized and gendered boundaries on campus. However, their narratives express fear, anxiety, and pain when they cross boundaries. These women feel marginalized, yet it is not a reason for them to not participate in groups, develop friendships, or have living situations that are predominately Black. The intersections of women’s identities dictates how and why women chose to cross these boundaries. Some students enjoyed participating in activities (e.g., dance, anime, gymnastics, etc.) that are dominated by White students. Their interest in activities makes these women focus on the activities and on finding people in these organizations who are “like minded.” Black women create spatialities of camaraderie in these organizations, but they are limited in the ways that they discuss issues of difference.

**Suggestions and Future Research**

Racial tensions and segregation should not be normalized on college campuses. Administrators, faculty, staff, and students should develop ways to create more inclusivity on campus. The burden of resolving racial tensions should not be on the shoulders of African American students, but rather should be shared by all those inhabiting the spaces of education. Black women should not be asked to shoulder the burden of being the “the race experts”; instead, these women should be allowed to contribute to conversations about race in ways that do not pressure them to represent an ideal of racial uniformity. PWIs should not expect Black students to overcome issues of racial tensions through individualized practices, but rather universities should work to stop racist socio-spatial practices based on the assumption of Whiteness and its privileges. Administrators and faculty members must do more than stay up to date with
their fields of study; they must also be expected to be aware of the latest research on issues of diversity (race, gender, disabilities, etc.). Indeed, to the extent that their fields warrant it, the subject of racial and other inequalities must be integrated into the design, of their curricula. For example, a class on mass media – even a general, introductory course – should include the ways in which race, class, gender and other relations of power form the ground of what appears in the media, and indeed form the foundation of knowledge production, whether in the media or in scholarship.

Students should be made aware of the importance of policies that promote diversity and plurality of experiences and the history that justifies those policies. Black women should not be victims of racial and gender violence on campus. It is essential that policies and activities designed to promote inclusiveness not be packaged as benefitting African American students alone, but rather should be targeted toward all students. For instance, complaints of discrimination, both overt and covert, should be taken seriously rather than marked as an overreaction to normalized racial practices. These complaints are not simply about issues on college campuses, but rather reflect the spatial realities of African American women in society as a whole.

Future research should emphasize the importance of space and relationality in the construction of subjectivity of Black women. This would allow for more expression of difference for academically successful women and for women who are perceived as different from them. It would be interesting to see how African American women develop and express subjectivities that allow them to not only cross boundaries but to challenge them. It would also be helpful to understand how academically successful
women experience anxiety yet manage to participate in activities that are not associated exclusively with African American women.

Future research can include comparing the narratives of African American women who are successful versus African American women performing at different levels at PWIs. These studies could lead to how more information about how subjectivity influences how different Black women understand and define achievement in higher education.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

All interviews will be open-ended. These are sample questions that guided the topics that were addressed with participants. Follow-up questions were asked during interviews in order to clarify incomplete or ambiguous responses.

1. What made you decide to attend [unnamed university]?
2. How do you view the importance of education?
3. Why was it important for you to attend college?
4. Are you the first person in your family to attend college? If so, what does that mean to you?
5. What made you choose your major?
6. Have your reasons for obtaining a college degree changed over time? If so, why?
7. Did you always make good grades in school or was there some event that changed your perceptions about your academic ability? Explain.
8. When do you think that you started to know that you were an excellent student?
9. Before you walk into a classroom, do you have preconceived ideas about what to expect when you interact with other students and faculty members? Are they usually proven to be true? Give me some examples.
10. Was there ever a time in class that you felt uncomfortable speaking or contributing because you are Black?
11. Have you been unfairly challenged in class? Describe the event for me and what was the result?

12. Do you feel compelled to speak when issues of race and/or gender are discussed? Tell me what happens when these issues come up.

13. Do you think teachers value your contributions in class?

14. How are your interactions with faculty? Do you have some examples of interactions that made you uncomfortable or upset? Happy?

15. While in college, how have you learned to deal with difficult people and/or situations? Explain.

16. Have there ever been times when you felt as though you did not perform well in class? If so, tell me what happened and how the situation was resolved.

17. How do you view obstacles, whether academic or personal? And how do you respond to them?

18. Has there been a time when you knew that you were discriminated against while attending this university? How did you react to the situation and what did you learn from it?

19. In what places do you feel most comfortable and why?

20. In what places on campus do you feel the least comfortable and why? Do you avoid any places on campus, and when?

21. How would you describe your social interactions when dealing with people that are not African Americans? Are there topics that you tend to avoid during these discussions?
22. How important do you think it is to socialize with other African Americans? Do you actively seek opportunities to socialize with other African Americans?

23. Do you participate in any social or mentoring programs outside of your major?

24. Have you made friends in these organizations? Do you participate in meetings?

25. Who are the people in your life that have taught you about what is important in life and how to survive in the world?

26. What types of characteristics do you look for when asking advice or adding someone to your support network?

27. Has your experiences in higher education given you more confidence in yourself and your academic abilities? Why or why not?

28. How do you think your college experience has changed your perceptions about being an African American women in an majority White institution or place of employment?
APPENDIX B: E-MAIL/ PHONE SCRIPT TO ADMINISTRATORS, FACULTY, AND STAFF

Hello,

My name is Christina Haynes, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Policy and Leadership. I am doing research on successful African American women students at the college level. My hope is to explore the experiences of African American women to understand their experiences in higher education and to create more diverse and complex representations of these women. My research stems from my personal desire to reflect on my own experiences as an African American woman attending at a predominately White institution. I am e-mailing in the hopes of meeting with you to help me recruit students because of your organization’s/ office’s commitment to servicing African American students, (particularly African American women, if applicable). For my study, I am looking to interview Black women with junior or senior status with a GPA of 3.0 and above. At your earliest convenience, I would like to meet with you to discuss introducing myself to members of your organization and connecting with some African American women that could potentially participate in my study. During our meeting, I will also answer all questions and address any concerns that you
might have regarding my dissertation project. Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Christina Haynes
Hello,

I wanted to thank you for meeting with me for this project. Let me remind you of my dissertation research again. I am studying successful African American women that are performing well at the college level. I want to hear in their own words what drives them to be successful, and how they cope with issues such as race, gender, and class biases at predominately White institutions. As I stated in my e-mail, I am looking for women who: (1) are able to commit to doing at least one and maybe two interviews with me, (2) they have a cumulative GPA of 3.0, (3) have junior or senior status at OSU. Upon completing the interviewing process participants will receive a cash payment up to $50 no later than three weeks after completing our final session. For my study, I am looking to recruit no fewer than 25 but no more than 50 participants for this project. If your organization has a listserve, I would like to send an e-mail to your students in the hopes of beginning of my recruitment process. Also, if you have any questions and/or suggestions to help me recruit students, please let me know.

To begin recruiting for this project, I want to ask you a few questions:

1) Can you put me in contact with people that can help me recruit more African–American women for my study?

2) Also, do I have your permission to mention your name when I contact them?

3) What do you suggest is the best way to contact them via e-mail or phone?
4) Are there any dormitories and/or buildings that you think I should post my flyers to attract African-American women?

5) When would be a good time for me to meet with you?

6) May I post flyers in your office and give you some copies to hand out to students that you think may be interested in participating in my project?
APPENDIX D: E-MAIL /PHONE SCRIPT TO POTENTIAL AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Hello,

My name is Christina Haynes, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Policy and Leadership. I am doing research on successful African American women at the college level. My hope is to explore the personal narratives of successful African American women in order to understand their experiences in higher education. My research stems from my personal desire to reflect on my own experiences as an African American woman in higher education and understand perspectives of other Black women and how we cope with issues such as race, gender, and class at predominately White institutions. I wanted to know if you would be willing to meet with me in the hopes of being apart in my dissertation study.

Participants for my project are required to have a 3.0 GPA and have junior or senior status. I want to conduct one to two interviews that will last from 1-2 hours in length. In addition, participants will receive a cash payment of up to $50 for participating in the study once the interviewing process is completed. This experience will also provide you with the opportunity to reflect on your time at OSU and how you have grown and evolved as a person. If you are interested in being apart of my study or would like further information on my research, then please contact me via e-mail haynes.132@osu.edu or by phone 614 581 0930.
Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Christina Haynes
Hello,

I wanted to thank you for letting me take a few minutes of your time today to speak with you about my dissertation project. My name is Christina Haynes, and I am a doctoral candidate in The Educational Policy and Leadership. I am doing my dissertation on successful African–American women at the college level, and I am here to recruit students for my project.

My interest in this project is personal for a number of reasons, but the most important is that I am curious about how my undergraduate experience at a predominantly-White institution is similar and different from other Black women. What I am finding in research on African–American women is that a) there is a lack of research about us and b) most of the research on African–American women focuses on deficiencies and highlight that we are not doing as well as our counterparts in education.

My work focuses on gaining the perspectives of African–American women through doing one–on–one interviews with women like you. These interviews will take about 1–2 hours each and I will work with your schedules to ensure that we are able to meet at a site and time that is most convenient for you. I have only four requirements: (1) that you are able to do two interviews with me and be willing to speak with me if I have a few questions to clarify your statements after we finish our sessions, (2) you have a
cumulative GPA of 3.0, (3) that you have junior or senior status at OSU, and (4) That you are willing to allow me to audio tape our sessions with the understanding that our conversations are confidential and I will work hard to ensure you’re your you remain anonymous.

After the completion of the interviewing process, you will receive up to $50 cash payment for your services. I will pass out some flyers to you all and leave some with [organization leader, staff or faculty member] if you happen to lose the one that is being passed around. In addition, my contact information is on the flyer so read over it and contact me later if you are interested. While I am here, I can answer any questions that you have about the work that I am doing or requirements to be a participant in this study.
Hello,

I want to thank you again for participating in my study.

Before we begin our interview, we will read this consent form and to make sure that you understand the entire document. If you have any questions, I will clarify them for you to make sure that you know exactly what I am asking of you.

When you are done reading the document please sign, date, and return it to me when you are comfortable. If you do not feel comfortable with signing the consent form we will not start the interview process and you are free to go.

You are under no obligation to continue participation in this study and I will not contact you for any reason if you opt out of this study. I also have a copy of the consent form so that you can keep it for your records. Once you give me this sheet, we will begin the interviewing process.