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## ABSTRACT

### KEEPING MY SISTAS THROUGH THE STORM: COUNTERSTORIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN GRADUATE STUDENTS SEEKING GOOD MENTORSHIP IN TROUBLING SPACES AND PLACES

by Lara Chatman

The existing research on African American women graduate students on predominantly White college campuses often results in quantitative data that suggests that African American women are more successful at completing graduate degrees than their male counterparts. This suggestion often leads to a dominant narrative of success that fails to recognize the challenges African American women graduate students face as well as the sacrifices they make in order to graduate. Thus, the purpose of this study was to identify the challenges that African American women graduate students face in their pursuit of advanced degrees on predominantly White college campuses and to also identify what kinds of mentorship African American women graduate students seek, and find helpful or unhelpful as they navigate through stated challenges. Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2000) and Critical Race Feminism (Wing, 2003) with a specific focus on intersectionality were used to structure the study. The experiences of 8 African American women who attended predominantly White universities for advanced degrees were recorded in interviews and personal journals. The data reflected 4 dominate themes, which included facing various forms of discouragement, lack of mentorship, painful perseverance, and racegender awareness. Based on the findings, the researcher recommends an alternative model of mentorship for African American women graduate students pursuing degrees at predominantly White universities.

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KEEPING MY SISTAS THROUGH THE STORM: COUNTERSTORIES OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN GRADUATE STUDENTS SEEKING GOOD  
MENTORSHIP IN TROUBLING SPACES AND PLACES

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to Diamond DiamonteTaz Mania Diva (my loyal dog) and  
Tiera Danielle Wilkins & Kayla Symone Wilkins (my adorable nieces).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I just can't give up now  
I've come too far from where I started from  
Nobody told me the road would be easy and I don't believe he brought me this far to  
leave me (Mary, Mary, 2000)

Mary Mary lyrics help me to deal with the frustration and countless days and nights of just being tired and wanting to throw in the towel. I was too stubborn to do that so I would sing the aforementioned verse from the song, *Can't Give Up Now* to help me complete this expedition or what I jokingly tell people the pledging process of the P.H.D. The Hard Way!!!!

I first must thank God because only he knew how to handle me and my crying out to him out of frustration. He also knew who to send my way with those words of encouragement or just a joke. He also knew who to prepare to deal with me specifically during this process.

I would like to thank my family, specifically, my mother, Claudette for all the motherly encouragement. I would like to thank my G-Pa for pushing me beyond my abilities to reach for the highest stars. I would like to thank my sister for being proud of her little sister. Hugs and kisses to my nieces Tiera & Kayla. Doggie treats to my loyal and dedicated dog Diamond. Special thanks to Anthony & Jenn. I thank all my family & friends for everything, R.I.P. Barbara.

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Thank you, to my partner, Nate. It's been rocky and only God knows what is next. I'm (WE) ready!!

I would also like to thank all of my participants, your voices have power!

I give thanks to myself for not quitting when the storm was raging in my life.

This special acknowledge is one that is bittersweet, but it has to be done. It's bitter because I feel like this is a farewell letter. It's sweet because I have finished and



this person had a huge part of this overall process. I know my doctoral experience would have been horrible if I had not built a relationship with Dr. T-Basz (Chair/Advisor). You have inspired me in so many ways that I don't know where to begin telling you. Thanks for helping me understand this process and all it entails. Only God, you and I know what this journey has truly been for us. You have been beyond an advisor, mentor, or friend, you have been a SISTA! You took me under your wing like family with unconditional love. I know it's been an airplane ride with a lot of turbulence, but we did it! You kept me through the storm. Thank you for everything you have done. BTW, I am listening! LOVE YA SISTA!!!!

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*“I have come to believe over and over again that what is important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.”~ Audre Lorde*

Today, I decided to cancel my membership to Essence Magazine. Essence is a monthly magazine targeting African-American women between the ages of 18 and 49. This magazine covers fashion, lifestyle, dating, and beauty with an intimate girlfriend-to-girlfriend emphasis. Why did I decide to cancel my membership? Well, let me be very honest and clear about the fact that I love Essence and many other magazines that are targeted towards African Americans, but when I read the Collector’s Edition 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as a mental break from my research and writing, a disturbing fire was ignited. I was immediately perplexed and disappointed to see that Essence had also revealed a quantitative perspective of how well African American women were doing in the education arena when compared to their male counterparts. The article really disturbed me as I read, “There are challenges, however” and then goes on about how African American women receive more degrees than men in higher education and that they will continue to outnumber them. It is messages like this that perplexed me more than anything, because it obscures a more detailed understanding of the challenges that African American women face and the sacrifices they make to succeed in graduate school. They’re missing the real stories.

The assumption—based on numbers-- that African American women are succeeding with minimal difficulty is just outright ludicrous. It’s ludicrous because there is much to be said about what it means to get a bachelors, masters, or even a doctorate as an African American woman, especially on a predominantly White university campus. When readers see articles like this, it can conform to a dominant narrative of success and essentialize the experiences of many African American women pursuing a higher education. What I would have liked to have read in Essence are the stories of how these women not only survived, but thrived while getting their degrees. Or perhaps, a story about how an African American woman did not finish for reasons other than academic ability. I have cancelled my subscription and decided to share my story as well as collect

and convey the stories of other African American women pursuing advanced degrees on predominantly White campuses.

The aforementioned quote by Audre Lorde is one of my favorites and was resonate in my spirit as I proceeded with the journey of researching and writing a dissertation. I recalled reading an article that was published in 2007 about Black and Brown skinned women surviving the ivory tower (predominantly White institution) and the authors said two things in the conclusion that puzzled me: 1) “We hope to encourage graduate women of color to share their experiences within academia with each other to clarify what is really their personal experience and what is recycling of institutional discourses of erasure.”2) “We must strive for equity and social justice in graduate school and professional experiences among women of color. Until this occurs, we hope to provide those struggling, like us, with a tool to get beyond survival, a tool for thriving within the ivory walls of higher education.” (Souto-Manning & Ray, 2007, p.288) I was puzzled by the fact that in 2007 the same ongoing issues still existed from the time the first African American woman stepped on a predominantly White campus in the late 1850s. In addition, the authors suggested that there was a strong need for clarity about the experience which means there was a need for “richly textured” experiences, such as sharing personal experiences about what it takes to fit in and keep peace in White environments. According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), “African American women in White environments must alter their speech, mind their grammar, and purge their conversations of any slang to overcome racist presumptions that they are uneducated and less intelligent” (p.97). Another article published in 2009 about the mentoring experiences of African American women in graduate school suggested that despite the increased literature on mentoring, much work remains to be done on the mentoring experiences of marginalized groups, such as African American women (Patton, 2009).

As I reflect once again on the opening quote by Lorde, I question, “What happens when richly textured experiences are shared?” What is the risk of speaking up? What is the risk of remaining silent? Another troubling statement from Souto-Manning & Ray’s article notes that struggles still exist and there is a need for a thriving tool. Why are we struggling and just surviving in the ivory tower? What are the individual and institutional forces that impact and shape our experiences in academia? How much does space and

location contribute to the mentoring or lack of mentoring that African American graduate women students experience on predominantly White campuses? These are just a few questions that has lead me to look further into the experiences of African American women graduate students who face serious challenges on predominantly White campuses.

### **My Storm**

My fire, passion and interest in the topic existed because of the challenges I faced as an African American woman graduate student on a predominantly White campus. In the summer of 2008, I thought seriously about quitting my doctorate program. My thoughts about quitting had nothing to do with my grades, because I had the grades. My thoughts about quitting had nothing to do with finances, because I had a graduate assistantship. I was considering quitting, because of some experiences I had, and how, at the time, I could not grasp whether it was my race or gender or both that impacted my experiences. Often I spent days questioning whether race and gender and their intersection was why I was facing these challenges such as the daily experiences of marginalization, social and academic isolation, passive aggressive treatment and comments from some professors/staff and peers. Just as many women of color and other marginalized groups, I began to confront the issue of my invisibility in so many spaces including the institution.

When I began my doctoral work in the fall 2007, I came with a plan to solve everything I felt was problematic with schooling and education; that mere thought became only a figment of my imagination. The realization that I was in an academically hostile environment, where privileged White middle class people who often disregarded me, immediately shifted my thoughts from problems with schooling/education to finding tools to surviving and thriving in the culture/environment where African American students have to learn. What I needed was someone who at least looked liked me, talked liked me, and even had a swagger like me. I needed the presence of an African American woman faculty/staff. I knew it was essential for me to have someone to listen to my ideas and to give me objective, critical feedback without bias. However, it is important to know that there were other strong factors that I took into consideration outside of race and gender; factors such as trust, competence, reliability, likability to name a few. I found her

during my first semester, Dr. T. Basz. Although she was not assigned to me, she became my new advisor. Dr. T-Basz was the first and only African American woman faculty in the department at the time. I sat in her class the first day as she talked about the process of the program and honestly I wanted to quit. I immediately felt overwhelmed by the space and the place and questioned my potential to succeed in such a White structured environment.

During the next class, Dr. T. Basz shared with the class the experience she and I had during the interview process for admission to the doctoral program. I was embarrassed; yet flattered at how she remembered me and the details precisely. During the interview, she asked me a question for which, she claims; I gave her a smart-ass answer. After class, I decided to go to Dr. T. Basz and apologize about the situation. She said, “Lara there is no need to apologize, you gave me a smart smart-ass answer and avoided really answering the question.” At that moment, I realized we had something in common besides race and gender; we both spoke from the hip, that is we were both direct, upfront, and spoke with a strong sassy sense of honesty. I did not realize until later in the program how perfect and complimentary; yet dysfunctional we were for each other. Nor did I believe we truly realized the commitment we made to one another once she agreed to be my advisor and I agreed to be her advisee.

In the spring, Dr. T. Basz was on maternity leave and I cried my way through the semester. I cried because my “voice” needed to be heard and no one was there. I often silenced myself because I felt situated in an environment where my “voice” had no power. Silence does not mean I feared speaking; but my silence was because I felt no one would truly understand me. I was often in classes taught by White men, with most books by White male authors. In these classes I felt less competent, ignored, and not taken as seriously. I was often questioned about the way I dressed. Someone even asked if I honestly believed I could get a job given my fashionista style of dressing. Comments like that from my peers made me want to assimilate to their ideas of dressing, but my stubbornness would not allow me to assimilate. I didn’t see anyone questioning their appearance or their ability to be professional based on their style. Or how about being told that you smell like an optometrist office by a staff member. To these comments I often was afraid to respond or even report how uncomfortable such comments made me

feel because I didn't want to cause a ruckus. All these things made me realize that I was pursuing a degree in a hostile environment. I struggled with whether the challenges I was dealing with was because I was an African American, woman, or both at the same time. I even began to think about the various stereotypes that have been plagued on African American women. I felt like "mammy" for sacrificing my feelings and often did not want to speak up because I did not want to be labeled "sapphire" the angry, loud-talking emasculating African American woman. I found myself navigating this environment where being my whole being was a real struggle. I even questioned, "How can I thrive in graduate school without sacrificing my life?"

That summer, I was indirectly informed that a professor felt that I was inadequate for the program and he was basing this assessment solely on my first writing assignment in his course. Even more disturbing was the fact that he failed to come to me with his complaint, instead he went straight to my department chair and told her that he felt I did not have scholarly writing and was likely not going to finish the program if I didn't get help. She called me to her office and asked me how I was doing in the program. Her recommendation was to go to the writing center. I refused because I knew that a writing center couldn't teach me how to do me, why couldn't she propose that the professor explore the writing style of other cultures? Messages like that confirmed that I obviously had the problem and not the professor. I didn't know how to deal with it besides knowing that he had basically already labeled me as inadequate for the program. I immediately got upset because he had not said anything to me directly. In previous classes, I had two White professors both a male and female who identified both my strengths and weakness and offered constructive criticism. One professor even said, "You remind me of myself when I first started the program, can't wait to see you at the end of your program." Those words alone spoke great encouragement and inspiration. However, I still questioned my academic viability even though writing is subjective. Not only is writing subjective, but it's often problematic when the reader and grader has their own notion of what writing looks like in academia. I emailed the professor and told him we needed to talk about his concerns with my writing. When we met the first question I asked was, "Why did you not address your writing concerns with me? His response, "I did not know the protocol in your department. I am from another department." My response, "I find that ironic that

you did not even think to start with the student first.” I then said, “If I had a problem with you as professor, I would start with you and not your boss. It’s standard protocol.” He never apologized and probably doesn’t really care. After that conversation, I worked extra hard to prove my place in the program both as an African American and as a woman. I had the “I’m going to show you” attitude. I just felt like if I could show him, he would tell the chair that he was wrong, or that I was great. I would email him assignments extra early and even asked my White peers how they were doing their assignments. Guess what, their assignments looked a lot like mine. I made it through the semester and made an “A”, but became traumatized and paralyzed in my ability to write again. This became a challenge for me because I felt like I just could not write. It was during this time, I realized that Dr. T. Basz’ role in my life was more than an academic advisor. It was Dr. T. Basz’s sense of motherhood that was so helpful to me. According to Collins, “motherhood can serve as site where the African American women express and learn power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessary of self reliance and independence, and a belief in Black empowerment (Collins, 2000, p.176). After this incident, I began suffering from being African American and woman. I was in cultural shock, self-doubt and I did not have anyone to talk to confidentially about this. I began feeling embarrassed, dumb, and incompetent. The only thing that registered in my head was that I was an African American woman doctoral student that was labeled inadequate and my writing was not good enough. At the time, I just wanted to quit because of the shame and embarrassment. I also did not want to tell anyone the story, and how the incident planted such a heavy seed of self-doubt that was paralyzing me.

I called Dr. T. Basz after this happened because I was furious and didn’t know what to do. It was during this breakdown, that I realized the importance of having a mentor who shared the same race and gender as me, and who was willing to mentor me through this storm. It was not just academic mentoring I needed and wanted, but I also needed the kind of mentoring that would help me navigate through school. I asked her, “Can you commit to helping me as I take this journey, because I am clueless, I am stubborn, I do not listen sometimes, I am rebellious, I speak from the hip, and I am far from perfect. But if you show me I will go!

This was my storm! I tell my story to heal and live! It was because of my mentor stepping in and lifting me up during my storm that I began to thrive after the trauma. Without Dr. T. Basz I would have easily become one of those African American woman graduate students, who slipped through the cracks. Just her presence alone validated my status and sense of purpose. It was her that abrasively encouraged me to keep moving through the storm when I was the most tired, frustrated and afraid. Since then, I have gained several other African American women mentors to help me understand and navigate the politics before and during a storm.

### **Statement of the Problem**

During my graduate studies, it has become painfully evident to me that there is a dominant narrative of success among African American women graduate students at predominantly White universities. In general, African American women received twice as many degrees when compared to their male counterparts (NCES, 2007). More specifically in 2003, African American women earned 44,667 master's degrees compared with 17,907 for their male counterpart which accounts for 71 percent of all master's degrees attained by African Americans (NCES, 2007). Almost 5 years later in the 2007-2008 academic year, African Americans received 65,052 master's degrees and with African American women receiving 71.8 percent of those degrees (NCES, 2010). In the same academic year African Americans received 3,906 doctoral and 66.8 percent of them were received by African American women (NCES, 2010). Moreover, these numbers increased, 8 percent for master's degrees and 7 percent for doctorate degrees in the last 20 years. On the surface, it appeared that the data support the assumption that because African American women graduate students were graduating in larger numbers than their male counterparts, they were facing fewer challenges in their efforts to succeed at PWIs. It is my contention; however, that this dominant narrative obscures the reality as it does not acknowledge the multiple and multifaceted challenges that many African American woman graduate students endure in their pursuit of an advanced degrees at PWIs. These populations often experience isolation, lack of appropriate mentorship, and negative experiences in the classroom (Benjamin, 1997). Jacqueline Flemings (1984) suggests that, "There is always the clear sense that African American women at PWIs often are suffering from emotional pain, social isolation, or aroused fears about



competence” (p.146). Although African American women share similar experiences with their male counterparts, and even White women, African American women also face experiences that require a unique standpoint. According to Bova (2000), “the life history and experiences of African American women project a different prospective not excluding the reality that the literature does not fully address the needs, concerns, and achievements of African American women, the stereotypical images and expectations of these women are still held by many” (p.6). Subsequently the failure to conclusively acknowledge and understand the challenges African American women graduate students face often leads to inadequate mentorship, both formal and informal. Although I believe this to be the case among both undergraduate and graduate students, I chose to focus this study on African American women graduate students primarily, because attention to mentorship tailored for African American women graduate students is relatively meager.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine in-depth how race and gender dynamics shape the challenges African American women graduate students on predominantly White college campuses face in their pursuit of advanced degrees as well as how mentorship impacts their navigation through these challenges. My primary research questions were as follows:

- I. What are the challenges that African American women graduates students face in their pursuit of advanced degrees at predominantly White colleges and universities?
- II. What kinds of mentorship do African American women graduate students seek and find helpful and/or unhelpful as they navigate through stated challenges?

As I explore these questions, I am most interested in focusing on the intersectionality of race and gender and thinking about how these dynamics work together to shape the experiences of African American women pursuing graduate degrees on predominantly White campuses. Intersectionality is a theoretical concept often used in feminist studies which seeks to examine the ways in which various socially and culturally constructed categories interact on multiple levels to manifest themselves as inequality in society (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000; McCall, 2005). Intersectionality recognizes that the experience of minority women includes race, gender, and other social dimensions as

central to understanding the experiences, behaviors, politics, and treatment of humans as socially constructed beings. Intersectionality seemed ideally suited to the task of exploring how categories of race, class and gender are intertwined and mutually constitutive, giving centrality to questions like how race is ‘gendered’ and how gender is ‘racialized’, and how both are linked to the continuities and transformations of social class (Davis, 2008, p.71). Thus the questions that guided my analyses were:

- I. What challenges did my participants identify?
- II. How did race and gender dynamics shape these challenges?
- III. What did their stories reveal about the experiences of finding/not finding mentorship specifically to help them address their most pressing challenges?
- IV. How did race and gender dynamics shape the mentorship they seek, find and find helpful?

### **Significance of the Study**

There has been a significant amount of research on the mentorship experiences of undergraduate African Americans students on predominantly White college campuses. There has also been a significant amount of research about the experiences of African American women students on predominantly White college campuses. However, there is not a lot of literature that closely examines the mentorship experiences of African American women graduate students on predominantly White college campuses. There has been little research that identifies the impact mentorship, specifically with regards to race and gender issues, has on the success of African American graduate students. This study is significant as it expands on and complicates many of the assumptions that undergird traditional definitions and models of mentorship, questioning their viability for African American women students who may face a unique set of challenges as they navigate campus spaces that reflect and inflect race and gender inequalities. This examination challenged the mentoring based on one universal definition; the personal, complex nature of mentoring experiences by under-represented groups such as African American students, who do not fit into a male-oriented, competitive, individualist, profile (Darwin, 2000, p.230).

Ultimately, I collected eight stories from African American women graduate students from predominantly White college campuses to examine the dynamics of race

and gender and how these two constructs impacted and shaped their mentoring experiences. The ultimate goal of this study was to seek a deeper understanding of how African American women graduate students seek good mentorship in the troubling spaces and places of predominantly White institutions. In other words, I wanted to seek a deeper understanding of how African American women graduate students in troubling spaces and places understand mentoring and the impact it has on them.

### **Organization of Dissertation**

Chapter 2 is composed of relevant literature in two areas, providing both historical perspective and ongoing challenges for African American women graduate students overtime. Collectively, I believe that these two areas provide vital information for understanding the challenges and dilemmas of mentorship of African American women graduate students at PWIs. Thus, I will provide a brief historical overview of the African American women on White campuses. Second, I look specifically at the current experiences and mentorship experiences of African American women graduate students on White campuses which include exploring definitions of mentorship in higher education and their relationship to African American women graduate students.

Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology used for this study. Black Feminist Epistemology (BFE) and Critical Race Feminist (CRF) act as guiding frameworks to explore the intersecting oppressions of race and gender dynamics as experienced by African American women graduate students on predominantly White college campuses. The use intersectionality provides various ways in which race and gender interacts to shape the multiple dimensions of African American women lives. This chapter also explains qualitative research and counterstorytelling. This chapter then identifies the importance of qualitative research for marginalized people. In addition, this chapter highlights the role of the researcher, pilot study, participant selection, and data collection. Last, this chapter outlines the research method for this study.

Chapter 4 Uncensored Stories are stories from four of the participants so that my readers can get a feel for how these women were impacted by their experiences stories. This chapter then identifies how these stories lay the foundation for a critical counterstory which includes discussing counterstorytelling.

Chapter 5 Emergent Themes discusses the challenges that African American women graduate students face in their pursuit of advanced degrees on a predominantly White college campus and the kinds of mentorship they seek, find helpful/ unhelpful as they navigate through stated challenge. First, I reveal a description of the site and introduce the participants. Second, the chapter identifies emergent themes which lay out a foundation for critical counterstory.

. Chapter 6 Discussion, Implications & Conclusion discusses the challenges that African American women graduate face in pursuit of advanced degrees on predominantly White college campus and outlines recommendations and needs for future research. Finally, the chapter concludes the study and how I plan to continue this kind of research.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

In order to get a clear understanding of African American women graduate students challenges and mentorship experiences it was necessary to explore two areas of relevant literature. This review will cover the following: (a) an overview of the experiences of African American women pursuing graduate degrees at predominantly White universities (b) struggles and limitations of mentorship for African American women graduate students. Exploring these two areas provided an overview of the past, present, and future experiences, expectations and needs of African American women students on predominantly White campuses.

### **African American Women Graduate Students on Predominantly White Campuses**

African American women represent a larger number in college enrollment when compared to their male counterparts; yet the literature remains scarce about how African American women are experiencing graduate school on a predominantly White campus. The literature often fails to address what African American women need to endure both the positive and negative challenges that African American women may experience. Current literatures often reveal a portion of the experience which often does not include the challenging experiences of African American women that are stressors which become inhibitors to persistence.

The presence of African American women on White campuses was first documented in 1862 when Mary Jane Patterson received her baccalaureate degree from Oberlin College at a time when no structured system for African Americans in higher education existed. She and other women such as Anna Julia Cooper, Lucy Sessions, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Mary Church Terrell were amongst some of the first women to make higher education for African American women a reality. Although African American women were granted access into Oberlin College as early as the late 1800s they faced overt hostility, isolation, race antagonism, and sexism among other things. African American women had to fight tooth and nail to have access to educational resources and when admittance was allowed, they had to work twice as hard to receive half the credit while facing insults, condescending attitude, and demeaning requirements (Cooper & Washington, 1990, p.45). They were accepted into Oberlin but forbidden in

the dorms, dining facilities, and the White students practiced passive hostility by refusing to sit next to them (Giddings, 1988, p.105). In addition, as a result and in order to persist in such hostile environments, these women either internalized the rejection or simply ignored it by not speaking about it (p.109). African American women learned early on that they had both race and gender barriers to navigate. Although there is a significant lack of literature about the early experiences that these women faced; one thing they all struggled with was their experiences being viewed through the lens of White women or African American men (Patton, 2009, p.512). According to Evans (2007),

African American women who attended White schools in the 1800s wrote of the prejudice in the curriculum, classroom, housing, campus and social clubs, and local towns. Whether from other students, faculty, administrators, or community residents, African American women faced insults, condescending attitudes and demeaning requirements. When not directly assaulted, they were conspicuously invisible, shunned, ignored, treated as exotic, or silently despised (p.104).

After the desegregation of public schools in the landmark case *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954), which granted African American access to White institutions of higher education, going to college became a goal for many African Americans. However that chance did not necessarily constitute a change in the culture or environment of these institutions. Many predominantly White institutions had a strong presence of institutionalized racism, racism that was embedded in the deep structure of higher education. Racism and cultural incongruence (lack of cultural fit which causes acculturated stress) hindered the ability of African Americans to academically or socially integrate at predominantly White campuses. Ultimately, African American students on White campuses encountered hostile environments, culturally ignorant students and faculty, limited funding, lack of African American faculty, and cultural alienation and isolation Taylor, 1989). Woodson (1933) contends African Americans have been educated away from their own culture and traditions and attached to the fringes of European culture; thus dislocated from themselves. He asserts that African Americans often valorize European culture to the detriment of their own heritage (p. 7).He explained desegregated schools and colleges have taught, and still teach African American youth to be Europeanized Whites--culturally, but without the privilege of being White.

In 1984 Jacqueline Fleming conducted a major study on African Americans in college, based on her findings, she suggested that many African American women feared success, felt incompetent, and faced anxiety; yet still aiming for achievement. However despite negative experiences at PWIs, Fleming (1984) concluded, attendance at predominantly White colleges made African American women more assertive and self-reliant. These women became proactive in their education attainment by taking full advantage of student services, and viewed themselves as more resistant to negative stimuli than African American males (Kim & Sedlacek, 1995). To this day, African American women who continue matriculation at White institutions develop coping mechanisms which enable them to persist. Smedley, Myers and Harrell (1993) identified social climate; interracial relationships; racism and discrimination, within group interactions and perceptions and academic concerns as stressors which negatively impacted the performance and psychological well being of African American students on PWIs. Howard-Hamilton (2003) asserts, “It is crucial to have critical mass of faculty members, staff and students on campus with the same cultural context as important for African American women on White campuses” (p. 95). It is the unacknowledged intersectionality of multiple oppressions such as race, class, and gender in addition to the cultural incongruity that strongly contributes to the negative experiences that African American women students encounter at PWIs and is still even in the present moment an ongoing issue (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p.23). According to Souto-Manning & Ray (2007), the environments of many predominantly White institutions are still similar to those that women like Cooper, Alexander, and Terrell faced. African American women on White campuses still face the same obstacles, barriers, and marginalization. Souto-Manning & Ray conclude that years after Mary Patterson graduated from Oberlin in 1862, and years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, African American women still experience racism, sexism, and isolation. In essence, the marginalization coupled with having to do a balancing act and having to negotiate in White space still complicates the academic trajectories for African American women. Although few, there has been some studies that look at the impact that White colleges have on the identity/ies of African American women (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, and Cooper 2003). Many researchers such as Jacqueline Flemings (1984), Walter Allen (1991), and Joe Feagin (1996) focus on the

experiences of African Americans on predominantly White campuses. Harper (2006) focuses on the experiences of African American males. Recently there has been an emerging shift in the study of African American women on White campus, yet there still remain few studies about the overarching experiences of African American women graduate students. It is my contention that it is important to unveil challenges that are happening, why, and how African American women particularly on White campuses are combating barriers, struggles, and obstacles while consistently outpacing their male counterparts on all educational levels (NCES, 2007). I think DeSousa (2001) articulates it well, “Understanding African American women’s struggles and successes in college, particularly at predominantly White institutions where the majority of African Americans students are enrolled, could help to identify ways to better support African American students and others.” Studies on how African American women at PWIs experience the struggles while succeeding is long overdue. Thus, my study will focus on the struggles, success and the impact of mentorship has on the experiences of African American women graduate students on White campuses.

In 2009, Rachelle Wagner wrote a book entitled *Unchosen Me* which is about the racial and gender inequities among African American women college students and how despite the many struggles they face, they aim and often combat them. In Wagner’s study, she identified that students of color faced alienation, stereotyping, low expectations and lingering racism both on and off campus. More specifically, over one hundred years after double consciousness was introduced by Du Bois (1903), Wagner noted that African American women on White campuses still experienced alternating feelings of isolation, twoness, and incompetency. When I began reviewing the literature and statistics on African American women graduate students experiences on predominantly White campuses; I refused to continue to allow graduation statistics mentioned earlier to overshadow the barriers and obstacles that African American women students are facing on predominantly White campuses. While Wagner takes the perspective that African American women graduate students succeed despite their real tangible struggles, I want to take a slightly different perspective as I attempt to really explore the challenges that seem to me to get overshadowed by the narrative of success.



In other words, I want to consider how African American women graduate students might succeed not despite, but because of the race/gender challenges they face.

The experiences of African American women in graduate school are often marred by racism, sexism, classism in a space where the lack of critical mass makes it difficult to address these issues (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Many African American women graduate students who attend PWIs deal with the emotional stress while trying to assimilate in a White environment, while not losing self or feeling left out. A study conducted by Souto- Manning and Ray (2007) focused on Black and Brown women's experiences in the ivory tower and identifies struggles with dehumanization, multiple positionalities (gender & race) and invisibility. Ray explains her experience as a graduate student,

The institutional discourse is such that 'no one cares about what the Black woman has to say'. Eyes are often rolled when I speak; they look as if they are saying, 'Oh no not the Black girl again!' Often the White students are uninvolved, silent and disinterested as if I am not humanly speaking anything of value. I was often silenced in class even when the topic was on race and treated as if I was invisible in the class, but I aim to "keep talking" just as hooks (1989) suggest that African American women talk back and be a critical voice within a White dominated graduate classroom (p.285).

What happened in this case is similar to what many African American women face which includes problematizing the institutional discourses and not complying with them, making the need to speak up and not be silenced a reality for African American women in White spaces.

Another study conducted by Schwartz et. al (2003) about the identification factors that contributed to the success of African American women in graduate school illuminates several themes about the experiences of African American women in graduate school. They concluded that: 1. Race has been and continues to be an obstacle for African American graduate students. 2. The women in their study were deemed successful but the load would have been lighter if they had a mentor. 3. By the end of the study, the participants who were reluctant to identify the role of race and gender at the beginning of the study all revealed that the role of gender and race were equally important to their experience. 4. Those women in the study who had the experience of having an African American woman faculty member available, especially a woman,

found it very important in dealing with the challenges they faced. One of the African American women participants in the study stated:

I have experienced different mistreatment because of my race .I have faced isolation and exclusion from White peers. When comprehensive exam study groups were created the White students studied together and did not include the African American students. When I confronted the White students, they were surprised by the critical comments. The response was they assumed the African American students would prefer to have their own study group (p.261).

Another participant stated,

I received a red WOW on a paper in class with a White male instructor from the north. I knew his condescending ways towards me were racist. That red WOW was not the one followed with excitement, but I assumed it was the one that meant I could not do better because I was Black. The WOW made me feel inadequate and angry. I knew my work wasn't the best, but that red WOW was a slap in the face that race and gender matter. That man has hurt me in ways that he will never know. I talked to Dr. X about what was happening and it was important to know that there was someone who could really understand all the issues I faced as both an African American and as a woman (p.263).

In this study the data was collected in focus group responses and individual interviews. Indeed, this study did reveal how sharing experiences, feeling and reactions confirmed the expectation that African American women in graduate school face significant challenges. In addition, these women revealed events that made them realize that race and gender matter.

In 1997, Ward (cited in Patterson, p. 23) conducted a study about the everyday realities of African Americans and women in academia. This study looks at some of the common experiences of African American women in academia specifically hostile environments. Ward's study looks at the impact of carrying not one, but at least two historically marginalized identities into academe, and it is imperative to note how African

American women have coped with the dual oppressions. One of Ward's participant's responses:

Having been a Black female doctoral student in a major, White research academy, I lived Dubois "twoness" daily. It was precisely from this reality that I chose to explore the mask, as protection, as sanctuary, and necessity for Black female doctoral students to succeed in this environment. In many instances, a mask is a grotesque head or face used to frighten or to ward off evil spirits. Yet the women under study expressed that when in the institution, regardless of their dilemma or perceived reality at a particular time, they had to assume a non-threatening, non-retaliatory, almost expressionless persona in order promote self, survive, and succeed. (p.7)

This study conducted by Ward the participants identify what it means to live a life as a African American and as a woman in White America, and discusses how participants coped with the oppression caused by their dual identity; as Dubois would say; "double consciousness" experienced every day (Dubois, 1903).

Although gender is salient in shaping identity and defining various facets of a women's educational experiences and opportunities, being female and African American places African American women at the confluence of two forms of oppression (Zamani, p.7, 2003). Often African American women feel obligated to prove self to others, work harder to succeed, fight racism and sexism, and fight all stereotypes. In a study conducted by Jackson (1998) on race and gender in the self-definition of African Americans on predominantly White campuses an African American Women graduate student says,

It's being a woman another item, it's like another item on the reasons the world should oppress Dionne or try to oppress. Um, basically that means I've got to beware of that and not fall victim. And if that means I have to work a little harder, then I am just going to worker a little harder to fight the negative stereotypes (p.177).

Ultimately, scholars suggested that the experiences of African American women in higher education are different and often difficult because of the intersection of race and gender (Jackson, 1998; Zamani, 2003). Thus, there is still a need to better understand African American women, their aspirations, and obstacles and the significance of

mentors (Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey, 1995; Jacobi 1991; Wiley 1992). As such my study is designed to consider the nature of the challenges African American women graduate students face as well as the kind of mentoring appropriate and helpful for addressing those challenges.

### **Mentorship: Possibilities and Limitations for African American Women Graduate Students**

*What is a mentor/mentorship/mentoring?*

The word mentor can be traced back to Greek poet Homer, in *The Odyssey*. In *The Odyssey* Homer's faithful and wise Mentor who was given a task to protect and nurture the King's son, Telemachus, in the absence of his father, Odysseus. This original notion of mentoring is framed as a hierarchical leadership role. Darwin (2000) suggests that, "Traditionally, the mentoring relationship has been framed in a language of paternalism and dependence and stems from a power-dependent, hierarchical relationship, aimed at maintaining the status quo" (p. 197). A review of the mentoring literature revealed that words such as advisor, sponsor, role model, and coach are readily used. The most basic definition, however, for mentor is a trusted counselor or guide (Merriam et. al, 2009). Yet there are numerous definitions from various sources and disciplines. However, for this study, I will focus on those in the field of higher education, which to some extent as Wrightsman (1981) points out, lack consensus:

With respect to communication between researchers...there is a false sense of consensus, because at a superficial level everyone 'knows' what mentoring is. But closer examination indicates wide variation in operational definitions, leading to conclusions that are limited to the use of particular procedures...The result is that the concept is devalued, because everyone is using it loosely, without precision, and it may become a short-term fad (pp.3-4).

Although the concept has not been short-lived, it continues to hold a variety of meanings in higher education. Before I discuss how I employ the term or concept of mentoring specifically for African American women graduate students on predominantly White campus, I want to highlight some of the various meanings in higher education.

Evanoski (1988) wrote that, "

A mentor may act as a teacher to enhance skills and intellectual development, may serve as a sponsor, may use influence to facilitate a person's entry and advancement. May be a host and guide welcoming the initiate into a new occupational and social world and acquainting the individual with its values, customs, resources and cast of characters, and a mentor may provide counsel and moral support in a time of stress (p. 111?)

Shandley (1989) writes that mentoring is first,

an intentional process of interaction between two individuals... Second, mentoring is a nurturing process that fosters the growth and development of the protégé... Third, mentoring is an insightful process in which the wisdom of the mentor is acquired and applied by the protégé.... Fourth, mentoring is a supportive, often protective process. The mentor can serve as an important guide or reality checker in introducing the protégé to the environment he or she is preparing for. Finally.... An essential component of serving as a mentor is role modeling (p.60).

Canton and James (1999) wrote that a mentor is “a trusted person who helps to facilitate a dream by believing in, and supporting the protégé through advice, resources, research, caring, and sharing of self and one's experience.” All of these definitions speak of mentoring in a general sense; that is without taking into consideration race or gender dynamics. Although Blackwell (1989) who did some of the earliest research on mentoring of African American graduate students suggests that mentoring is an intense, close, exceptionally interactive, and complex relationship (p.9), his definition also does not speak explicitly about the significance of race and gender dynamics in the mentoring process. Again, these definitions are all acceptable, but quite general, broad and often assume a one –to- one relationship that is not centered on race and gender dynamics, which often means that African American women do not fully benefit from traditional models of mentoring. Often times, race and gender dynamics are overlooked when establishing various forms of mentoring programs and initiatives. Harris (1999) suggests that , “By limiting the examination of mentoring based on one universal definition, the personal, complex nature of the mentoring experience of under- represented groups such

as African American students, who do not fit in the a male oriented, competitive, individualist profile, will be excluded” (p.230). What I hope to do as a result of my study is devise a working definition that is reflective of the specific challenges of African American women graduate students on predominantly White campuses.

*The Struggle of Mentorship for African American Women Graduate Students*

Mentoring is an integral tool for student success (Hurte, 2002). Mentoring has been shown to encourage more minority students to continue in higher education, earn master’s degrees, and become professional (Blackwell, 1989). When looking at mentoring on the graduate level for African Americans, Blackwell (1983) suggests that “Mentoring is reported to be particularly important for success and completion of graduate programs” (p.9). Adams and Conley (1986) three years later suggest that, “For minority students, good mentoring is a key variable for determining success or failure in completing a doctoral program.” Cusanovich and Gillard (1991) described mentoring as an essential part of the graduate education; it’s the heart of the graduate process. While there is an extensive body of literature about mentoring minorities on predominantly White campuses; there is little to none specifically on mentoring African American women graduate students. Various studies have acknowledged that mentoring is one of the salient factors in academic and career success for minority students, as a number of these studies have reported that traditional mentorship programs have been successful in increasing retention and graduation rates among minority students (Haring, 1997; Jacobi, 1991; Johnson, 1989; Laden, 1999; Smith, 2005). However, some of the weaknesses in this body of work is that African American men and women are considered collectively rather than as distinct groups just as African American and White women are consider collectively taking the experiences of African American men and women collectively ignores the fact that “women often have different needs and concerns from their counterparts... and face a complex, interrelated set of career issues that may be outside men’s experience” (Quinlan, 1999, p.32). Moreover, statements like the following: “women mentors can offer the personalized attention, which women students need to deal with the problems specific to them as women that they may encounter in the higher education environment” (Hurde, 2002, p.45), make it clear that gender plays a significant role in mentoring, but does not acknowledge that race among other factors may also play

an equally significant role. For instance, how does the lack of African American female faculty on predominantly White campuses impact the mentorship experiences of African American women graduate students?

Schroeder and Mynatt's (1993) study on women graduate students revealed that many of the women graduate students often felt ignored, invisible, and dismissed by faculty. These researchers identified how the availability of same- gender faculty as mentors is important. I would add: What about race? Another study by Neumark and Gardecki (1998) revealed that women doctoral students who had women mentors reduced their time to complete their degrees when compared to those without women mentors. Once again, I ask: what about race? It is obvious that the literature reveals that women are comfortable with women as mentors but what about the race dynamic? Why is there such a tremendous gap in the literature about mentoring experiences of African American women graduate students particularly in predominantly White spaces? Williams et. al (2005) note that "navigating through graduate school in pursuit of a terminal degree is a challenging endeavor for most African American women" (p.181), and thus mentoring that helps African American women graduate students negotiate the rules and codes of power on a predominantly White and male-dominated campus is critical.

What became apparent to me as I reviewed the literature about mentoring and more specifically about mentoring African American women at PWIs is that there is not much out there that narrows the mentoring experience to just African American women on PWIs. I found several studies that talk about the experiences of minorities on predominantly White campuses. I read studies about mentorship as a retention tool in higher education. I also found studies that look at mentorship of African American women faculty or administrators in academia. I found literature that speaks about African American women professionals and how sociocultural and gender experiences shape career choices and development. I even found literature that speaks to the absence of mentorship for African Americans in general. There have even been a few studies on mentoring relationships in graduate and professional school, but not many attentive to African American women at PWIs. More specifically, there are few studies that speak about mentorship beyond the professional mentorship.

In the few studies that have been done, there is a consistent theme. Jackson, Kite, and Branscombe 1996 (as cited in Bowman et. al 1999) found that African American women overwhelmingly prefer African American women mentors but many found it difficult to locate at a PWI. Blackwell (1983) and Scandura & Williams (2001) both did studies on mentoring relationships of African American graduate students and found that women were less likely to have mentoring relationships and were less successful at their quest of establishing one. Patton's study (2009) found that there are not enough professors to adequately accommodate every African American student who might need help and opportunities and, moreover interactions between White professors and African American students appear woefully inadequate and or insignificant. Patton also (2009) found that many of her African American participants wanted an African American woman mentor because they felt it is easier to identify and feel comfortable with someone who looks like them and someone who represents what can be done.

African American women are uniquely situated, as they stand in the nexus of two highly prevalent systems of oppression—race and gender—which shape their experiences and impact their lives in different ways. Artis (1979) suggested interests, race, and gender are three factors which should be considered in a mentor-mentee relationship. Howard-Vital (1993), noted with regards to the literature on African American women graduate students, it “holds a minority position not unlike that of African American women in society” (p.180). I would argue that it also points to an interesting inconsistency in the literature. On one hand, the literature clearly suggested that mentoring is absolutely critical, particularly for minority students, for successful completion of graduate school. On the other hand, however, the small body of literature that does consider the experiences of African American women suggested that their graduation rates are often higher than African American men and yet they clearly struggle with finding appropriate mentoring on the graduate level. Thus, studies specifically attentive to mentoring designed to address the kinds of barriers and obstacles that come up for African American women graduate students, particularly in predominantly White institutions, are still necessary as we try to understand how African American women persevere despite inadequate mentorship.



### **Summary**

African American women are continuing to pursue and attain advanced degrees despite various obstacles and barriers (Fleming 1983; Howard-Hamilton 2001; and Patton, 2009). This review of the literature illuminated the struggles and experiences African American women have endured while pursuing degrees on predominantly White campuses. The relevant literature highlights the limitations and struggles of traditional mentoring for African American women. In the next chapter, I will discuss the theoretical framework and methodology that was appropriate for this study.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to identify the challenges that African American women graduate students face in their pursuit of advanced degrees on a predominantly White college campus, and to examine the kinds of mentorship African American women graduate students seek, find helpful/unhelpful as they navigate through the stated challenges. This chapter describes both the theoretical perspectives that shape this study as well as the research methods used to examine how race and gender dynamics shape the challenges faced by and the mentorship experiences of African American women graduate students seeking degrees on predominantly White university campuses. This chapter begins with an overview of the theoretical framework which includes Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2000), Critical Race Feminism (Wing, 2003) and Counterstorytelling (Delgado, 1989).

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The theoretical frameworks most appropriate for my work are Black Feminist Epistemology (BFE) and Critical Race Feminism (CRF). I draw from Black Feminist Epistemology, Critical Race Feminism, and counterstorytelling to both structure my study and to analyze the data provided by my participants. Black Feminist Epistemology and Critical Race Feminism act as guiding frameworks to explore the intersecting oppressions of race and gender as experienced by African American women graduate students on predominantly white campuses. Although I will discuss emergent themes from my data, I use the concept of counterstorytelling to suggest that the data provides a story that clearly counters the dominant narrative of rich meaningful analysis of African American women graduate students' lived experiences on a predominantly white campus while raising critical consciousness about racial and gender injustices which are often untold, ignored and/or misconstrued. Collectively, BFE, CRF, and counterstorytelling de-center traditionally accepted White, male dominated power structures by recognizing stories and knowledges of African American women graduate students on predominantly White campuses as both valid and valuable data.

*Black Feminist Epistemology*

Collins (2000) defines Black feminist thought as a specialized thought that reflects the distinctive themes of African American women's experiences. In other words, the use of Black feminist thought as an epistemology places "Black women's experiences in the center of analysis without privileging those experiences" (Collins, 2000, p.228). BFE in this study allows an examination of race and gender and how these constructs impact and shape African American women graduate students' experiences. More specifically, BFE sets forth the idea that living on the margins brings forth specialized knowledge of African American women that helps us cope with and resist unjust differential treatment in predominantly White spaces.

Collins (2000) outlines four dimensions of Black feminist epistemology: lived experience, dialogical knowledge, caring, and accountability. The lived experience dimension recognizes the importance of knowledge gained by life experiences of African American women. Dialogical knowledge allows African American women to become connected rather than separated from accessing and validating the knowledge. Moreover, Collins (2000) states, "Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate" (p. 257). Becoming agents of knowledge is helpful in gaining voice and expressing self-definition. The use of dialogue is crucial to establishing bonds and relationships among marginalized peoples (Cott, 1987). The use of BFE allows the story to be told and preserved in a narrative form and not torn apart in the analysis (Collins, 2000, p.258). The third dimension, ethic of caring, allows the transfer of lived experience and knowledge through dialogue to be tested by the existence of empathy and compassion. Collins (2000) argues that the presence of emotion validates the argument: "Emotion indicates that a speaker believes in the validity of an argument" (p.263). In addition Collins states, "Values lie at the heart of the knowledge validation process such as that inquiry always has an ethical aim" (p.266). The last dimension of BFE is the ethic of personal accountability. Collins (2000) suggests that African American women must develop their knowledge claims through dialogue and present them in a style proving their connection to the idea, but also to be accountable for their claims (p.265). Collectively these four dimensions of Black feminist epistemology are useful for African American women as they develop their knowledge

claims through dialogue and present them in a style emphasizing their connection to how they understand or make meaning of the subject at hand.

In this study BFE is used to explain the lived experiences of eight African American women graduate students who attend/ed a predominantly White college. Collins (2000) argues that BFE demonstrates the importance of African American women's emerging power as agents of knowledge. The sharing of experiences will assist in the creation of new knowledge for these African American women graduate students. The sharing of stories also has the potential to empower them as they continue navigating through their graduate studies. BFE is significant because it encourages African American women to articulate the, "taken for granted" knowledge and experiences they have and encourages them to create new definitions of themselves to validate their standpoints (Collins, 2000). BFE as an epistemology illuminates African American female's dual oppressions: race and gender. As King (2001) suggests, there are certain experiences that African American women have because of their race that female members of the majority do not experience. Collins (2000) suggests lived experiences as a criterion of meaning explains how one knows what one knows through episodes one has encountered in her life. It is my hope that these stories create what hooks (1990) calls "notion of reading each other" which includes sharing and connecting experience in order to move towards a better situation or experience. The notion of reading each other means treating each other with respect and support. Thus, such experiences are useful in creating new knowledge, and help make other African American women graduate students aware and more sensitive about the experiences they face at PWIs. BFE allows the unveiling of several possible meanings of the African American woman graduate student's experience as they occur on a predominantly White campus. In other words, BFE is critical to helping African American women define their realities, shape their identities, name their histories, and tell their stories (hooks, 1989), therefore challenging patriarchal structures and racial inequalities. While BFE focuses specifically on the empowering of African American women as knowledge, CRF stresses conscious consideration of the intersection of race, gender, and class by placing women of color at the center of the analysis to reveal the discriminatory and oppressive nature of their reality,

*Critical Race Feminism*

Critical Race Feminism intersects with Black Feminist Epistemology and extends the feminist theoretical lens. Critical Race Feminism asserts that the position of women of color cannot be understood without taking into consideration both race and gender as they shape African American women's lives. Critical Race Feminism is an embryonic effort in legal academia that emerged at the end of the twentieth century to emphasize the legal concerns of a significant group of people—those who are both women and members of today's racial/ethnic minorities, as well as disproportionately poor (Wing, 2003). According to Wing (2003), it is important to place emphasis on understanding that both race and gender are essential to the identities of women of color. Critical Race Feminism emanated from Critical Race Theory (CRT) as an aftereffect of racial and ethnic legal women scholars feeling repudiated by men and White feminist legal scholars. Critical Race Theory is a movement that involves various lawyers, activists, scholars and emancipatory projects that center around: race, racism, knowledge and power. The objective is to study and transform the relationship among race, racism, knowledge and power. This movement began in the mid 70's and originated in the legal field (Critical Legal Studies) and has recently spread to other fields including education.

According to DeCuir & Dixon (2004) CRT specifically involves the following tenets:

- ***Permanence of racism*** (Bell, 1992) which examines how racism remains an enduring component of all aspects of society.
- ***Whiteness as property*** (Harris, 1995) explicates the power and privilege associated with Whiteness.
- ***Interest convergence*** (Bell, 1980) explores how the advancement of people of color are accommodated only when Whites can benefit.
- ***The critique of liberalism*** (Crenshaw, 1988) discusses race consciousness (notion of colorblindness and the systematically slow progress in reaching racial equality).
- ***Counterstorytelling*** (Delgado, 1989) allows voices of marginalized people to be heard rather than silenced.
- ***Intersectionality*** (Crenshaw, 1989) denotes various ways in which race

and gender interacts to shape the multiple dimensions of African American women lives.

Many Critical Race Feminists deviate from CRT by rejecting blanket essentialization of all minorities (Wing, 2000). CRF argues that in addition to the axiom of socially and legally constructed racial power, there is also a social and legal construction of gender (Wing & Willis, 1999, p. 3). More specifically, CRF brings out the gender aspects of injustices. Wing states, “Our anti- essentialist premise is that identity is not additive. In other words, African American Women are not White women plus color, or African American men plus gender” (p.7). However, there are four basic tenets of Critical Race Theory that are applicable when understanding CRF:

- Racial /ethnic identity is a product of social thought and is not objective, inherent, fixed, or necessarily biological.
- Individuals have potentially conflicting overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances.
- Racial/ethnic individuals and groups negotiate intersectionality simultaneously in their lives in relation to other groups within the groups with which individuals are affiliated.
- Minority status presumes a competence for minority writers and theorists to speak about race and the experiences of multiple oppressions without essentializing those experiences (Delgado & Stefanie, 2001).

For the purpose of this study, CRF challenges the notion of unified ‘women’s universal experience’ (Flores, 2000). According to Wing (2003), CRF: 1) constitutes race intervention in feminist discourse, which is highly important because it gives a feminist voice on gender oppression in a system of patriarchy. 2) provides a critique of the feminist notion that there is an essential female voice, that is, that all women feel one way on a subject. 3) highlights the situation of women of color, whose lives may not conform in an essentialist norm. I will be utilizing the basic component of CRF, *intersectionality*, as the theoretical lens to help analyze the experiences of African American women graduate students at predominantly White institutions/campuses.

The concept of intersectionality is a useful analytical lens that expands our notion on the value of examining race, gender, and class differences. Although the idea has

been around as long as women of color have been present, the term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 to avoid the pitfalls that come with identity politics. Crenshaw argued that, “Intersectionality denotes the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of African American women’s employment experiences” (Crenshaw, 1989, p.139). Her major goal was to show how “the intersection of racism and sexism factors into African American women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). According to Bograd (1999), intersectionality is an abstract concept but it relates to real life threatening consequences such as mistreatment and abuse. Examining race, gender, and class as they intersect disrupts the tendency to see and study these aspects of identity as exclusive or separable.

Intersectionality also known as multiplicative identity suggests that women of color are often not included in discussions of racial and gender legal issues (Crenshaw, 1989). According to Brock (2005) “African American women’s struggles have been framed within a false dictotomy of race and sex. Often required to choose between the fight against race or gender oppression. Etter-Lewis (1993) suggests that we resist the temptation to minimize this intersectionality by making either racism or sexism the primary influence on the lives of African American women, instead, “the underlying assumption that life can be divided into discrete components without overlap or interaction is both reductive and misleading” (p.44). African American women have to constantly reassert the need for a combined struggle” (p. 12). McCall (2005) also notes that, “Interest in intersectionality arose out of a critique of gender-based and race-based research for failing to account for lived experience at neglected points of intersection—one that tended to reflect multiple subordinate locations as opposed to dominant or mixed locations (p.1780). “Intersectionality thus highlights,” as Collins explains, “how African American women and other social groups are positioned within unjust power relations, but it does so in a way that introduces added complexity to formerly race, class, and gender only approaches to social phenomena” (p.205). Thus, looking at the experiences of African American women through an intersectional lens is necessary because of the distinct and frequently conflicting dynamics that shape their multiple subject positions (McCall, 2005, p.113).

In this study I used intersectionality to examine how racial identity and gender identity intersect in the context of African American women's lived experiences on predominantly white campuses and to suggest that the nature of this intersectionality is key to developing effective mentorship for these women. In other words, Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality is used to explore the ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping the challenges and mentorship experiences of African American graduate students on predominantly White college campuses. What is often seen on predominantly White campuses is that mentorship does not serve everyone which includes but is not limited to African American women. Often the traditional mentorship relationship which is hierarchical often reflects and reproduces institutional practices that do not benefit African American women. Thus, intersectionality in this study highlights how African American women graduate students are positioned within unjust power relations in a way that adds complexity to race or gender approaches to mentoring.

Although emerging from different disciplines, Critical Race Feminism and Black Feminist Epistemology share more similarities than differences. They emphasize identity politics; the value of racial/ethnic scholarship that offers partial truths and use stories to gain knowledge. According to Few (2007),

CRF and BFE together do not merely offer a story that depathologizes the experiences and choices of their informants, for in doing so; they would misrepresent experiences by hiding dirty laundry or validating unhealthy behaviors. Instead, CRF and BFE offer multiple "partial truths" from within group experience with the intent of accurately contextualizing choices and outcomes while balancing the ability of informants to tell their experience (p.457).

Thus, collectively these feminist lenses place not only behavior under scrutiny but also the sociohistorical context of the African American woman graduate student on a predominantly White campus.

### **Methodology**

Taking my lead from BFE/CRF, I wanted to capture the stories of self-identified African American women graduate students who attended a predominantly White university. Thus I chose to do a qualitative study. As a qualitative inquiry, the goal of this



study was not to collect large samples to make future predictions but to focus on a small sample in order to understand more deeply the nature of the setting, what it means for the participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting (Patton, 2002, p.516). In the next several sections I discuss in more detail, the selection of my participants, my methods and data collection process, my role as researcher as well as the use of counterstorytelling along with BFE/CRF to analyze my data.

### *Participant Selection*

For this study, I sought participants who are/were African American women graduate students at a predominantly White institution who were willing to speak about the challenges they faced as they navigated through their programs. Initially, I used network sampling by contacting various organizations, such as Graduate Students of Color Association (GSCA) and National Black Graduate Students Association (NBGSA) to advertise my study. Ultimately, participants were identified through networking sampling, a type of purposeful sampling described as the selection of information rich cases for a study in depth (Patton, 2003). After identifying some of my participants through purposeful sampling, I used snowball sampling to get additional participants. In snowball sampling, a participant is identified and then the participant recommends others for participation based on the predetermined selection.

I ended up with eight African American women who attended graduate schools in various in the Midwest, South, and North. The women in this study have been an inspiration to me and my work. Hearing their stories brought tears, chills, smiles, and a sense of hope. Before, each interview I would say this African proverb to myself, "Until the lion has his or her own storyteller, the hunter will always have the best part of the story." I would say this to remind myself of my role as the researcher and their role as the storyteller. I would also be reminded of the West Ghana African Adirika symbol Fawohodie which means emancipation, liberation, freedom, and independence. This symbol helped me stay grounded with the purpose of my research, which was to be a creator of new knowledge for African American women and how they experience graduate school. So, I decided to utilize African names as pseudonyms that described the spirit of each participant respectively. It is important to know what each woman brought

to this study. In this study, these women revealed serious challenges that they endured throughout their journey as an African American woman graduate students on predominantly White campuses.

Participant 1 will be referred to as “Afric” which means pleasant. Afric was 28 years old at the time of the interview. She was between the ages of 25-27 when she attended the predominantly White institution that she speaks about in her interview. She was a full time master’s student in the field of science. She graduated and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. degree in the field of sciences at a historical black college/university (HBCU).

Participant 2 will be referred to as “Kali” which means energetic. Kali was 27 years old at the time of the interview and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. degree in the field of science at another predominantly White institution. She was between the ages of 23-26 when she attended the predominantly White institution that she speaks about in the interview. She completed her master’s thesis in the field of science in July 2011

Participant 3 will be referred to as “Afam” which means friendly. Afam was 23 years old at the time of the interview. She was a full time master’s student in the field of education. She graduated in May 2011.

Participant 4 will be referred to as “Rhaxma” which means sweet. Rhaxma was 29 years old at the time of the interview and was pursuing a second graduate degree. She was between the ages of 24-29 when she attended the institution she speaks about in her interview. She was a full time doctoral student in psychology who switched to a full time master’s student in the field of education at the same institution. She left her doctorate program in 2009 and left her master’s program in 2010.

Participant 5 will be referred to as “Saran” which means joyful. Saran was 24 years old and graduated in 2010 with a master’s in the field of education.

Participant 6 will be referred to as “Kamili” which means perfection. Kamili was 27 years old at the time of the interview. She was between the ages of 23-25 when she attended the institution that she speaks about in her interview. She was a full time master’s student in architecture, but left her program after a year.

Participant 7 will be referred to as “Damisi” which means cheerful. Damisi was 31 years old at the time of her interview and in graduate school. She was a mother of two

kids who lived with her parent/s in her hometown. She was originally a doctoral student in the field of performing arts but later became a full-time doctoral student in the field of education at the same institution.

Participant 8 will be referred to as “Nkechi” which means loyal. Nkechi was 43 years old at the time of her interview. She was 33 years old when she attended the institution that she speaks about in her interview. She was a wife and mother during her time in graduate school. She was a part-time doctoral student in the field of education.

#### *Data Collection*

This study was based on individual interviews and written journals collected from all eight participants. I used unstructured in-depth format because my goal was to have a relaxed environment in a conversational mode. Marshall and Rossman (1995) describe in-depth interviewing as a “conversation with a purpose” (p.82). These interviews were held in places where the participants felt free to speak without hesitation. Open ended questions allowed me to get more intimate answers in which I began to understand the challenges that the participants revealed in their stories. According to McMillian & Schumacher (2001), “Qualitative research is interactive face to face research that will require relatively extensive time to systematically observe, interview, and record the process.” One interview and a follow up telephone interview for clarity were conducted for each participant. I also collected written journals from the participants. (See Appendix D)

During late December 2010- March 2011, I traveled to various parts of Ohio, Illinois and Tennessee to conduct initial interviews with participants. I conducted an interview with the Louisiana participant early April 2011. At a later date, I did follow up interviews. These interviews lasted from sixty minutes to three hours. During each interview, I would capture thoughts, terms, and perceptions. In addition, I collected journals from the participants.

Prior to the interview, I answered any questions or concerns from the participants about the study. My initial goal was to interview each participant forty-five - sixty minutes twice, have a follow up interview and collect journals throughout the process. However, some of the interviews lasted an hour to three hours.

I used the interviews of my first two participants to pilot my questions. The interviews in the pilot study were in-depth unstructured interviewing with open-ended questions. There were a few questions I asked, such as-- “Why did you choose your institution?”, “Is this your first time institution for this degree?”, “What did you know about your institution/department before attending?” and “Is this your first experience at a predominantly white institution or a predominantly white educational setting?” --to get the conversation going.

The interviews lasted from thirty minutes to an hour. They could indeed be shorter or longer based on how much the participants have to share. I found myself asking suppositional questions which allowed me to create hypothetical situations to gauge responses. I did that because with some of the questions I found the participants would only say yes or no, nothing more, or disagree. For example, I would ask “How much does race and gender collectively impacted the challenges they faced?” I assumed race and gender collectively impacted every participant’s experience so I phrased the question in such a way, but each participant had their own view. I knew that this was not how my gathering information should go and I decided to revisit/change some of my questions because I did not want to provide assumptions or scenario to the participants.

Overall I was not impressed with the responses, so I redesigned my interview questions so that they would be more appropriate for my study. However, I did discover and found it very interesting that these two participants were not clear on what is a mentor/mentorship which complicated my questions. Also, both struggled with understanding and articulating the dynamics of race and gender. The use of in-depth unstructured interviewing was appropriate so I decided to continue to use that style of interviewing. I still believe that focus group interview would have been interesting, but because of time restraints and the location of participants that is something I will explore in another study.

The two participants in my pilot study were not used in my study, but helped rewrite several questions, such as those that were too general or not specific enough. For example, “What has been your experience at your institution?” Many times, the participants would try to access their overall experience instead of identify the challenges they faced within their departments or that influenced their navigation. Another example,

“How salient is race and gender?” This question did not lead to the importance of racegender and the impact they had on the experiences. Many of the participants did not elaborate on the impact that race and gender had on their experience so I had to add more that question.

Once my interview process and questions were refined I continued. For many of the participants, the second interview was just reaffirming what had been said previously and perhaps adding more details. Interviews were transcribed verbatim.

### *Role of Researcher*

I entered this research feeling both excited and vulnerable. As an African American woman conducting research on African American women, it is imperative that I acknowledge that I am accountable for the portrayal of the story from the perspective of the participants. Often African American women’s stories are mistold, invented, modified, and disseminated by others. I have a personal connection to the subject matter as a graduate student at a predominantly White institution; thus I aimed to not reinforce what often happens to the stories of African American woman. I aimed to tell the story just as it was told to me to the best of my abilities.

I am reminded of my role as a African American scholar who is studying African American people by Ogbu (2003) who stated, “The uniqueness of these Black perspectives are forged through what I term as ‘living Blackness’ which is negotiating one’s humanity through a maze of socially constructed notions of what it means to be Black as part of one’s everyday life” (p.44). This description cited in Ogbu (2003) suggests that the experience of ‘living Black’ is framed by race and racism. However, for me as the researcher, I am identifying that the experience of African American women is framed by race/racism & gender/sexism as they intersect.

A crucial task for me as the researcher was gaining the trust of the participants, which determines the success or failure of the interviews. As an African American woman researching African American women, I came to this research with my own challenges as a student that made me question whether thing were happening because of my blackness and/or my womaness. I also came to this research knowing the importance of mentorship in trying to overcome these challenges. So as a researcher, I was not naïve

or in disbelief of the participants stories or their struggle to understand racegender dynamics and its impact on their experiences.

Since I had similar experiences as my participants, gaining trust was not as complex. I still had to remember my role as the researcher and be mindful that these women were sharing some intimate stories about themselves with me. I knew that once I had the trust of these women, I must cherish it, particularly those who still struggled and feared the telling of their story. I had to make certain that I kept these women stories intact and handled them with care. Once trust is gained, trust can be fragile and must be handled with care (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). After I fully established a rapport, I was then able to begin to see things from the participant's point of view. I really struggled with this last task which was separating me from this study. I had to learn to balance on the line between becoming overly involved and losing the focus of this study.

My role as researcher developed throughout the process as the questions, ideas, answers, and even the relationships with the participants developed. As a qualitative researcher, I set the tone of the interviews. The idea of keeping the interview tone academically focused sounded good, but *sistah to sista* talk was more appropriate for getting at their stories. I really struggled with listening and hearing these women's stories. Each of their stories was very compelling and disheartening for me to hear. I often felt compelled to just stop the interview and say, "I can't do this @#\$, this is too much for me!" I struggled with holding my own emotions during this process. Often I found myself overwhelmed with the data that these women were giving me. I left several interviews mentally and physically drained. I found myself overly submerged in my research and at night I couldn't sleep, as I was constantly thinking about solutions. During times like this, I relied on my *sistah to sista* support circle to help me get refocused on my research in a healthy way. My *sistah to sista* circle was just a group of African American women working on their doctoral degrees, depending on each other for various forms of support from one another. We were actually in the process together, yet differently.

### *Data Analysis*

The process of data analysis involved detailed listening and reading of all interview transcripts and journals which allowed me to look for patterns, themes, and

even emotions within the context of participants' stories. Data analysis in qualitative inquiry consists of analysis, presentation, and interpretation of finds. Patton (1990) describes data analysis as a process that involves continual reflection about data to identify significant patterns and to develop a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveals. The data were analyzed paying close attention to racegender dynamics. As the researcher, it is my task to interpret and make meaning of the collected data. I began the analyzing as I collected the data. After each interview was completed, I would listen to the audio tape and take notes which I revisited once I received the transcripts. I also kept a reflexive journal where I wrote about my feelings during the process, my rationale, methodological decisions, my values and interests, and notes about each participant. Often my journal talked about why I was doing this research, what benefits are there, am I being exploitive or fostering emancipation or liberation for these women. I would often ask myself, "Who really gives a @#\$!?" This self reflexivity helped me stay balanced throughout this process. According to Few (2007), self-reflexivity uncovers and unveils theoretical blind spots internalized and subconscious racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ethnocentrism, ableism, and xenophobia.

As the researcher, it was my goal during the interviews to record the participant's thoughts, feeling, and experiences verbatim as they faced their challenges as African American women on predominantly White college campuses. Their stories revealed various emotions including embarrassment, anger, and tears. I had one question that often caused a pause in the response and then tears. The question I posed was "Could you tell me about the last experience at your institution that caused you to question your academic viability?" Asking the participant to think and talk about this was very complex because it was vulnerable to share that part of self. It was vulnerable for me to have to listen and be accountable for such information.

Black Feminist Epistemology and Critical Race Feminism and the use of intersectionality, as the main framework of this study, examine how racial identity intersects with gender identity (Carbado and Gulati, 2001), specifically for African American women. More specifically, this study suggests that African American women "identities must be multiplied together to create a holistic one when analyzing the nature of the challenges they face on predominantly White campuses" (Wing, 2003, p.7). As an

African American woman researcher, researching African American women from a BFE/CRF lens my responsibility is to analyze these African American women's unique experiences as being both African American and women. This entails how their multiple identities are shaped with predominantly White college campuses, and the impact of these issues on their challenges. Ultimately, my interest in collecting their stories was to examine how they compared to the "majoritarian story" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) which by highlighting the graduation rates of African American women graduate students as compared to their male counterparts, suggests that African American women graduate students are succeeding unproblematically. Furthermore, since the mentorship literature holds that mentorship for minority students is crucial to graduate school success, one could also assume that African American women are succeeding because they are developing sound mentor relationships, or at least better ones than their male counterparts. The stories of my participants challenge both of these assumptions and therefore can be read and understood as counterstories.



## **CHAPTER 4: SOULS OF MY SISTAS: UNCENSORED STORIES**

There is an unexplainable power that evolves from deep within the soul of African American women. In this chapter, I will share uncensored stories from four of my participants so that my readers can get a feel for how these women were impacted by their experiences. These four women stories were chosen for this section because their stories illuminated one or more if not all of the emergent themes that I discuss in the following chapter. The women in this study all possessed unassailable strength, courage, fortitude, and perseverance that aided them through the challenges they faced in pursuit of their advanced degrees. For many of the women in this study they aimed at trying to get the right perspective when going through the challenges they face. Many decided not to look at the temporary challenge by looking at the long-term reward which was an advanced degree. Many decided to ignore the temporary pain by looking at the long-term gain which was creating a path for another sista and proving that they could attain the advanced degree under all circumstances. Many decided not to look at it with the short-term view, “What’s happening to me right now or why is this happening?” Instead, they chose to look at the character that they were building because they hadn’t given up. Deciding to hang in there was not just about them as an African American woman, it was about every African American woman!!! Many of these stories reveal how despite of all of the suffering, indignities, and pains these women have managed to survive and perhaps thrive and by sharing their stories bring revelation and tools for navigating graduate school and healing through the hurt of the process. The roles of these uncensored stories serve as the introduction to the emergent themes that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Each of these four stories identifies challenges and more importantly the impact of those challenges on the women. In addition they reveal how they really counter the dominant story of unfettered success. I will identify three challenges from each of the participants’ stories that will be a great asset to creating a counternarrative. All of the participants identified the absence mentorship as a challenge.

Nkechi’s story reveals what it means and feels like to quit a program, the experiences that African American women who have to balance motherly, wifely, and

community, and the struggles of just arrival and negotiating. Kali's story reveals what it means to be admitted and not accepted, the constant fight to prove that she is an intellect to her faculty, peers and undergraduate students she taught, and how painful it was to fight to stay at a school, but no one listens. Saran's story reveals what it is means to be misadvised, the feeling of loneliness in a place that has politics and norms, and how silence is not always the best option. Damisi's story reveals the struggle of knowing what to negotiate, fighting to separate identity to be accepted in the norms of the culture, and what it means to passively/silently not respond hoping those results would have great outcomes. Collectively, all these counterstories identify some challenges that counters the dominant story and assumptions of how African American women graduate students experience graduate school.

### **Inadequacy, Insecurity and Incompetency (Dreamed Deferred)**

*Sistah Dreamed Deferred (Nkechi), described her experience as the “silent holocaust” because of the challenges she encountered. She stated, “What I experienced was always “unrelated” to the situation or event. It was the silent holocaust of assimilation that caused me to disappear as a Black woman.” My journey was rough I lost myself, my husband, and my dream was deferred! Nkechi quietly thought about her experience before speaking with a few pauses, but she did not have doubts about what she was saying and meaning. She was very reflective and thorough; yet still trying to piece things together.*

So many things in my life were planned as a child. The very fact that I was raised by grandparents who demanded that I know what I wanted to do with my life, and encouraging me to aim for more than a master's degree at the age of seven. I knew absolutely nothing more than I had to go school and be successful and at no time was I overwhelmed by that fact. In a way, I guess I decided at seven that I wanted to pledge.

Fast forward twenty five plus years and I found myself completely overwhelmed and filled with anxiety of epic proportion. In many ways, I felt that I was doomed from the onset. I knew that I wanted to “pledge” but had no idea what was involved in gaining access to this special sorority. By pledging I mean the experience and process I had to endure to join my African American sorority. I knew that it would be hard work and that

“hazing” would be a necessary component to join this group of elite academics. I gladly signed on and was not going to let anything or anyone deter me. I knew that I had to find the right program with the right group of people. I felt that I had found a program that would allow me to grow and become a fine researcher. I looked forward to my new challenge. Immediately I had the rude awakening of realizing that it was an image, it was a façade that things were changing, and that it was really a welcoming to helping students of color make changes and adaptations in their work so that they could go out and continue the equalizer, the field of education, making it a safe space for all different types of people and I think that was devastating to me.

I worked in the program for only a year, but walked away vowing to never return to anything school related. Instantly I became insecure and marginalized in class. When I talked with my professors to try to get “help” with what I was doing wrong, I walked away even more confused. In desperate need of a “translator”, it didn’t help to be told that I was not a good writer. I guess when the look of sheer confusion registered on my face; the comment was clarified by saying that I was not an academic writer. I have always considered myself to be a good writer because I believed in what my teachers told me. I liked my writing style and took it hard to have been “unconstructively” criticized. The feedback was not constructive. The feedback that I would get on my papers were redirecting me in ways that didn’t make sense to me and when I would ask questions about it, it seemed like it got further and further convoluted. It was so abstract that it didn’t make sense to me and so the way I dealt with it was I just didn’t deal with it. I would just throw some things on paper...it was rather hit or miss. I felt like I was just shooting arrows in the dark, blindfolded, and turned backwards. Initially I thought, well maybe I don’t know how to write in a scholarly vein because most of my writing is really woven between, I hear songs in my head, and there are so many lyrics that apply themselves very easily to my writing and I incorporate that in my writing. It’s kind of like; I weave a tale, if you will, as I write. So part of my concern was a) is there really lacking a scholarly frame, ok? The second concern was...am I communicating effectively. What’s in me...is it really reaching my reader, but more importantly, I had to ask myself is my reader a) interested and do they have ears that will allow them to listen or are they so stilted in their dominant culture that they can’t hear me? I have not taken a

class in any form since that fiasco, but on some days, I still wrestle with the notion of “what if I had only”.

I was, I just always felt conflicted, like I ....I did know what I was doing. I had no one to talk with. I asked myself, why the hell are you here? You know, you want a PhD for what? What is your real purpose for doing this? Why do you have this dream anyway? And retrospectively, when I decided to leave my job, I was an assistant principal when I was finally accepted in to the program and I told my HR director that I was going to resign at the end of the school year to pursue graduate work...and he said, why? This is a White man asking me why do you feel you need a Ph.D? And he went on to tell me that he had been very successful in his career and he didn't have a PhD, so why did I feel like I needed one? And what did I plan to do with it? And my response to him was, I don't feel like I have to map my entire career out for you and I'm not asking for you to validate my desire to do this. I will be resigning...you'll get my letter when I return to my office. So that was the whole mindset. I felt like I had already struggled to just arrive...I had worked so hard and emotionally was just absolutely desolate just to get there and then to have comments on my papers that didn't make sense when I have always been an English Language Arts person. I can honestly say, retrospectively, through my high school career, I've always let myself, to express myself in writing and so to hear, all of a sudden, that I don't write well, and I can't fix it...it was extremely frustrating.

I had so many questions about what does it mean to be in a program like this? What are the real requirements? I'm a, my personality I think is, I'm a solution based processing person. Tell me the rubric, tell me what the expectations are, I don't do very well in abstract and everything involved with this was abstract. It was like, very disjointed. Disjointed from the perspective of I didn't know anything about the classes. What's my role when I go to class? I have these assignments and if I have questions about the assignments, I don't feel comfortable saying I have questions because you are a doctoral level student. You don't know this? And so you feel powerless because you don't know and then you're paralyzed because you can't ask to find out.

Between the program and me not feeling connected..and my personal life it was a struggle to express my frustration to my husband... which again led me to be silent and

disconnected and hard to reach? I believe I became a very difficult person to deal with because at school, in the program, I wanted to be ok. I wanted to be brave. I didn't want them to know and them meaning my professors, those who were ripping my papers to shreds that I was struggling. I'm here, I'm going to stay here and that's it...I will not be moved. But on the inside of me, I made a decision, after talking with my Godmother who just felt maybe my ambition to have a doctorate was displaced or maybe this was not the right time because as a married woman, my first priority should be my husband and my family. Culturally, I'm a southern woman so for me to even want to aspire to do this as a working mother and wife...I was already having resistance in my family because the perception was...there's no way you can be in a program of this level and not neglect your duties as a wife and mother. I did not get any better when I received incompletes in two of my classes because of some, again abstract criteria that didn't make sense to me then, and it doesn't make sense to me now, and I read my last papers that I submitted...I probably take them out maybe once or twice a year, just to see if what I said on paper then is really what I wanted to articulate...and I still have that file, and I have not made any changes to that paper because I'm very clear...what I wrote is what I meant to say. I didn't have an audience to hear that though, so after I got that second incomplete coupled with the pressure in my personal life, coupled with the pressure from my family with the opinion that there's no way you can do this as a black woman, who's working, who's married and who has a child. How do you propose to do this and in fact, one of my professors even asked me how was I managing all of that and unfortunately my response was very slick. I said, you know, nobody asked my great great grandmother how do you sleep in the bed with massa and go home and make your black man feel like he's still your man? Nobody ever asked her that. That was a white female...and I said to her, "You simply do it."

Well, as evidenced by my response today, I guess I didn't handle the challenges I faced. I threw myself in to my work. I worked harder. I read more. I wrote and revised and revised, and wrote and revised and tried to pay attention to the road maps that I saw my other white peers doing, particularly white female students who always were very vocal in class, even though I did not see the connection between the material and their commentary. And then I began to be silent. I was silent in my personal life. I was silent

in my professional life and certainly silent as a student. I did..I went to my advisor, a white female, and I just needed to purge. I needed to cleanse. I felt like I just had loser written on my forehead. The only thing I knew I was doing well was my job. I felt that I had a great handle on the professional part of my life. And I tried to, if you will, compartmentalize my life. I'm a system thinker, so ok, you look at the total of who I am. I'm a wife, I'm a mother, I'm a student, I'm a professional, and I'm a woman...and I went to this white female to try to talk to her about the totality of who I am and my experience in this program...my frustration as a student was my primary concern because I was getting feedback from my professors...White males... at that time..All White males who did not seem to receive me well. It was like I was completely misread and I wanted to talk about my personal life because I felt maybe I could do a better job of balancing some of this. I don't want to see your whole roadmap but if you could just give me some landmarks...that would be great...and that went over like...it was a complete and utter waste of time. No understanding...she was white, she was female, she was not married at the time, and had just been reassigned to a different position and probably was experiencing her own struggles in a White male dominated environment and I wanted to be sensitive to that, but at the end of the day, I needed my needs to be met and I needed to understand how do I make my way through this program? I know what I want to do. I want to be here and I continually felt like I had to prove my worth to be there. It didn't go over well. Nothing was accomplished from that conversation...nothing.

I entered the space feeling so completely optimistic. I was on fire, I mean I was passionate. I wanted to, coming from a background, my grandmother was born in 1903 and she had a master's degree, so the fact that as a second grader, I had to decide what I was going to do with my life. I had to tell them. I was raised by my grandparents and they were elderly and retrospectively, I know they did that because they were preparing me to basically be without parents. By the time I was in fifth grade, I knew what college I was going to attend. It was already set that I was going to have a Dr. in front of my name. It was just no other way, so when I got the opportunity, I felt like, ok grandma and granddaddy, I'm here..I did it. I'm in this program. I'm going to do you proud. While I was there, I would just hear the United Negro College motto, "The mind is a terrible thing to waste." And I would sit there in my classes all prepared with my neat little notes

thinking, ok...it looks real shitty, it feels shitty...damn this is shitty, but guess what? Alright, right now, right now, here's the jest of it baby girl. Shit rolls downhill and right now you're on the bottom, but it's not going to be like this forever. Stay focused and my vision began to get blurred. I began to ask myself...look at the sacrifices you're making. You're in a place you feel completely incompetent, more incompetent than I've ever felt in my entire life. I felt one day sitting in class, just like I felt in my advanced American history class as a junior in high school and my teacher was a white male and he asked me about a chapter that he automatically assumed I did not read...and it wasn't a check ...microphone check, if you will...to see how can I assist this student who may be disconnected from this material. It was a...I got you! I caught you off your game. That's how I felt trying to negotiate this space. The space that I'm in right now as I look back on it...I am completely turned off by my experience and the whole idea of graduate school. I quit, didn't have a sister to keep me through the storm, my dream was deferred!!!

I have held onto those feelings of inadequacy and became instantaneously defensive when asked about the program or encouraged to finish what I started. I was an artful dodger and masterfully managed to maneuver conversations about my doctoral work. Ten years later as I speak to you Lara about this, I have a true disdain for the melodramatic, however, having no one to express my feelings about this major setback and feeling like a complete failure if I did share this load with someone. I have to say that I suffered in silence for almost ten years. I used to write poetry, commentaries, pretend political rebuttals, etc., now I don't so much as write a grocery list. My one year experience truly laid the foundation for a phobia. When I have no choice but to write a summary or some type of written correspondence for work, the "labor" is long and the contractions are hard and intense. When I finally "deliver" the document or correspondence, I wonder if I could have been some way to "terminate" the piece. Since I often cannot escape these necessary writings, I wonder if my writing would at least be "adopted" and placed in a loving home. I worry about my writing being in a "safe" place where it can be accepted.

I would like to add these last comments I would like to say that from my personal quest, I do want to get to a place where mentally and emotionally I can really think about

being a doctoral program again. I like the idea of having that invitation to the table. To really make it a better space for some other person. And in conclusion, I want to be able to look back on that program and grow from it and not reflect on it an emotional basket case, cause even when I allow myself to think about it.. I'm overwhelmed emotionally...I still feel all of that anxiety and anger and disappointment and shame. When I see people whom I have not seen in year, who knew me at that time as a student, it's painful when they say...hey doc. I know you finished..and to say no, I didn't finish the program. And they say well what happened, and I've learned to say...lots of challenges and to leave it at that.

**Do I belong here, hmm... I thought I did, but I struggled to show them!!!**

**(Fighting to Belong... Like the little engine that could)**

*Sistah "I think I can" (Kali) described her experiences as a fight with no one in the ring, but she thought she could fight her way to belong in her department. She stated, "I thought everything was peachy keen. I did not see there were problems at first or the impact of race and gender. I did know my field was a White male dominant field." She was a first generation student who said, "This journey has me in disbelief and pain, but no longer naïve about race and gender." She was really down to earth and excited to share her experiences. She was still in school during the interview so she exhibited hurt and anger as she explicitly shared her experiences. She recently graduated and is working on her doctorate at another predominantly White institution.*

So my experience, based upon what they don't do ...going in from undergrad...it's a different experience. Like I said I had to take care of my business, so I thought everything was peachy keen. I didn't initially see that there were any problems. I didn't understand the whole race issue, or social economic issue and all those various issues that are determinants in getting you through graduate school. So say for example, my department, I was the only African-American woman there. Now there were other African, people of African descent graduate students in our department, but in comparison, looking at the statistics, it's still all white students. So you know, we're already considered the minority in itself, so you know, my interaction with the professor as well as with the graduate students, everything was still cool. I didn't think there was any turmoil or any stressful issues, but you know, during my time there, I had a couple of



issues. And I don't honestly know if it was purely because of my race or my gender, but I know if I was a white woman or a white male, you can see my sarcasm between the two, that it would have been handled differently.

Well, initially coming in to my department, I had to qualify by exam. So because I did not score high enough on these particular examinations, I received an F. So you know the GPA for graduate school, your minimum is a 3.0...that's like a C average in grad school. Because of this, my GPA became lower, but as well as not passing the qualifying exams, the views on me in regard to several professors was turned down. The professors thought negative of me and negative of my abilities to even continue on in the program. I'm saying this was my first semester, you know. How the heck can you just tell me that my skills, my abilities, my knowledge and my intelligence are not good enough to make it through by taking one standardized test? I could talk about that in detail. First and foremost, Black people are not good at standardized testing. If you look at the stats, it's a known fact. If you look at my grades compared to my standardized tests scores I've always done better in the classroom in comparison to taking these various standardized tests. So by the end of my first semester, I already had a low GPA because I didn't pass the standardized test, which is primarily as research shows geared to white males and I'm the exact opposite..a Black woman. There was a stigma, I was stigmatized that she can't make it, and she's not good enough. So it made me question myself..Like I already have one degree and one of the hardest degrees you can ever get and you tell me because I didn't pass one standardized test my intelligence is not capable..or I don't compare with my white counterparts...how dare you. So me being the type of person I am I was very thrown off. My mojo went, my mind had changed. I was mentally paralyzed and stuck, but I just could not quit. So second semester, because I failed the examination, my GPA was lower than 3.0, I had to do double time. I had to go H.A.M. hard as a muther@#\$%er to show these White folk that they didn't make an error accepting me. I had to boost my GPA up meaning getting all A's in my classes or I was going to get kicked out. So the funny part is this...one of those particular professor that has used this examination to measure my intelligence or my ability to excel or to even to make it through the graduate program told me, well hey, if you don't get an A on your first examination, maybe this graduate school isn't for you and I politely told this woman

...no ma'am I have goals. I will excel in graduate school and I will not need to have any other correspondence with you.

This experience felt just like somebody putting a gun to your face and say, either you gonna live or die. Chemistry is my life and then you put this gun in my face and say, well I guess you're not...you're about to die. It's like they had control of my life and me being an independent black woman...no one has control over me but the Lord God Almighty. So my first experience was, I cried, I cried, I prayed. I said, Oh Lord...you didn't bring me here for no reason and let your will be done. When I first got there I really didn't reach out to my Black community, which to me, I wasn't raised in that way. Like I originally said, race wasn't an issue to me at first, I just interacted with anybody. Not knowing the other fellow graduate students of color, I just stayed with the flock which as I said, I'm the only Black woman there...the white peers...they couldn't understand, I couldn't tell them, well hey, I'm about to flunk out ...could you all help me? What do you think? I was alone, trying to fake it til I make it....

But afterward, I busted my ass. I said I'm not letting anybody take what I know my God given talent is just because of some stupid standardized test. So I excelled, and I cried, I studied and cried. And then studied and cried and prayed, because I know it's a very stressful situation and you have to be strong, not just physically, but mentally to get through any ordeal like that. My relationship with my mother got stronger because to me, she was the only person who understood what I was going through. I didn't feel...I didn't want to seem weak. Most Black women, we have to be strong Black women. There's no excuse...have to just keep it moving.

My experiences made me pissed.. I was pissed as a motherfucker...you couldn't tell me a damned thing. The motherfucking White people gonna tell me, Kali that I'm not good enough. How dare you. It made me feel that I was weak and someone else had control over me. In the same sense like the shackles was put back on the sister. I was back in slavery days and whatever the white man said was going to go. Another adjective...shit. I wanted to burn all the motherfuckers down. I'm very violent. You gonna fight, I'm gonna battle with you. I was distraught and depressed. I was angry yet still trying to stay in school.

Now my institution not only is it a predominantly White institution, it's an institution where socio-economic status is limiting your overall sense of control of the university. So me being an African-American woman, from lower income...I mean LOWER income...poor and having to teach upper middle class white students and have a sense of respect is a struggle. I could stand up there all day and they could look at me like, who the @#\$! does she think she is? She's an ignorant, ghetto black girl who don't know shit. I had almost 2 degrees in the field. Now every day they challenged me but I didn't let that hinder me but it actually was extra stressful. I didn't worry about teaching; I worried about having to defend myself about shit I knew more about than they'll ever know. Cause this was my field, not theirs. This is just an adjunct course for them.

After all that work I did to prove I belong there, I didn't have a choice about staying for my Ph.D. So we can go back to this whole GPA thing and the standardized tests. So let me give you a general synopsis: I failed the standardized test, GPA got low, increased my GPA, but because of the standardized test, they told me specifically, that no matter if I had the 3.0 or above GPA, I would only be able to get my masters. Now in my program, you can go straight from undergrad to PhD, but they used that one period of time in that standardized test to only terminate me at the master's level. I eventually completed the program but it was difficult and painful knowing that the department really did not think I was capable!!!! I fought and was like the little engine that could...

**Disinterest advisor, No mentor, & Frustrated because more was never enough!**

**(Lost Soul, Lonely Storm)**

*Sistah "Lonely" (Saran) described her experience as a "new beast". She stated, "This was all new, I had no clue, no one, and it was very terrifying experience." She described her journey as one with complexities; yet with a little guidance it would have been more manageable and less stressful. She was a first generation student directly from undergraduate enthused to do research and write. She had recently graduated from her program during the time of the interview. She had a feisty attitude and a cheerful spirit even as she told her story about how the Black male faculty never intervened and helped her. She was very reflective with her thoughts as she offered ways of doing things differently now that she is finish.*

Graduate school was a completely new beast. Being that I went to a predominantly White institution to pursue my undergraduate degree, I was completely comfortable with being one of a very few Blacks/people of color in an academic setting. However, the culture was much different and from the first moment that I started my program I could feel it, but I could never figure out why. I don't know what was different, but I felt that everyone had some piece of information that I was missing out on. As I did in undergrad, I looked for someone to help me out. I felt that I was behind everyone else in the class and I could not catch up, but because I didn't know what I needed I didn't know who to reach out to and what to ask for. It seemed that everyone else was finding their niche, finding support, and maneuvering the program with ease/success while each day was a struggle. I was grateful for the professor at my undergrad institution for his support, but he could only take me so far.

I remember reaching out to a Black woman who was a fulltime professional in the office for which I was a graduate assistant. I tried to sit and talk with her, but she always seemed too busy or very guarded with information. Looking back, I now understand that she herself was very much overworked and struggling herself to keep her head above water. Beyond that, she was of the mindset that she had to "protect" her career because things were "political" at this institution. So I can't take any of it personal, but if she would have only taken a few minutes a week to talk about her experience in graduate school or share that what I was experiencing was not totally uncommon and that I could make it, she really could have saved me from a lot of tears. While I know this, even sometimes to this day, I resent her for not trying to help a young Black woman, who I am sure she was aware, was struggling.

There were only two other Black women in my program. One was a PhD student who had been navigating through the program for over 5 years and another started in my cohort and was pursuing her Masters with me. I also find myself being resentful to the PhD student for not helping me and my peer out during our time of loneliness, confusion, and struggle during graduate school. Not once did she say we could make it or give any hints. I remember reaching out to her sharing that I was having a hard time and if should could lend any resources. I remember her always saying, "Sure, you'll have to come over sometime", but would never respond to set up a time to talk or even talk with me when

she was around. I specifically remember one time, she just so happened to stop by my office and she stuck her head in to say “hello”. She came in and started to talk about things, but she was so quick to cut off my story and add her experience that she never took the time to listen. I really feel that she had to have had useful knowledge after being in the program for 5 years that could have been helpful.

O, I forgot about a piece of my history....I am the first person in my family to go to college, which adds another gap in information. The other Black woman in my program had similar struggles, but she was handling them much better than me. I believe part of this was because she was an English major before coming to the program which made her a stronger writer. She was also the daughter of two college educated parents, one of which was a Student Affairs professional. While I understand that her parents didn't alleviate the struggles of being a Black woman in graduate school, having a parent who had been through the system did give her an advantage that I did not have. For example, she knew the difference between research assistantships and a graduate assistantships-I had no clue, or the importance of being linked up with a professor who had similar research interests as your own. Nonetheless, she and I became like peas in a pod. She helped me out and I did what I could for her. We ate together, studied together, socialized together, encouraged one another, and made it. The major thing that made our experience different was that she was advised by the only faculty who understood student of color identity development in our department. While, I understand that all students need the support of all who can help them and those people are not always people of color, she was advantaged because he understood her research my advisor had no idea. But because I didn't think it was “politically appropriate” to ask for another advisor and trusted the committee that placed me with my advisor, I never challenged the process and it cost me my thesis and M.S.

When I began the program, I had my eyes set on writing a thesis to graduate with a Master's of Science in Higher Education Administration. I am the first to admit that my writing skills are/were the not best, but I am and was confident that I could have accomplished this task. However, my frustration with an advisor who knew very little about my research interests (students of color-identity development), my desired methods (qualitative), and didn't believe in my ability left me totally defeated. I remember

walking to his office for each meeting extremely nervous of the things that he would say. I felt that he consistently challenged me but never gave me tools to make things better. For instance, he would advise me each week to research more, read more but would never give me the 'okay' to move any further. It got around time to submit for IRB approval and I felt that he did everything in his power to slow the process down. I even remember him telling me that the M.S. could not be completed in 2 years and that I'd have to stay longer to complete it, while my peer was on track and completed it just in time. She and I began in the same place but were advised totally different which I feel was very influential in her success. She was instructed to use research done in a class during our first year to be a pilot for her research while I was advised that I had all the time I needed, and was on track, to pick a topic. She was doing early research while I was still being challenged to find a topic. While she and I talked about our different advise, I trusted my advisor and felt that he was leading me in a different direction, but he knew what he was doing and she and I would end in the place, I couldn't have been more wrong. While I will not blame my failure solely on him, I must admit that I am confident that if I had the support and guidance she had from an advisor who understood my research, it may have been more likely for me to complete the task.

The even more frustrating part about that story was that the Black professor in the program shared with me, after classes were complete, that he wondered why I never asked for him to be my advisor. To this day, I wonder why he never made any close suggestions that he could help me out. While he and I did talk about my research, per my initiation, he would never really dig in with me and I think that was out of respect for his colleague. I am sure he too was navigating through the system.

Graduate school was a long two years of my life. There were way more tears than smiles, and I really think it was because I was without a guide, trying to figure everything out alone. While I count myself blessed to have complete my Ed.M in Higher Education Administration I will forever feel like I cheated myself and quit because I didn't reach my goal. For this reason, I think it is of major importance to have mentors and for people to reach out to younger men and women, specifically Black women, to share the stories of how they made it and give a listening ear to those who are struggling.

The even more frustrating part is that I still feel that I have not found anyone to mentor me. I feel that I am still figuring things out for myself while everyone else has the key to success. The greater frustration is that I think people think I think I have it together and I don't, I really could use some guidance. I've reached out to so many with no responses, it has to be me. Yet, if someone would tell me what I'm doing wrong I'd fix it. I have done some intense soul searching and I don't know what it is. I am working on my follow-up in hopes that that will help. However, I feel much more confident in my abilities than I did in graduate school and working to build a support network. It may take awhile, but I will not let Saran fail Saran again. I'll push through, take my time, and make this future as I want it. I graduated, but it was a lonely storm.

**The African American spokesperson & racial comments**  
**(Still I Rise)**

*Sistah "Still I Rise" (Damisi) described her experience as a death notice because school was killing her softly. Damisi was full of energy as she shared her story with fire and rage in her voice. She had energy and a spunk that was refreshing to see and hear. She said, "This journey was wrought with contradictions!" As she recounted her story, she struggled through critically reflecting on how she was good enough to be accepted into the program, but not good enough to excel in the program, or how she would negotiate being the spokesperson for her race, and a strained and hostile relationship with her advisor.*

The Theatre department that's a whole different place. And I mean honestly...I almost left the school. It was rough. The theatre department when I first got there in August of '07, I was the only Black; for the most part I was the only female. There was another female but she was higher up in her course work. And then I was the baby that was still left in course work. There were no African Americans that were ABD but there were at least some other women who were ABD. So when I got there it was instantly...I really felt like "oh here's the little black girl and we're going to take every advantage of that possible." Like it would drive me crazy when we would have discussions and something black would come up, be it popular culture, be it theatre be it just general discussions I would always be what I like to call "the black question." Like "oh you're black so you can tell us blah, blah, blah, blah or blah or I heard this song on the radio

today and you're black what does that mean?" It was that whole attitude of "black is only one thing it can only be defined as one thing and you have to fall into this box. You have to validate blackness for us."

I faced a lot of challenges, but I will start with my last semester in the Theatre Department. We're sitting in class, Intern Graduate Studies, which oddly enough I didn't take until my second year because, well my first semester my second year, the theatre department doesn't have specific order you take courses in. So we're sitting in class, it's me and three white male students, my white female professor, who again is my advisor, my major professor, is teaching this course. She comes into class and she, some kind of way, we did not start talking about the reading, we started talking about curriculum vitas and the whole, you know who gets a job and where do you want to work and what type of universities there are and so on and so forth. And so at the end of the conversation she proceeds to tell each of my white male counter parts why they would get a job. "Oh you're really good in this" and "you'd love to work in History and a lot of universities are looking for History professors" those types of things. And so after she tells them she can begins with the readings from the night prior and one of my white male counter parts and I know it was not to be ugly he raised his hand and said "you didn't say anything about Damisi." And she looks back and she says "oh Damisi will get a job, she's Black." And she goes right back to talking about the readings like it never happens. And like at that point I'm thinking "this is my advisor. This is the person that I'm supposed to be depending on. This is my go to person. This is the person that is supposed to guide me through this process for the next 3, 4 5, you know however long it takes to complete the course work; pass comps, and write the dissertation. This is supposed to be the person I believe in... When she doesn't believe in me. That same semester, same professor, same course we took a midterm. She gave us 45 minutes to take it. No notes, it was a, you know you type it. Mine turned out to be, I think it was only two questions, two or three questions. Mine ended up being about two and a half pages, double spaced. She was not happy with it. She gave me a C. She told me she was not happy with my writing. Which I actually got that comment as well a lot, that I did not use big words, I need to expand my vocabulary. And so my issue with that was when I applied to the department they requested a writing sample. They had no issue with my writing with the writing sample.



So why...because I know I did not change as a writer from May of 2007 to August of 2007. My writing style did not change neither did my writing ability. So she tells me to spend the summer in the Center for Academic Success. She gave me an "I" in the course and she said "and you'll take this test again, this exact same test at the end of the summer, once you learn how to study and develop your vocabulary and write..." I mean she had these little...really I felt like they were undergraduate assignments and that the lady in the Academic Success worked with me on. But I stayed with it because again my goal was to get a Ph.D, I'm on a fellowship, I am at this university, I want this. You know? So I spent my summer doing all that foolishness. She gives me the exact same test. This time when I complete it is 8 pages and I have no problem admitting that it's a much better work than it was the first time around. She gives me the same C! My issue is that it is the exact same test. So either you were lying when you gave me the first C or you're lying when you gave me this C. Because either way something had to have changed. You're not going to tell me that I spent...I mean even with the lady in the Center for Academic Success she had me write the paper at the beginning where she said to her daughter the formal writing, you know who actually teaches writing, her daughter gave me one grade on it. We spent the summer doing everything and I rewrote that paper, her daughter moved me from a C to an A. But my professor was still saying that my writing abilities were at the same C. So they called me and they're like "we don't think you're going to make it in graduate school." And I said "but you've kept me here a year and a half and you don't think I'm going to make it in graduate school?" And it's like I jump through all your hoops and this is how you treat me. And I decided at that moment that...also I think what made it so much more difficult was that it was the day before classes started that they made this decision. So I mean I'd already signed a new lease for my apartment. You know what I'm saying? Things of that nature that I could not get out of. So what I did was...with the Theatre department you have to have a minor. I had taken a course in ELRC, Educational Leadership, Research, and Counseling, that's where the higher education department is housed. It was an Ethics in Education course with an African American female professor which one was my first like, breath of fresh air. Like there was so much almost drowning in the Theatre department that when I could go into a classroom and see somebody who looked like me at the front of the room who, although

we may have grown up in two totally different cities, two totally different regions of the United States, with different experiences and different...beliefs, just because she looked liked me made me feel better about who I was. Because I had been in a department where honestly it seemed like black scholarship was not scholarship. Like we were not encouraged to read anything ethnic unless we were in the African American Theatre class or the African Theatre class, you know. It was very...outside of that we're reading all these old, staunch, white men but I'm reading these white men to tell me about black literature, about black plays, about black drama. And I'm not saying that "outsiders can't do insider research" but what I'm saying is that outsiders should not be the end all of insider research. I don't feel like you can truly understand the plight of an African American if you've never been and African American. I'm not saying you can't research it. I'm not saying that you can't attempt to understand. I'm not saying that you can't attempt to make others understand. But you should not be the only source that is used.

So I had all those experiences and spending that summer in the education class made it...it gave me something new, it gave me something different. And in theatre we had to have a minor so I had already decided that Education was going to be my minor. And of course higher ed because I was interested in teaching at the college level, even though I had never had a higher ed course. One of the higher ed professors had come in and taught two days of the education course and I was very happy with him. I was very happy with the way that he taught the class. There was more of a...we had an open discussion. It was not I am the professor this is how this is, if you don't like it you'll get over it. You'll learn it my way. You'll regurgitate it my way and that's the only way you'll move forward. Because that's how I felt in the Theatre department, that there was no room for anything that was not...well it's specifically written right here in black and white and specifically what the professor told you to read right here in black and white. So I got to the point where I was going to just leave school because I knew that I could not get any further in the Theatre department and it just so happened that I went to talk to the Higher Ed people that summer about minoring in higher ed and they were fine with it, it was great. So this is the day before...I'm sorry it was the Friday before classes started, I had no idea what to do. I sent an email to the Higher Ed department and I was like "hey I'm not going to take any classes over there. I'm no longer going to minor. I'm actually

not going to stay in the PhD, so on and so forth” because I got the C anyway so I was going to lose my fellowship. So I didn’t have any way to pay for school. I did not want to take out those types of loans. You know PhD loans are real different from the other ones. And then of course like I said I had an apartment, I had a car note, like those are real loans. And so I got a message back that said “just come talk with us. If we can’t get you an assistantship this semester we’ll get you one by next semester. Just don’t go anywhere. If you really want to be a PhD we can make this happen.” And that night via email and by that Monday morning I was registered in all Higher Education courses and I started the Higher Ed program the fall of ’08. And I never looked back, I left one program and I am enjoying a department that welcomes my work.

There were no African Americans in the faculty or the administration of the Theatre Department. So there was really nobody I could talk to who I felt like understood me. There were women, but those were women who were not of color. So they still often did not understand what was going on. Let me take that back, there was one woman of color who was a Master’s professor but she was so bogged down by the environment that she was trying to get out basically with the same fervor that I was trying to stay in with. I mean actually she did. She left at the end of my first year and got another job somewhere else. And I felt that from my African professor as well but I explained, I really felt like he was the kind I been here so long they not going to make me leave because he was tenured, because he was perceived by the rest of the university even though the department took him for granted. I think that was the only reason he’s still stayed. So there was no support, so I constantly felt like I was really by myself, it was like I was on this island and I can see land and I know land is there and they keep telling me to come you know to come and be with them on the land, but there’s no hope, there’s no bridge, there’s no way to get to the land. Also, I felt like I was not being taken seriously. I felt like I was very small and a joke...oh, your words aren’t big enough, I mean where in the definition of scholarship does it say you’re supposed to use words over 7 letters, who decides what words are big enough or not big enough for a scholarship. I know a wonderful scholar and she purposely uses smaller words so people can engage with her information, so what’s the difference there? Why is my scholarship wrong because my words are small? The other thing is it’s more than isolation because

it's almost more like a slap in the face because you want to belong, you aim to bend and you'll hold your tongue and you'll try to move in to their situations the way you need to and they still tell you that you're not good enough. But because you're not a professor in his classroom, I'm on this fellowship and I need to an extent where there's a lot of minority, because the next black person who applies for a fellowship, I don't want you to tell him no cause the last black person you let in you know?

I had never done the angry Black woman, especially at school, I mean it's about education, it's about a lot of people to think and feel any way they need to, to understand things, and I was constantly hitting a wall, so I want to be the angry Black woman, but I was raised that it was the worst thing to do. The best thing to do was whatever to get the degree and move on with your life. And I was really torn with that, like when I go and call my momma to complain she says, "you got to do what she say" and so like I was constantly stuck in the place where I wanted to go home but I couldn't and I honestly, I hate to say this, I had congestive heart failure in the fall of 08 and my doctors said they believe that the stress of school is what did that because they encouraged me not to go back to school, and I think definitely, if I had not changed departments, I would not have changed departments, you know that whole semester of paperwork, but I was taking course in higher ed, but I want to say if I had not had all those issues right at the end of August, because classes started at the end of August and I had congestive heart failure in October. It honestly may have been the stress, I don't know and the doctors of course won't say that's what it was, but they were very much in conversation after I had those issues. When I got ready to go back to school, it was very much a part of the conversation. Honestly, the theatre department may have been killing me, I mean, I had never cried at the end of the day, no other time in life. I've been married, divorced, caught my husband cheating on me and I was no crier. So it made me question who I was because the persona I thought I was could take this...I can't take this. So either this is more than I'm use to taking or they're turning me in to somebody else. All the years of experience whether it was racist or not, there was always another black or brown or Hispanic, somebody else in the room who could understand. There was nobody who could understand.

A year later I still question my scholarship, is not because I'm not a scholar..I feel queasy because of the time I was in the theatre department and people telling me I was not because I know I have not changed as a writer or even as a researcher from 2 years, not the kind of change that they were saying I needed. I know my words are no bigger. I know that, for the most part, my idea process is not any different. I still question my scholarship even though I've been to conferences where senior professors have taken me over after it was over and said, wow that was wonderful. I used to teach that and never thought about it like that, but I still question because of that one year of all of the questioning of my work. I'm in another department, still I rise!!!!

### **Conclusion: Understanding Counterstory**

Each of these four stories share various challenges and experiences that identify themes that would lay the foundation for a critical counterstory that challenges the dominant story of African American women's experience in graduate school. Counterstorytelling is a method of recounting the experiences and perspectives of racially and socially marginalized people (Yosso, 2006, p.10). Richard Delgado (1989) states that storytelling is a powerful means for creating meaning as well as challenging myths. As oppressed groups cry out for a narrative, Delgado (1989) suggests that "oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation" (p.2436). Solórzano and Yosso (1989) defines counterstorytelling as both a method of telling the story of those people whose experiences are not often told and as a tool for exposing, analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse, the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Ladson-Billing and Tate (1995) suggests, "The use of personal narratives and stories as valid forms of "evidence" to document inequity or discrimination and respond to only quantitative data that measures discrepancies "the voice of people of color is required for a complete analysis of the educational system" (p.58). Critical race theorists use counterstories in the form of discussion, archives, and personal testimonies because it acknowledges that some of the members of the marginalized groups, by virtue of their marginal status, tell previously untold or different stories based on experiences that challenge the discourse and beliefs of the dominant group (Delgado & Stefanic 2001; Villalpando & Bernal, 2002). In other words, counterstories shatter complacency and

challenge the dominant discourse (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p.32). Solórzano and Yosso posit that storytelling and counterstorytelling experiences can help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance. Delgado & Stefaniec (1993) suggest that, “A counterstory challenges the story of majoritarian story or that bundle of presuppositions, perceived wisdoms, and shared cultural understandings persons in the dominant race bring to the discussion of race” (p.462).

Moreover, Hilde Nelson (2001) suggests that counterstories are designed to resist the evil of diminished moral agency in two ways: 1) by uprooting harmful stories that constitute the subgroup member’s identity from the perspective of an abusive, dominant group, counterstories aim to alter the dominant groups’ perception of the subgroup. 2) by uprooting the harmful identity-constituting stories that have shaped a person’s own sense of who she is, counterstories aim to alter the person’s self-perception. Thus, the role of counterstorytelling in my research is to replace the harmful stories with counterstories. The majoritarian story of African American women at PWIs is one that is shaped by both the absence of stories in the literature about the mentoring experiences and the statistics of graduation success of African American women graduate students on predominately White campuses which sends a message out that nothing is wrong because African American women are getting to done despite of all when the reality is something is truly wrong when there is a huge absence of the richly textured experiences of how these women are succeeding in these hostile spaces. Although counterstories can be powerful individual testimonies both creative and painful, Lee Bell (2003), suggest that “Counterstories can also bear witness to institutionalized and unequal social relations that the dominant culture tends to minimize or deny” (p.8). The use of a counterstory frame will bring critical insight regarding the experiences of African American women graduate students on predominately White campuses by trying to reveal and understand the challenges which they are often confronting. It is through counterstorytelling that African American women in White spaces according to hooks (1989) engage in the analysis of our own telling. The use of counterstory in this study is not disprove but to disrupt the dominant narrative of success of African American women graduate students but to illuminate challenges and how race and gender shape stated challenges. These counterstories will allow exploration of how African American women graduate students

at PWIs navigate through stated challenges including mentoring experiences and how they respond.

Counterstories cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises and myths which are held by the dominant. The ultimate goal of counterstories is to provide the correlating link between diverse worldviews of people of color for those who are unfamiliar with their experiences and bring out the dominant issues found in the data collection (Gilborn & Ladson-Billings, 2009). In this study, the dominant story that is being countered is that the quantitative data of how African American women graduate students are graduating at higher numbers when compared to their male counterparts perpetuate the idea that detrimental/traumatic challenges do not exist. The stories of these women raise questions about the narratives that exist about the overall experiences of African American women graduate students on predominately White college campuses. The general idea of counterstories is not to replace narratives with new ones, but it allows room for stories of those marginalized. Delgado (1995) says that, “Stories not only open up other voices that have been marginalized, but can also put them in dialogue with the dominant narratives in the ways that highlight connections and conflicts (p. 23)

In essence, I have analyzed the data for important themes that address my primary research questions. In chapter 5 I go on to discuss how the emergent themes lay the foundation of for a critical counterstory that addresses some of the problematic assumptions that are rooted in the dominant narrative of success of African American women graduate students.

## CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS: EMERGENT THEMES

Although this study is focused specifically on African American women graduate students on predominately White college campuses, it is not my intention to essentialize the experiences of all African American women graduate students. I aim to identify the challenges these women face and how racegender dynamics have shaped their challenges and most specifically the challenge of finding appropriate mentorship.

The women in this study faced a host of different challenges as they pursued their advanced degrees. Although their challenges were distinct in some ways, they all seemed to fall under one of four emergent themes, which were consistent and comparable across the participants' stories. The first theme is focused on how various racegender microgressions lead to discouragement and how that discouragement often leads to an intense struggle with self-doubt. The second theme which was explicit in each account suggests that perhaps the greatest challenge that these women faced was finding appropriate mentorship and/or trying to figure out what to do given the lack of such mentorship. The third theme which was evident in all of the stories except one emphasizes how these women were all engaged in what I will call painful perseverance or the willfulness to succeed despite the painful challenges. The last theme was racegender awareness which suggested that many of the participants struggled with race, gender, racegender awareness. In my analysis, I look at how racegender dynamics shaped the challenges that they faced.

### Emergent Themes

#### **Theme I: Discouragement**

*Sometimes you have to encourage yourself. Sometimes you have to speak victory during the test. And no matter how you feel, speak the word and you will be healed; speak over yourself, encourage yourself in the Lord (song lyrics from Donald Lawrence performed by Tri-City singers).*

These lyrics taunted my spirit as I listened to and read journals from each of the women as they relived and retold challenges they faced discouragement which led to self-doubt. Discouragement happens in all areas of life. Specifically for the participants in this study who were continuously putting their best to ensure academic success, only to



get damaging responses instead of a positive feedback or constructive criticism. The women in this study faced a host of different challenges like the stress of family duties, lack of appropriate mentorship, the struggle to prove the adequacy of their writing skills and intellectual ability, and the fight to affirm their self-worth amid the degrading perception their professors and other support staff had of them. The women in this study all dealt with discouragement differently, but some became so discouraged, so distressed and as a result quit their programs with the idea to never return to school again. In this chapter, I will reference stories from the previous chapter in addition include stories from other participants as they speak about the various things that happened that caused them to become discouraged.

In Chapter 4, Nkechi spoke of her struggle between her duties as a mother and a wife and her desire to do doctoral work which led to her quitting her program. She writes in her journal,

My advisor is now the new department chair. She's seems really overwhelmed. I try to talk to her about my personal life. My husband and I at each other's throat and abyss is widening. I fear that I am losing my marriage. She tells me that if my husband can't support me I should make some changes. She is a great listener but it's perfunctory. At this moment all I want is peace in my life, in my house, and to stop feeling like a failure. I'm told I am not a scholarly writer and my marriage is failing. I quietly made a decision to quit the program. Too many things were going wrong, I gave up!!!! Maybe this isn't the right time... I'm hurt, I lost my fortitude, I lost my marriage and my dreams were replaced with a taste so bitter that when I hear the name of X university I want to spit. The discouragement I felt by feeling invisible, troubled, and overwhelmed caused to be become paralyzed and often speechless....

#### *Motherly, Wifely, and Scholar Duties*

Nkechi faced the challenges of being a mother, wife, and a Black female intellectual. As a Black female intellectual she faced being alienated from her own community and not being fully respected in the White academic community. What Nkechi faced is clearly racialized and gendered as she tried to find a balance between being an African American woman who was a caregiver that sacrificed various duties and roles to also be an intellectual. Not only did Nkechi face these issues at school, but also with her family and community. Her comment from her Godmother about “not outsmarting her husband” is similar to what bell hooks speaks about in *Breaking Bread*.

In Nkechi's case, the choice to become a Black woman intellectual was more damaging than good. Hooks (1991) states, "Being too smart was synonymous with intellectuality and that was cause of concern, especially if one was female" (p.149). In addition to home struggles and trying to balance school struggles, what Nkechi faced was had both sexism and racism working against her in a world where being an intellectual meant being a man and more specifically White man. For several years there has been a representation of Black females and their duties to serve others which in Nkechi's story became a challenge. She was trying to understand school, manage a marriage, and meet the needs of a White world and Black community. Grace and Goutro (2000) noted,

As women strive to overcome resistance to access and accommodation in higher learning, they are left to work within a narrowly constructed institutional definition of commitment to graduate education that frequently ignores . . . their right to balance commitments in terms of their responsibilities in the homeplace and the university. (p. 10)

Nkechi's story is representative of many African American women who do not fit in the traditional scholar academia model which is predominantly White, male, middle-class, single, and childless. The culture of academia allows virtually no space for women of color who must negotiate a fine line between family, community and academic work. Younes and Asay (1998) conducted a study with graduate women to explore their process of role negotiation and how it impacted their academic success. The authors noted:

The women painted an enlightening picture of not only the daily struggles that all women face as they attempt to integrate their multiple roles, but the added struggle of graduate work. This seems to be a turbulent process filled with paradoxes . . . The polarization stems from the commitment and obligation that these women feel towards their families while trying to nurture their education needs and career aspirations. (p.38)

### *Navigating the Classroom*

In addition, in chapter 4 Nkechi and Saran, both shared stories about how they wished they had someone to tell the rules of graduate school. Saran described how she never questioned things because she didn't know the norms or politics:

I just let things be because I assumed what I was being told was correct and that everyone had by best interest. No matter how upset I was or didn't understand things I silently allowed them to happened because, I just did not know and didn't

want to challenge the dominant-centered epistemological and philosophical ideologies that existed or cause conflicts amongst the professors.

Saran's experience reveals that she wanted to adopt the rules and norms and that it was a part of being socialized in the culture. However, as her story reveals she was forced to adjust her behaviors and natural forms of expressions. She refused to aggressively express her interests and needs in the department which caused various forms of negative emotions. Such socialization practices constitute a social narrative that dehumanized Saran's journey as a student. Critical race theory/feminism reminds us that sexism, racism, and dehumanization are historical phenomena (Bell, 1987; Ladson-Billing & Donner, 2005; Wing, 2003).

The challenge of life outside of the academy for African American women is just as demanding and real as life within the academy. For African American women, education fulfills multiple personal edifications, meeting the needs of their purposes, immediate communities, and meeting the needs of other and larger communities. It is the responsibility of the African American woman to know what is best for everyone, yet sustain in school as well. Fully acknowledging what it means to be an African American woman in this space means strategically planning to negotiate the practices and policies that cause hurt and pain that often leave women broken and in despair at the expense of attaining a degree.

In addition to trying to adapt to the socialization process while being discouraged, African American women graduate students experience racial micro aggressions. Racial micro aggressions is defined as "commonplace verbal or behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults" (Sue et al., 2007, p.278). The stories shared by the women in this study reveal a new form of thinking about racial aggressions and I called it racegendered micro aggressions. Creating a new term will assist in understanding the intentional/unintentional, covert/overt, recognized and ignored racegendered assaults that African American women on predominantly White college campuses face. In chapter 4, Damisi speaks about race and gender in the classroom and how it made her feel to be ignored and looked upon as the Black spokesperson.

As an African American woman Damisi was faced with multiple positionalities in the classroom. As indicated by Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1998) multiple positionalities can have a significant impact on the overall classroom dynamics and the learning environment. Arguably that comment the White female teacher made about her and the invisible gesture would not have been said if Damisi was an African American male. Such comments and behaviors are similar to those that led to The Black Feminist Movement, which was a response to, the Black Liberation Movement and the Women's Movement. In an effort to meet the needs of black women who felt they were being racially oppressed in the Women's Movement and sexually oppressed in the Black Liberation Movement, the Black Feminist Movement was formed. All too often, "Black" was equated with black men and "woman" was equated with white women. As a result, black women were an invisible group whose existence and needs were ignored. The purpose of the movement was to develop theory which could adequately address the way race, gender, and class were interconnected in their lives and to take action to stop racist, sexist, and classist discrimination. That comment about her getting a job could easily be looked upon as a racist comment, but it is inflected with sexism as well as she was also ignored. In addition, Damisi faced being overlooked in the class until the issues were about race. Often times in the predominately White classrooms where race is the issue the expectation is that the minority person will have the answers. Damisi became frustrated with being the Black spokesperson yet she kept talking. Similar to hooks (1989) assertion that Black women talk back, Damisi views speaking out not as speaking for the entire race but as the voice of her experience and understanding. Damisi provided her perspective on educating others about African American people and culture in America,

Like it would drive me crazy when we would have discussions and something black would come up, be it popular culture, be it theatre, be it just general discussions I would always be what I like to call "the black question." Like "oh you're black so you can tell us blah, blah, blah, blah or blah or I heard this song on the radio today and you're black what does that mean?" It was that whole attitude of "black is only one thing it can only be defined as one thing and you have to fall into this box. You have to validate blackness for us." And I mean it got so bad that even in my African Theatre class, which I probably don't know anymore about Africa than the average American because I have never been. I don't know anyone who lives there. I have no direct ties. As we all know slavery took about 400 year chunk out of people's history so there is no connection to that whole...you know...process to that whole life before slavery. So I don't

know anything about Africa. But again often I was asked “what do you think the author thinks?” You know, “what do you think the playwright thinks because you’re both black?” And again, no those are two different things. The playwright is from a totally different continent that has a totally different value system, a different way they were raised, and different way that she coaches in daily life that I can’t understand. People could not get that I did not have a counter response for each thought.

Damisi’s story illustrates a common scenario (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) for African Americans specifically when they are the only one in class. Having to respond to classmates questions about race or culture adds another pressure for African Americans in general that their White peers do not have. In addition, the pressure of womaness and the burden of being a representative for self, family, and community are being self questioned if a valid response is not provided.

Another racial micro aggression that was evident in some of the participants stories involved their abilities to become scholars or produce scholarly writings which led them to questioning their abilities or worth. In chapter 4, Nkechi and Damisi both shared stories about how they had derogatory messages told to them about their writing and inability to write:

Nkechi,

The feedback was not constructive. The feedback that I would get on my papers were redirecting me in ways that didn’t make sense to me and when I would ask questions about it, it seemed like it got further and further convoluted. It was so abstract that it didn’t make sense to me and so the way I dealt with it was I just didn’t deal with it. I would just throw some things on paper...it was rather hit or miss. I felt like I was just shooting arrows in the dark, blindfolded, and turned backwards.

I can honestly say, retrospectively, through my high school career, I’ve always let myself, to express myself in writing and so to hear, all of a sudden, that I don’t write well, and I can’t fix it...it was extremely frustrating. Initially I thought, well maybe I don’t know how to write in a scholarly vein because most of my writing is really woven between, I hear songs in my head, and there are so many lyrics that apply themselves very easily to my writing and I incorporate that in my writing. It’s kind of like; I weave a tale, if you will, as I write. So part of my concern was a) is there really lacking a scholarly frame, ok? The second concern was...am I communicating effectively. What’s in me...is it really reaching my reader, but more importantly, I had to ask myself is my reader a) interested and do they have ears that will allow them to listen or are they so stilted in their dominant culture that they can’t hear me?

The experiences that Nkechi and Damisi had in the classroom are stories that many African American women share which led me to write an article which is still in progress, *I'm not CRAZY, Neither are you my SISTA...please believe everything gonna b'aight!:* *Using critical race feminism, black feminist epistemology, and counterstories to bring an critical awareness to the untold journeys of African American Women Graduate Students in Troubling Spaces and Places.* This article focuses critically on the racialized and gendered consequences surfaced in the experiences of African American women graduate students at predominantly White colleges. The socialization, negotiation, and the questioning that the women in this study asked themselves made me say, “No you’re not crazy and you have some validity to your experiences, but it is no longer just a racial issue; its racegendered.”

Nkechi and Damisi both on various occasions would ask me, “Am I crazy for thinking like this?” I would politely response, “I’m not crazy, neither are you my sista everything will be aight”. What these women stories reveal is that most of their previous life experiences, interests, worldviews, beliefs, and scholarly thoughts were not seen as valid because of their racegender existence. Having to process the various forms of derogatory messages, questioning their research interests/goals or even questioning their abilities to become holders and creators of new knowledge created hostility and a hostile environment. Saran speaks more specifically about how hostile things can become for students as she shares an experience with her White male advisor as he questioned her abilities to write and produce scholarly work.

I met with the guy every two weeks and I would go in there and I remember, you know for about three or four weeks in a row I would leave crying. It was frustrating because I felt like...like I said he, I just didn’t think he knew my research. Like there would be times when you know when I was beginning writing my thesis where he’d say “do some research, get some articles, do some reading” and I would go out and I would read you know 10 to 12 articles and come back and you know, “this is what I found.” “Ok, well go research more.” So I would go and I would read more and I would come back and every time I would come back he would tell me stuff like “well I don’t think you’ve read enough” like “I don’t think you know enough.” And I realize that I understand what he was doing, he was trying to get me to exhaust resources and to learn as much as I could. But because he didn’t know that I getting it he forced me to do

more and I think that's because he didn't, he didn't trust my intellect. He didn't trust that I was smart enough or that I would go read. So when I did and I would come back and tell him things I think that he was like "there's more to it. There's more." And he never did tell me what that more was and so I just think that...it was just very frustrating. Like I was pissed. I was mad. I mean it got to the point where I felt like I was not going to be able to write the thesis and get out and graduate in time. And so...you know...during the winter break of my second year I decided I wasn't going to do it. And so I just didn't talk to him. My whole last semester there. Any advising I needed I would go to the general office or I would talk to somebody else. I just didn't want to talk to him. Like I just ignored him.

Further, every woman in this study faced similar situations that led them to question their academic abilities and worth to achieve in school. Kamili shared how easily she became insecure and lost focus in school because she questioned her worth in the program. She spoke emotionally with grape sizes tears and she relives a conversation she had with herself:

It seemed like everything I turned in it wasn't good enough or that's not what we're looking for. Just the points I was trying to get across were things that they wanted but it just wasn't in the way that they wanted it. I don't know when exactly, like when you ask a question, what are, I should say what other things added to that, and not having anybody to voice what was on my mind..to like literally, I used to uh I can remember always sitting on a swing next to Alumni Hall by myself and it was just, it was a swing by a dorm, right on the porch...and just crying, like trying to figure stuff out, like I did not have anybody to talk to. With the professors, that was one of the reasons with the writing, um, well...this is ok. I kind of felt, the grades that people were giving me, I felt like, ok, maybe I don't know what I'm doing, or what I'm talking about, but as I look back, I think, that could have been a prejudice of my portfolio, cause they didn't want to hear what I was saying, and when I submitted my portfolio, I had things in there in reference to diagrams from Africa or wherever it was and map that I was looking at and took a picture on top of a mountain at Ivory Coast. It was one I was looking at the patterns on a Ghanaian stole...its things like this they can't pay attention. My work was not anything that interested my all White professors. When I presented my ideas, oh it wasn't good enough, or when I tried to speak from the standpoint of the book or articles that we read, oh, you don't know what you're talking about. So it just seemed like it was never good enough. I felt like a &^%\$ loser and questioned why the &^% I was here. Why I'm not good enough...sometimes I would think when I would get grades for stuff and felt like I really put in an effort....um..on a project, to be honest I would feel like what the hell wrong with them? You know, I been thinking like, if I'm stupid, like shit, these people just as stupid as me looking at some of the stuff that they did.

The reality is all students have what I call “good and bad days”, but the women in this study faced long term bad days which was questioning their academic. The most disappointing thing is that students who question their ability and worth in education run the risk of developing perceptions of themselves that can be destructive and invalidating (Vasquez, 2007). More specifically as I listened to the after effect of the women in this study as they try to move through their writing strongholds, I identified and coined that these women are dealing with what I call and create as “post traumatic writing syndrome”. This syndrome being derived from Dr. Joy DeGruy Leary (2005) theory discussed in her book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*.

In her book, DeGruy Leary changes our understanding of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder to propose that African Americans today suffer from a particular kind of intergenerational trauma: Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS). The systematic dehumanization of African slaves was the initial trauma, explains Leary, and generations of their descendents have borne the scars. Years later, Americans of various ethnic backgrounds have been inculcated and immersed in a fabricated (but effective) system of race “hierarchy,” where light-skin privilege still dramatically affects the likelihood of succeeding in American society (p.65).

P.T.S.S. is a theory that explains the etiology of many of the adaptive survival behaviors in African American communities throughout the United States and the Diaspora. Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (P.T.S.S.) is a condition that exists as a consequence of multigenerational oppression of Africans and their descendants resulting from centuries of chattel slavery. This is a form of slavery that was predicated on the belief that African Americans were inherently/genetically inferior to Whites. This was then followed by institutionalized racism which continues to perpetuate injury as seen in the stories told by the women in this study.

What I am proposing with Post Traumatic Writing Syndrome which is definitely just the beginning of this theory which is specifically created from my analyses of this study. Each of the eight women in this study faced multiple traumatic writing and academic situations connected with oppression; more so, dual oppressions and no place to heal or be heard which led to traumatic thoughts about writing, thus I called it, *Post*



*Traumatic Writing Syndrome: African American Women Writing to Heal and to be Free After the Damage.* Although no one in this study used trauma to describe their event, I felt the word was appropriate after hearing comments of fear and being terrified to write from various women:

In a final note from Nkechi she stated that,

I used to write poetry, commentaries, pretend political rebuttals, etc., now I don't so much as write a grocery list. My one year experience truly laid the foundation for a phobia. When I have no choice but to write a summary or some type of written correspondence for work, the "labor" is long and the contractions are hard and intense. When I finally "deliver" the document or correspondence, I wonder if I could have been some way to "terminate" the piece. Since I often cannot escape these necessary writings, I wonder if my writing would at least be "adopted" and placed in a loving home. I worry about my writing being in a "safe" place where it can be accepted. I am ready to be healed from this slave like place....

During a final interview with Saran we talked about her returning to college to work on a doctorate, Saran with her jokey spirit said,

The numbness I have influences my ideas about returning to school for another degree. I do not think that I can write like the scholar they need me to be. But one day I hope to be there. I want to do a thesis one day; just not today I am too terrified about the whole idea of writing.

These comments from Saran and Nkechi which are often kept in sacred places like diaries, their mind and hearts, or with no one become pollutants to the mind, body, and spirit thus needing a healing mechanism to move forward using racegendered epistemological and philosophical ideologies. One thing that I can honestly say about each of the women in this study is that they all had very positive attitudes about life and sharing their graduate school experiences with me. However, after interviewing all of my participants, I noticed that each them had been planted with a seed of self- doubt/self-worth. They were all facing racegender micro aggressions that led to the feelings of inadequacy, incompetency, and essentially self-doubt. Yet, it seemed that the biggest challenge of all was finding someone to support and guide them through these challenges.

### **Lack of Appropriate Mentorship**

The lack of appropriate mentorship was everywhere in these women's stories. The lonely storm!! Each woman in this study had their own understanding of mentorship and

its impact on them in college. Many of them were unclear of what they thought they needed in a mentor, but each of them articulated a strong desire for an African American woman to help them understand what was happening, why, and how to handle it. It also became clear that an advisor does not equate to a mentor. Many expressed a need for someone who could identify with them both in terms of race and gender.

During an interview with Saran, in chapter 4 she shares the challenges she faced throughout her program and how she had no one to guide her through the challenge.

These are some of her reflections on the experience.

I was struggling with my writing at least that is what I was told and just the whole politics of graduate school needless to say. My white male professor seems disinterested and I was too afraid to ask for another advisor. He was a historian so he didn't look at interviews and quantitative stuff. So my biggest challenge was how to deal with a person who doesn't have my interests, my research interests, I don't know if he really thought of me as an intellectual. I think he didn't think I was smart. And I just don't feel like...I feel like he was nice to me but he never really helped me. And so my biggest thing was I didn't know how to deal with this advisory relationship...you know this advisor. I started off the program on a path to get a MS, a Master of Science writing a thesis. My advisor, I think, didn't think that I could do that and so he challenged me in ways that were unfair. I think his expectations of me were as if I was writing a dissertation but I was trying to do course work and get out in a year. It was unrealistic. So I think my biggest thing was just my advisor. Like how to deal with it. Now that I'm done...it was so, and this pisses me off when I think about it, but when, you know...the night that we were celebrating my graduation, you know it was all of us in my program, the black professor in my program says well "you could have...you should have asked to be my advisee." And I'm like he let me struggle for two years knowing that this man that I was working with had no idea what the heck I was interested in, he let me do this for two years and then tell me "well I could've been your advisor and I could've helped you get through this." So I think that was the biggest thing. Like I didn't know that that was a possibility. I was afraid of politics. Like I was afraid if I ask another person to be my advisor over this one then it'll make me...you know it'll mess up the dynamics in the program.

I think I would have like to at least have had somebody to say "well Saran you're not the only one. They're all confused. You're all figuring stuff out." Or you know "Saran this is what you need to read, this is where you need to go, these are the conferences you need to attend." Someone who would have filled the gap or told me that I wasn't where I was supposed to be with everybody else. Now that I've graduated I realize that I was online. I wasn't as...cuz I just felt stupid. You know I just felt like I just wasn't doing well. I couldn't write. I mean I went to the program like I'm a fair, I'm a decent writer. I left almost before the end of the

program. I'm like I can't write, I'm not good, and I deserve to be here. So but you know over time I'm like well hey I would work in groups and read other people's papers and I'm like "wait, they can't write either!" I would never put this in my paper. You know? So that was the thing. It just would've been nice to say "Saran you all are students. You'll be fine."

Nkechi speaks about what it might have been like had she had a mentor:

How would my situation been different if I had a mentor? I think that I would...I'm willing to bet that if I had opportunities to talk to other black females, not even women of color. I'm not talking about someone of Asian descent, I would believe that if I had a black woman to talk to...to say, this is how I feel in this moment...I would have an opportunity to have someone who could truly relate to me. Share their experience with me. And I wasn't even asking for a solution, just to hear that, first of all, I'm not crazy...this really is happening to me. It's happening just like you think it's happening and yes it's just as ass stuck as you believe it. Yes you are hurt. Yes you feel disconnected. Yes you're angry and it's valid and don't let anybody tell you that it's not. You know what you feel. You know how you feel and you know what's being done to you whether it is covert or overt...you know this is your experience. I think just to hear somebody else say, baby you're not crazy...it would have meant a lot.

Kali stated,

Sh@% I didn't I realized how messed up I was until started struggling. I grew up in a house where my mother said not to trust any females, but what I was dealing with mom advice was not working. I was fucking failing and angry at the White people so I didn't have anyone to talk to or to help me. First and foremost, being a minority student, being an African-American woman, your path is not going to be straight and narrow. There's going to be obstacle meaning, professors, as well as colleagues, as well as students that just because of your gender and your color are going to say that you are not fit to be there no I needed help understanding how to fit in or to navigate. Are treated differently even if they couldn't even know about your background, your resume, or even your transcripts. It does not matter. You are a black woman...nuff said. You are not equipped for this particular program but they accepted me now what... I need help. I think you should always have somebody that's been through.. because if you're going blind, no matter how determined you might be, you're going to put yourself in front of various obstacles, because you didn't know how to guide your way through. So you need that beacon of light at the end of the tunnel, meaning your mentor. I didn't have that person, I had sister friends in the same space but they too were dealing. Long story short, I transferred!!!!!!

These women all expressed the need and desire for a mentor, a support person, or someone who could relate to them. What many of these women faced is confirmed in the

literature. I would arguably say that the literature has not provided clarity about how these women are able to achieve and accomplish goals despite the obstacles they face in the graduate school. Those who sustain a lot better usually speak about having a mentoring relationship with an African American woman. Welch (1996) stated, “Individuals tend to identify with persons who are like themselves on salient identity group characteristics” (p. 10). In addition, Okawa (2002) noted that cultural similarity is significant in mentoring, although not the only factor to consider. Similarly, the process of mentoring may feel more natural when the mentee and mentor share cultural experiences, language, or similar interests (Athey, Avery, & Zemsky, 2000). There is still much needed research on the needs of African American women, specifically graduate students at White institutions to better understand African American women, their aspirations, obstacles and the significance of mentors (Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey, 1995). Gregory (2001) stated, “Support systems in the lives of Black faculty women have been found to be important because of these women’s needs for guidance, strength, and encouragement to help them negotiate academic settings that are often unfriendly and isolating” (p. 131). This idea is just as valuable and worthy in mentoring relationships. Support systems like Sistah to Sistas are great in helping African American women race genders challenges. Moreover, support systems are beneficial in helping African American women overcome the dual-edge burdens particularly when they attempt to find mentors within the “old boy” network (Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey, 1995). More specifically the women in this study began to say, “Hey I needed a sistah” which signifies the impact of racegender. Black women, for instance, are uniquely situated, as they stand in the nexus of two highly prevalent systems of oppression—race and gender—which shape their experiences and impact their lives in different ways. Thus the differential impact of the intersections of race and gender should be taken into consideration when developing mentorship initiatives for African American women on predominately White campuses. There are several individual strategies and/or initiatives that African American women graduate students can benefit from to help to combat the oppressive effects of systemic racism and the lack of critical mass that they face as graduate students on predominantly White college campuses. Some of these initiatives/ strategies include connecting through mentoring, spirituality, and involvement in professional

organizations. According to Gregory (2001), one of the most detrimental obstacles to the academic success of African American women is the absence of mentoring relationships. Moreover, a study conducted by Noble (1988) revealed that having a mentor was reported to enhance Black faculty women's opportunities for promotion and tenure as well as provide important information needed for professional mobility. Patton and Harper (2003) asserted that Black women would be served best by same-race female mentors because they would "understand the complex intersection of race and gender in the academy and society" more than mentors from other racial backgrounds (p. 71). As my study reveals, many of the women lacked a mentor which is an urgent need for African American women in higher education. This study revealed a need for African American women to engage in healthy mentoring relationships to navigate through school which in most cases there was a direct conflict with the underrepresentation in general and within specific academic disciplines. However, even when African American women faculty are present in both large and small numbers, they are unavailable to fulfill the mentoring role due to the overwhelming professional demands they face. Saran's shares her experience with reaching out to the only African American women faculty in her department:

I was so excited to her; I mean an African American woman faculty. I was at ease because I knew she knew the struggle and would help ease my worries. I would swing by and say hi. She never seemed interested always quick with responses as if she didn't care. I knew that she too was struggling so eventually I stop reach for help from her. I just politely walked by her office hoping one day she would respond to this needed African American woman graduate student, but she never looked up or reached back to grab me. If she sat me down one time to say something, oh boy, how differently this journey would have been... I honestly feel that way.

Moreover Saran's comment speaks to the lack of African American women in faculty and staff in higher education and how that results in a lack of mentors to help with the navigation and unwritten rules of White space. According to Wilson (2003), woman-to-woman mentoring can bring together women of all ranks by supporting professional women working with women students in their field. Hurde (2002) also notes that woman mentors can offer the personalized attention, which woman students need to deal with the

problems specific to them as women that they may encounter in the higher education environment.

Afam stated that,

I knew who the only African American woman faculty was but I did not know whether I could trust her or even if building a relationship was an option for me. It seems as if other African American women graduate students had an upper hand on the relationship with her. Some days, I wish I would have if I knew what I know now. She seems like a fair person, but at that moment I decided to face things alone because I did not to risk adding anymore drama to my journey.

As African American women attempt to identify same race mentors, the whole idea of cross connection or functional have to become an option, For example, African American women graduate student may have to venture beyond the confines of their department or academic college to find same-race mentors. Some of the women in this study attempted to build relationship and some participants said mentorship relationships with individuals outside of their race such as advisor. In each story the eight participants, those relationships were horrible and unhealthy. Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) warned that some African American women have reported that in attempting “to make a connection with their White advisers or faculty members [they] were rebuffed” (p. 101). Similarly, Patton and Harper (2003) noted that mentoring relationships with individuals from other racial or ethnic backgrounds resulted in less favorable outcomes. What my study is clearly suggesting is that African American women must take initiative and continue to proactively forge meaningful formal and informal mentoring relationships with one another if they are to survive and thrive in professional settings where they are significantly underrepresented.

Thus, these stories reveal an attentive need for a mentoring designed to address the kinds of barriers and obstacles that come up for African American women graduate students, particularly in predominately White institutions, where African American women faculty are necessary but scarce. As mentioned in the literature review; the literature says mentorship is necessary for the success of African American students on predominantly White campuses. African American women have been successful in completing their degrees leads us to the assumption that they have been finding good mentorship, but these stories say otherwise.

### **Theme III: Painful Perseverance**

**(It looks like we not hurting)**

We Wear the Mask  
We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.  
Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.  
We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
We wear the mask! ~ Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)

The aforementioned poem written by Paul Dunbar was resonated in my spirit after countless hours of reading and listening to the women in this study share their stories. It appeared to me that these women decided to take off the mask as they spoke with me. The mask they wore for days and years just to manage and cope with school without breaking down. The painful perseverance that was revealed through their stories has so much power on how African American women navigate graduate school. Perseverance means to never give up, but painfully perseverance means there was several strongholds. By painful perseverance, I am speaking to the various ways despite the participants' situation they persevered or are still persevering with all the thorns in their back and odds against them. Hearing some of these women, say I was diagnosed with high failure, but I kept pushing, I cried until my tear ducts dried up, I stayed up all day and night and often could not decipher the difference. Or hearing them say or reading in their journal, I am so tired but I can't quit, I am sick, but I can't quit.... I am going to keep pushing through the pain of hurt. The perseverance that graduate school required for these women in this study carried over into every other area of their lives in painful ways. One participant talks about losing her marriage. Another participant talks about becoming terminally ill

from the stressors of school. A few talked about being speaking with therapist and giving medication to get balance in their lives.

It was resilience that kept these women surviving and strong. Resilience, the ability to maintain competence despite stressful and difficult life circumstances (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; Walsh, 2003). The women in this study all faced a thirst to not only survive but to thrive under hostile environments and circumstances. Many had stories about how quitting seemed logical at times, but wasn't an option. Some had stories about leaving their programs; yet going to another graduate school or program that proved not to be better option. A couple actually quit their program, but have recently began thinking about returning to school. A few graduated and are now more aware of what to expect if they decide to pursue a doctorate degree. Each of these women wore mask as they painfully persevered through school. In chapter 4, Nkechi speaks about quitting her program, what motivated her while there, if she would return, and passion she once had and these are some of her reflections about those experiences:

What led to me quitting the program? Between the program and me not feeling connected..and my personal life just was a struggle to express my frustration to my husband... which again led me to be silent and disconnected and hard to reach. I believe I became a very difficult person to deal with because at school, in the program, I wanted to be ok. I wanted to be brave. I didn't want them to know and them meaning my professors, those who were ripping my papers to shreds, that I was struggling. I'm here, I'm going to stay here and that's it...I will not be moved.

Will I return back to school? You funny!!!! Every time I think about it, I get nauseous. The thought of laying myself bare to that type of scrutiny, to the possibility of being told, you're inadequate..you don't measure up...you can't make the mark frightens me because I am a person who has a strong work ethic. I'm a person who prides herself on job completion and quality is very important to me so even when...I've actually tried to think about applying to other programs and I'm paralyzed with fear.

What put that fire out and what would it take to relight it? The relighting...haven't thought about that. What took the fire is to sit in class and be present but absent....to be completely dismissed. It's the implicit that takes place right before you that may be invisible to other people who don't look like you and yet everybody knows it's there and nobody says a word, but it's present. What kept me motivated to stay there? If I move, I will not leave this space open for the next black woman. It's not a lot of space anyway and if I give this space up, this gap will close and another woman will not have this opportunity if I fuck this up.



Aric speaks about moving forward through her program after failing comps because of misadvisement and being told she plagiarized which led to her staying in school an extra year. She felt that she always had to work harder to prove herself and her capabilities.

So much was happening they made me feel like an idiot at least I look like one in their eyes. I failed my comps and all he (my advisor) had to say was “Oh no I dropped the ball on that. You should have been studying for about six months for this test.” Clearly a misunderstanding, or more so no communication besides “oh it’ll be fine, you know you’ll do fine, you’ll do great, and hey you did well in the classes.” Obviously I...now all of a sudden there’s a problem I’m struggling but I’m done with class work and I have an over 3.0 so what’s the thing? What’s going on? So on the way home you know you got to call somebody after failing comps and later being told you plagiarized on your thesis. When no one said anything to my white peer who basically put his name on someone else’s thesis. I call Grandma. You got to call grandma. You go off and I’m crying and boo hooing and honestly at that time I said you know when I yelled I said I can’t fight these white folks and I’m tired of fighting the white folks up here. I said I’m tired of it. I can’t fight these white people. And there were no black faculty at the time when I was there. There was no black faculty in the department. There was no other minority there for me to talk to. I was like I can’t do it. And you know grandma of course she came up through the civil rights movement and did the sit ins and that was not something she...she was like no you’re going to fight. She was like you’re going to stay there, you’re going to fight. I was like they just failed me. I’m out of the program. There is nothing left to fight. She was like no there’s something else to fight. Don’t worry. She was like let me pray. Call me back. I said well ok. So I’m like she wants to pray at a time like this. So I get off the phone and I say a prayer. I was you know what I can’t do this by myself. Obviously whatever I’m doing is not working.....

I became frustrated and angry. Depression for a while because you know you’re constantly trying to do this and it seems like you take two steps forward and their pushing you three steps back. And then you start...you get self-doubts. It’s like “am I really supposed to be here?” You know “do I really need to be here?” “is this...” then you start thinking like you know, depending on religious views its like is this really the path that I’m supposed to take? Am I really supposed to be this or is God trying to tell me I need to go another route? And so you...it’s all that and you’re sitting there thinking “I don’t know.” And for awhile you...you just sitting there and you’re numb. Sometimes you’re like...you just sit there numb. You don’t have the answers to the questions. You don’t know who might have the answers to the questions so I think you go from the whole spectrum.

Oh God. I was upset. And then again I questioned like...do I really...is this really what I’m supposed...and at that point I was like “no” I’m like...”I’m...no” After that I got pissed. I was like “no.” I think even if I probably did want to question it I was like “I’m going to do it just out of spite now.” So it was just I’m

like “I’m determined to prove you wrong.” There is no point...you cannot judge me in three months of knowing me, my capability. But I was pissed. I kept doing rewrites to prove I was not plagiarizing, see in the field of science plagiarism is an issue, but I was not plagiarizing.

Things would have been different in a sense to have a black mentors or even peers because I wouldn’t felt alone. I think the obstacles would have still been there, but I would have had someone to face them with or talk about them to but the loneliness part would not exist. At least I hope they wouldn’t.. I just don’t believe I would have felt lonely...

It was a lonely journey even as my white counterpart excluded me from study groups or checked out all the books from the library. I use to think those cohorts were created so that students can help one another through school together. It hurts to know that my peers isolated me but I kept pushing. You know at first you’re like really I can’t believe you all...then you get into the mind frame “I’ll show you.” So it’s like fine. You’re not...you don’t have to be my only source of getting through here. It helps because you do want the camaraderie and the people you can go to and lean on and sort of you know talk about it. But you start getting into the mind frame then ok if I’m alone then it’s going to make it even sweeter when I get done because no matter what I can get through this.

Kamili speaks about a typical day at her school and the various messages she received as she attempted to navigate her program and her thoughts about returning to school.

Um, one, I’d be the first in the studio, so somebody would come in and ask, oh, did you stay here overnight? Um, going to all my classes, I did have one problem that created problems for me, like, by being up all the time, I kinda like dozed at some of my classes, but I don’t even think it had anything to do with being up all the time, like, how you going to give a lecture at nine o’clock in the morning, it’s the first class, nine, eight o’clock, and you cut all the lights off in the class and I know that may be an issue of mine and I know it’s wrong to some extent, and disrespectful, but I started to bring a tape recorder to class because I knew, you know, what I would do, but you would go to that class and try to get everything that you could, go to another class, other students would always go out to eat, again, my culture, I’m different, I’m trying to save money...I cooked lunch and had a fridge at my desk, so my lunch was at school already, and then go to some other classes or whatever...sometimes you would hear, oh why is she dressed like that, that was another thing...it wasn’t a big thing but, you know, people are like, how do you put time in to this, your clothes are always clean and ironed and I mean, that just wasn’t me to come to school with some old dirty old, but you know, little stuff like that, but that stuff came up, you know....about what you’re wearing, or whatever and then you, after classes were done, I mean, you’re still in there trying to work on stuff...I remember, I mean this isn’t an everyday thing, but trying to ask somebody stuff and sometimes, somebody would help you, sometimes they won’t, they try to act like they don’t know, you know, or try to

brush you off...you want to punch them in the face but you don't, you know, it's just like, well whatever, you know, try to get it on your own but that was a typical day, I mean just struggling trying to get my stuff and for real, in the studio all the time, trying to get work done for your studio class, where our stations are called studio. I was just trying to keep up with no guidance...

The messages that were given to me over and over is for lack of better words, take it like a man. I mean, that's what I used to tell myself, I mean that's what you basically would get from people, in so many words, and that's one of the things I used to get me through school. Take it like a man, black people supposed to be strong and we get supposed to get this and you know whatever, so a lot of times I mean...even as the Caucasian women in the program that's kinda how it was, oh I ain't got time for this crying and sympathy, oh no I got more necessity of when I go to graduate school, cause I mean at least to that graduate school, cause man, all this crying and whining and all that stuff, this wasn't me at all.

I want to return to school and I told myself this year has to be the year. I know I was trying to do it last year but I've been letting working get in the way. There is a little bit of fear there, can I do it, but really I been let work get in the way, cause there's nothing much that I have to do, I mean I have to study to take the GRE over, so one, I will go back to school, I'm trying to go back to school, two, no I would not try to go back to that institution because of the experiences I had and I think my view may kinda be their view of me may be kinda tainted and at first I used to think, I felt I should have proven my point while I was there. It's no need for me to go back and deal with that again even though I may kinda deal with it elsewhere. At least this time I would know how to get through it. This time I have to get through it, so but it wouldn't be I wouldn't put myself through that again at that institution...it's not worth it.

May I be honest, while sitting here in this interview I was thinking that I am going to be a big architect period... but I'm thinking that this whole thing got famous and somebody say, oh well let this transcription of what you interview come out and I didn't even care it's ok, cause I really want it, I really would like to see this come out so other people can see what's going on because...the agonizing pain no one speaks of...

O I'm crying because it hurts, it hurts to talk about it but I want to be free from hurt... I wasn't worried about my identity being revealed. I was thinking that the school was out...that people did know it was that, but also to let it bring something out about me, that's another thing I'm looking for, for it to bring something out about that I can, so I can learn more about myself before I go in to you know to re-enter this program again....It's one thing to be, to sort of be assertive and everything about yourself but again when you get in a space like this, after a while you can get tore down and not even know it and that's what I think, that's what I know happened to me. My fire was put out basically by being shut down all the time. White people tell you oh this ain't right, this ain't right but then no one is

telling you how you can improve. As fearful as I am to return to school, I will! And basically, most people just by the grace of God make it through because they believe it's only a test.

It is obvious through just these stories that these women were/are determined to make it through school despite the adversities they faced. This attitude is one that women of color have possessed for years. The pressure African American women place on themselves to achieve at inordinate levels is the manifestation of African American women fighting against the negative message of inferiority (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). African American women in the context of their existence in the United States have survived and overcome oppression in the form of legal institutional slavery and segregation, and even today continue to rally against the affronts of institutional racism & sexism, poor educational opportunities, hostile & stressful environments, economic depression, and other engulfing problems. Lifelong dual oppression has required African American women to adapt creative values and ethical positions (Stevens, 2002) to assist with transcending adverse situations—such as poverty, poor housing and schools, improper city services, social isolation and crime riddled—which are compounded by racist social structures (Hopps, Pinderhughes, & Shankar, 1995).

The resilience these women displayed has been equated with strength (Stevens, 2002), a concept that has traditionally been a part of social work practice. Resilience reinforces the strength concept and has been characterized in three ways: (1) as recovery in the face of trauma and adversity, (2) as means of coping, and (3) as the presence of protective factors that mediate stress, risk, coping, and competence (Freshman & Leinwand, 2001; Levy & Wall, 2000; Smith & Carlson, 1997; Stevens, 2002). From a developmental viewpoint, resilience is the ability to effectively negotiate each successive stage of development (Blum, 1998) by means of intrapsychic strengths, internal coping skills, and an external facilitative environment (Grotberg in Blum, 1998). Many of the women in this study painfully preserved by various coping methods such as self efficacy, laughter, faith, tears, avoidance (Shorter-Gooden, 2003) and concealing the effects of racism by wearing masks and veils (Ford, 2003). In addition, these women shifted their identities while compromising themselves and their lives to deal with the various painful stressors they face and as such they persevered.

#### **Theme IV: Racegender Awareness**

As these women shared their stories that exhibited painful perseverance, it was clearly that not only did racegender shape their challenges but they also shaped the responses. The women in this study struggled with explicitly stating that racegender shaped their challenges. However, some of the participants would say racegender indirectly when telling their stories. On the hand, some were very clear that racegender intertwined.

For example, Nkechi says,

Race matters. My experience as a woman is secondary. I think my race is the first line of defense. It automatically sets me in a different category and then my gender. It could be equal, but unfortunately, when you see me you automatically see two labels. You see black...woman...you don't see woman...black. You don't see female black, you see black woman...black girl in those instances.... or black bitch. But I think racegender set me apart because my struggle is different and even as I sit in retrospect, in those classes and hear white females describe what they appear to be "troubling". I would love to be "troubled" in that capacity. I would love the luxury of being able to be free to say that I'm "troubled" in that capacity. I find it offensive...."

Another example from Kali who speaks about her race and gender,

In all circumstances I'm treated not only for my color but also as my gender, so if I had to choose someone to mentor me through school, I would choose the black woman than any other, because she can understand both aspects...my gender as well as my race. Doesn't even have to be in the same department, as long as she a sister, that's been through higher ed at my level, would be fine.

Considering racegender dynamics as a contributor to the challenges that these participants faced was a complex task for them as participants. As the researcher, I identified situations where racegender converged. Yet, I am aware that at times it may be complicated to identity what part of your oppression is the problem. African American women do not have an identity problem and we must become cognizant of it. The problem is that we are both African American and woman. Indeed this poses issues that place African American women in a position that is very political because it involves be able to articulate what is means to have both racegender working against them as they stand between an African American man and a White woman. The unique positionality of women is illustrated eloquently by Hines and Thompson (1998),

No matter what anyone may say to the contrary, Black women are different. They're different from Black men and they're different from White women. It is true that much of what they have experienced derives from racism and much from sexism. At the same time, however, much of what Black women have experienced and still experience today—both bad and good—involves the blend of their separate identities in a way that chemists would call a combination, not just a mixture. Both race and gender are transformed when they are present together, and class is often present as a catalyst. (p. 316)

Although the participants in this study were often indecisive about the racegender, this study does suggest that more research needs to be conducted to help women of color understand how they experience intersectionality. The responses from the women in this study confirmed that they faced challenges and never questioned the impact race and/or gender had on their challenges.

In conclusion, discouragement/self-doubt, lack of mentorship, and painful perseverance and racegender awareness lay out a foundation for a powerful counterstory to the dominant narrative of success that often represents African American women in graduate school. These four themes were consistent and comparable within the participants' experiences. Each of these African American women graduate students were experiencing these four themes consistently at their predominately White college. The data collected from this research study provides evidence that problematize the dominant narrative that does not reveal how African American women are surviving and thriving the ivory tower.

A majority of the participants in this study felt they had experienced issues with their academic writing/performance by White professors at their predominately White institution and did not receive constructive criticism. Instead, they received harsh, derogatory, and damaging comments and suggestions which led to feeling of inadequacy, incompetence, and self doubt. In addition, many of the participants stated that they did not know how to receive the comments or even where to begin process their feeling about their experience, or even have someone to help them navigate through what they were experiencing. Second, all of the participants lacked mentorship at their predominately White institutions. Many found themselves calling home to family, mentors in other spaces and places, silencing themselves indefinitely, or going to their White advisors who were all unhelpful with navigating the racegender challenges. Third, many of the

participants in this study that they struggled with identifying whether race, gender, or racegender impacted their challenges which was a challenge itself as they attempted to navigate through the original challenge. One participant said, “I’m treated not only for my color but my gender, Black woman, no perks I got two strikes against me. When I look at my situation I know that these damn White folks know that I am Black woman, they don’t treat the Black men like this.” Another participant said, “ I really don’t know, when they see me they see Black then woman, not woman then Black, so I really don’t know if it was sexism, racism, or both, but I know for sure racism.” Another participant said, “In my White male dominant field I know sexism is huge, but racism is too at least here at my school, it’s so hard to even determine why they treated me this way, you never really know with White folk, but the Black guy in department had different struggles than mine so I tried to man up and mirror him.” Each of the participants stated a different way of valuing race, gender, and racegender as it related to their stated challenges. However, each participant explicitly would state that they entered this space as strong Black women.

They all had some sense of knowledge about attending graduate school in general. More specifically they knew that it would be academically intense, competitive, and required a lot of reading and writing. All of them had attended a predominately White institution for their undergraduate degrees, so they knew what this culture looks like from a minority undergraduate perspective. They also knew that there would not be a lot of minority faculty, staff, or even peers. Nkechi said this about her institution, “I knew that historically it was not, based on conversations with other people about the institution, it was not a place that was welcoming to people of color, to women of color, but it seemed as if they were transitioning to be aware, that historically it had not been a friendly place and that there was a drive to really change that persona.” Saran said all she knew was that it was a nice school. Damisi heard that the state itself was really racist and that the university seems to promote a culture where we deal with people based on race and class more than anything.

Although they had some sense of awareness on where they were deciding to pursue their advanced degrees, they felt confident that they could endure all that would come their way. Many had their eye on the prize “graduation” and the accomplishment

of achieving an advanced degree. But no one really warned them of what happens on this journey that can cause them to continue, to quit, or to just stand still in the moment not moving forward or backwards.

The primary goal of counterstory is to provide a correlating link between diverse world views of people of color for those who are unfamiliar with their experiences and bring out the dominant issues found in the data collection (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). The dominant story countered is that quantitative studies suggest that African American women are attaining advanced degrees; yet the challenges are few. The counterstorytelling method allows scholars to step outside of the realm of formal reporting and provide literary and narrative effects to give those who experience discrimination and oppression a voice (Bell 1992; Delgado 1990; Williams, 1998). Moreover the method aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones that are held by the majority.



## CHAPTER 6

### Implications and Final Thoughts (Now what does this mean?)

As I reflect back over the data collected from this study, I must also reflect back on my main research questions and what led me to conduct such a study. In doing so, I discuss the implications for African American women pursuing advanced degrees on predominately White campuses.

My primary research questions were as follow:

- III. What are the challenges that African American women graduates students face in their pursuit of advanced degrees at predominately White colleges and universities?
- IV. What kinds of mentorship do African American women graduate students seek and find helpful and/or unhelpful as they navigate through stated challenges?

My sub- questions were as follow:

- I. How do race and gender dynamics shape the challenges that African American graduate women students identify?
- II. How do race and gender dynamics shape the mentorship they seek, find and find helpful?

This study has attempted to situate the challenges and mentorship experiences of African American women graduate students as it pertains to how they navigate the process of pursuing an advanced degree at a predominantly White college. First, I stated the problem and the significance importance of this study. Second, I shared relevant literature that supported and revealed a need for more research and conversations about African American women graduate students on White campuses.. Third, I shared how the Black feminist epistemology and critical race feminism was appropriate for my study and detailed information about the methods used in this study. Fourth, I presented uncensored stories from the participants. Fifth, I presented the finding and emergent themes and used excerpts from the data to support the various themes and how they point toward a much needed and yet little understood counterstory. Finally, I embark on a discussion about the implications, what's next, and final thoughts.

In this chapter, the recommendations are provided to empower African American women to become advocates for how they experience pursuing an advanced degree on a White college campus and how African American women can think more on what is needed to support, retain, mentor and inspire themselves and one another through graduate school. My research was intentionally written and analyzed with my participants in mind. I purposefully and unapologetically write this section with the intent and goal of hoping to provide Sistahs in the academy with the spirit and tools to not just survive, but to thrive in graduate school.

I asked what are the challenges that African American women graduate students face in pursuit of advanced degrees on predominantly White college campuses and what kinds of mentorship they seek and/or find helpful/unhelpful as they navigated the stated challenge. I feel that the questions have been addressed by the data supporting this study. African American women graduate students are painfully persevering through the self doubt, discouragement and lack of mentorship. In fact, they are faking it til they make it. The women in this study demonstrated painful perseverance throughout their pursuit of an advanced degree. Although, these terms were never used by the participants explicitly my interpretation labeled their journeys. These women all spoke about ‘not quitting’ even those who did and no matter how much they sweated they fought through the storm until they had nothing left. They knew the burden they carried to succeed was beyond them, it was a family and community commitment as well. In each case, these women had to be strong African American women pushing through all to succeed; yet some felt like failures although quitting was not an option.

I asked certain questions to provide an opportunity for the women in this study to reflect on their challenges and mentorship experiences. In addition, I asked questions about the impact of race and gender on the challenges and mentorship experiences. The women in this study speak about friends and family, spirituality, and perseverance as surviving tools. So what are the challenges and what types of mentorship exist? There were challenges and various forms of mentorship.

The participants in this faced similar and different challenges which all led to discouragement, self doubt, and painful perseverance. Although all the participants did not use these terms, they are appropriately coined. I immediately noticed with each of my

participants how enthused yet reluctant they were to tell their stories. These women revealed so many emotions as they told their stories about the challenges they endured or were enduring. Many would often say, “It was rough but I just could not quit, I just prayed and cried my way through!” All of the participants admitted that they prayed and cried through their programs with no one to mentor them beyond the academic mentorship. The lack of mentorship became a huge challenge for all of them because they did not have anyone to help them navigate the original challenge/s. Many spoke of having mothers, husbands, grandparents, church members, friends and more people who had no clue about graduate school as support systems which in most cases the advice was not helpful. Although, no one was fully clear on what they needed in a mentor, they knew they needed special help. One participant said, “I was going through so many challenges with class, professors, and just understanding the culture and then I realized I had no one to mentor me through those, so the lack of mentorship became another challenge.”

I observed and learned through the interviews and diaries that many of the participants struggled with identifying how much race and gender impacted their challenges. As a matter of fact, many of these women said only race or that only gender impacted the challenge. I also observed a huge fear in many of the women as we talked about the impact that race and gender had on their experiences and the type of mentorship they sought. At times I felt that the participants thought it was inappropriate to say both race and gender. This was a huge struggle for more than half of the participants. Often times, some of the participants tried to filter out whether it was race, gender, or both. One participant admitted later in the research process, that the things she was going through she wanted to talk to an African American woman. When asked why, she said, “I needed someone who at least looked like me and understood the academy as an African American woman.” Yet, she initially said that race and gender did not matter. All of these women had various ways of looking at the things they endured and my research has made them think differently about their experience. Although, they refused to admit it or even struggle with accepting the challenges they face as race and gender, I can.

This study was not conducted to essentialize the experiences of all African American women pursuing advanced degrees on predominately White college campuses. However, I unapologetically conducted this research to recognize that there is much more

to what it means to get an advanced degree as an African American woman specifically at a predominately White campus. Quantitative data reveals that African American women are getting these degrees, but at what mental psychological cost?

This study confirms that challenges exist for African American women graduate students. It confirms that mentorship or lack thereof does make a difference in how African American women navigate through school and their challenges. It also confirms that racegender matters in every aspect of the graduate school experience. Although this study focused on a small sample of women from four different states they validated that challenges exist, mentorship is important, and racegender affects the overall navigation of graduate school. This study reveals how African American women are navigating challenges and completing or not completing school. In doing so, giving voice to African American women about how they navigate the multiple challenges of graduate school while empowering them to be advocates and creators of new knowledge.

As a result, I hope that this confirms the need for more African American women graduate students to share their experiences and to help each other through the unspoken struggles of graduate school. There are several African American women pursuing advanced degrees throughout the world that face various challenges and are surviving, but are not thriving graduate school. This study confirms that African American women are surviving graduate school, specifically at predominately White institutions. However, there needs to be a thriving mechanism for African American graduate women in the ivory tower. I could easily suggest what I think colleges should do; however, I am beyond that because the challenges these women face in this study are not brand new to the literature. Institutions are fully aware of many of the challenges and the absence of mentorship specifically for African American and many fail to invest time or money into making the appropriate changes or even address the issues. I unapologetically feel that the recommendations in this study are specifically written for Sistahs in the struggle, Sistahs considering the struggle, and Sistahs who have completed the struggle.

African American women who are in graduate school or are considering graduate school specifically at a predominately White college campus must begin to be comfortable acknowledging that race and gender influence their graduate school experience. Not only race or gender, but racegender which is often compromised and

negotiate in and out of the classroom. Understanding the impact of racegender on the challenges African American women graduate students face how it impacts how they navigate them and seek the mentorship needed to navigate them is key to thriving.

### **Implications for Future Research Study**

This study has had a keen impact on the understanding of the challenges that African American women graduate student face and the mentorship they seek and find helpful and/or unhelpful as they navigate through stated challenges. It confirms the need for more research, the importance of support and networks both on and off campus and the importance of racegender. It also helped me to introduce some new ideas and information about how African American women pursuing advanced degrees on White college campuses envision mentorship beyond academics and how they no longer want to be silence about how they navigate the challenges in college. The end results of this study helped me to illuminate how African American women are navigating through advanced degree programs. In addition, this study helped to emphasize the gaps that remain in the knowledge that enhance the understanding of impact of racegender in the experiences/ challenges that African American women students identify and various types of mentorship that exists. There remains much to learn and question about the challenges/experiences that African American women face in addition to the overlapping identities and dual oppressions. Based on the data, these are a few ideas for future research and working concepts.

1. First, creating an afro-womentoring model for African American women specifically for those pursuing advanced degrees on White college campuses. My vision for this requires more research which starts with educating African American women on the importance of not compartmentalizing their multiple identities. Second, looking more at racegender afro-womentoring. (I saw this need as many women in this study were not fully confident about their understanding of mentorship.) Third, identifying the commonalties and differences of African American women. Last, compounding race and gender as one word in this model which acknowledge they are intertwined not separate, racegender.

2. Sistah to Sistas afro-womentoring which I envision it being a support network of African American women sharing techniques, tools, and best practices for thriving in the ivory tower. (I saw this need as many women in this study said, 'if I only had another Sistah to help me or tell me the game that would have helped out ')
3. A focus group study and research on the impact of Sistah to Sistas afro-womentoring.
4. Raising a Ruckus: D.I.V.A Ruckus which I coined as many of my participants feared speaking up about the challenges because they did not want to cause a disturbance. (I saw this need as many women in this study felt silence and voiceless in their situations.) This working concept redefines what it means to speak up as an African American woman in White space.

Where am I going with Raising a Ruckus: D.I.V.A. Ruckus

A D.I.V.A. ruckus which means Demanding Institutions to Validate my Arrival is a newly working concept that I have created and am currently developing to speak about the positive ruckus that Black women create as they navigate in White spaces.

Did I raise a ruckus or was the ruckus already there? What has become more evident to me over the past years of my doctorate study on a predominately White campus is that a ruckus already exists. Ruckus is synonymous to disturbance. According to Merriam Webster a ruckus is to cause a disturbance or the state of being disturbed. In lay terms, a ruckus is an act of disturbing something or perhaps someone; setting something in motion perhaps a change. It has also become evident to me that a reaction or response to a ruckus can create a ruckus. I'm reminded of the *original* Murphy's Law reads: "If there are two or more ways to do something, and one of those ways can result in a catastrophe, then someone will do it." My argument is that there are various ways to create a ruckus, so I argue that my vision of the ruckus that women of color create is not the catastrophe, it's a D.I.V.A. ruckus

Often times on a predominately White campus when a Black woman speaks up, addresses concern, or even validates her identity it causes a ruckus. Many are labeled as the angry Black woman full of rage or even told to man up, to take it like a man.

According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), African American women in White environments must alter their speech, mind their grammar, and purge their conversations of any slang to overcome racist presumptions that they are uneducated and less intelligent (p.97). I argue that these predominately White spaces which are institutionally racist create and cause an institutional ruckus because of the continuous failure to realize that the culture of these White spaces change when Black women become present. I will use stories from diaries to reveal and tell a D.I.V.A ruckus story.

As I finalize this research, I am mindful that this is just the beginning of my work. I am also mindful that now that I received all this information I am accountable for taking the journey towards change. I go back and forth reading and listening to the experiences of these African American women and realized that this study has changed my insight totally. I knew how much race and gender mattered to me, but I realized that a lot of African American woman struggle with their intersectionality. I knew how much mentorship means to African American woman, but I realized that many of my participants were not fully aware of the impact. It amazed me to see how little research had been done about the experiences of African American women, mentorship on White college campuses, and how much was needed specifically for my eight participants. I realized that I have changed tremendously from this study, lenses have been removed, wounds have been healed, and new ideas have been formed. The African American women in this study have shared with me how they have been changed, healed, motivated, educated, emancipated, liberated, heard and inspired. One participant who actually quit her program expressed to me that conversations with me were like therapy and the fear of returning to college to pursue her doctorate no longer exist. Some participants expressed that being able to share their stories/experiences have inspired and healed them in unspeakable ways because they actually had a voice. All of the participants expressed that they would no longer be silent about their experiences and hope to share and encourage other women to do the same. As I reflect back on many of the conversations, interviews, journals, and tears to heal, I must be honest I was healing as well because some of the experiences intertwined, intersected, and often sounded similar to mine. This research has educated both me and the participants who all had similar goals and visions just in similar yet different troubling places and spaces. Now

that I have grabbed these women in my life and have their lived experiences to share, I must proceed with this knowledge to assist the next Sistah seeking an advanced degree at a PWI.

### **Conclusion (Final Thoughts)**

I had a dream that someone from Essence Magazine called me and asked, “Why did you cancel your membership?” I said, “Sadly to say a magazine that is attentive to African American women in my opinion failed me as a reader, researcher, and as an African American woman by not having a more thorough story of how African American women experience higher education. The Essence spokesperson asked, “What do mean?” I said, “The magazine reveals those same numbers of how African American women when compared to African American men are out numbering them in graduating. I think that I have had the experience and done the research to say, there is more to understanding those numbers. There is a story!” The spokesperson replied, “Can you prove that?” I responded, “Read my piece where I create a composite counterstory from eight participants who faced challenges but graduated and those who did not graduate. In doing so, please be mindful that a composite story is told from the information provided by the participants. Call me when you ready to publish it, until then my membership is still cancelled!”

Alarm goes off..... Dang, I woke up that was just a dream!

This was totally a depiction of how I envisioned things going if Essence magazine actually found out I cancelled my membership. However, the reality is that I am going to tell the stories of these African American women graduate students just as they were told to me. Verbatim!

The data I collected lays out a foundation for a lot of work and ideas for future research. Ideally, my goal would be to just grow from the data I have, but I plan to explore my questions more thoroughly with a larger population. My goal as an African American woman is to continue using this data and my findings in presentations, panel discussions, journals, books and eventually create various mentoring models specifically for African American women graduate students. My next project is to look more thoroughly at the impact of Sistah to Sistas circles and to conduct a focus group study. I plan to also explore racegender racial micro aggressions. It is my intentions to advocate



for African American women and to educate them on how to advocate for themselves. As African American women we must be part of the transformation! Don't talk about it, be about it! GAME OVER! AM I MY SISTER'S KEEPER, I HAD TO BETTER BE.....

AM I MY SISTER KEEPER'S  
I had better be.  
What benefits my mother, niece,  
Daughter and the neighbor lady  
Will also benefit me.  
Her working conditions,  
How much she earns,  
Her crisis, her problems,  
Are all my concerns.  
Her children are my children,  
Her yearnings are mine.  
A Christian sharing of the burden  
All along the line.  
A cheerful encouragement  
Of the flowering of the vine.  
Am I my sister's keeper?  
I had better be.  
What benefits my mother, niece,  
Daughter and the neighbor lady  
Will also benefit me. ~ Ruthe Spacht

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## **Appendix A: Research Participation Consent**

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Date : \_\_\_\_\_

Dear : \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Lara Chatman and I am a doctoral candidate at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where I am pursuing a doctorate degree in Educational Leadership with a particular emphasis in the area of curriculum and instruction/cultural studies. My academic advisor at Miami University for the course of study in the aforementioned department is Dr.

Denise Taliaferro- Baszile.

You are invited to participate in a research study on how race and gender dynamics shape the experiences African American women graduate students on predominately White campuses.

You will be asked to complete audio taped interviews. In addition, you will be asked to keep an audio diary or a hand written journal. You will be compensated for your time after you have completed the interviews. In order to make sure that the data collected during the research is accurate, you may be contacted by telephone for clarity if needed. After transcription, I plan to share the transcript and audio tape with you to clear up any misconceptions or misinterpretations. I will ask you to review the information and return it to me with any changes because accuracy is highly important to me. Once the research is finalized, I will contact you to offer you the chance to review the completed research. In addition, each participant will be asked to sign a consent form indicating that she has reviewed the final product and has no problem with being included in the final project. Confidentiality is assured during the interview process and data collected will be held confidential. As primary investigator, I will be only person with access to identifiable data. I will choose pseudonyms to provide anonymity in this study. All transcriptions will be coded with a pseudonym. The audio tapes, audio diaries, and written journals will be destroyed after transcription. Interviews will be about approximately one hour each session, which can be shortened if you wish. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the session at any time or refuse to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable without penalty. You will not be asked to do anything that exposes you to risks beyond those of everyday life.

The benefit of the study will be to provide richly textured ‘voices’ of African American women graduate students mentorship experiences on predominately White campuses that is often portrayed in the literature through the voice of minorities and not the ‘voice’ of a African American women. If you agree to participate in this study, you will receive a gift card of \$25 to a massage/nail spa for your time after your interviews has been completed. If you have further questions about the study, please contact Lara Chatman at (901) 236-8953 or you may email me at [chatmala@muohio.edu](mailto:chatmala@muohio.edu). You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Denise Taliaferro-Baszile at (513) 529-1798 or email: [taliadfa@muohio.edu](mailto:taliadfa@muohio.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please call the Office of Advancement of Research and Scholarship at (513) 529-3600 or email: [humansubjects@muohio.edu](mailto:humansubjects@muohio.edu).

Thank you for your participation. I am so enthused that you have chosen to partake in this study and I hope that this is be both interesting and illuminating for you. You may keep this portion of the page.

Cut at the line, keep the top section and return the bottom section.

.....

### **Consent to Participate**

I \_\_\_\_\_ voluntarily agree to participate in the dissertation study on the mentorship experiences of African American women graduate students as they face experiences that impact their ability to navigate through advanced degree programs on a predominately white campus and how race and gender dynamics shape, and impact these experiences. Further, I \_\_\_\_\_ have read the Research Participation Consent Form and agree to be audiotaped for the purpose of this study. I \_\_\_\_\_ hereby consent and grant permission for Lara Chatman to use audio tapes in which I participate for dissertation and any other publications, presentations, broadcasts etc. related to her dissertation research. I understand my participation is voluntary and that my name will not be associated with my responses. By signing below, I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older and that I have read the Participation and Informed Consent Form and agree to all of the terms outlined.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Lara Chatman, Primary Investigator, Study on the Mentorship Experiences of African American Women Graduate Students on Predominately White Campuses  
Dr. Denise Taliaferro-Baszile, Faculty Advisor

## **Appendix B: Consent to Participate (Final Research Product)**

I \_\_\_\_\_ voluntarily agree to participate in the dissertation study on the mentorship experiences of African American women graduate students as they face experiences that impact their ability to navigate through advanced degree programs on a predominately white campus and how race and gender dynamics shape, and impact these experiences. Further, I have read the Research Participation Consent Form and agree to be audiotaped for the purpose of this study. In addition, I have reviewed the final product and have no problem with being included in the final research product. By signing below, I acknowledge that I that I have no problem with being included in the final research product.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Lara Chatman, Primary Investigator, Study on the Mentorship Experiences of African American Women Graduate Students on Predominately White Campuses  
Dr. Denise Taliaferro-Baszile, Faculty Advisor

## **Appendix C: Initial Interview Questions**

1. Why did you choose your institution? Is this your first time institution for this degree?
2. What did you know about your institution/department before attending?
3. Is this your first experience at a predominately white institution or a predominately white educational setting?
4. What has been your experience at your institution? In your department?
5. How many African American graduate students/faculty do you have ongoing relationships with at your institution?
6. What challenges have you faced at your institution? In your department?
7. Based on the stated challenge, can you tell me how you handled the challenge?
8. How did the stated challenge make you feel?
9. Can you tell me about the last event or series of events that prompted you to question your academic viability?
10. How would you describe a typical day as an African American woman graduate student at a your institution?
11. Do you have a mentor? How was the relationship initiated?
12. How do you define mentor? What expectations do you have for a mentor? What qualities do you look for in a mentor?
13. Do you think it is important for African American women to have mentors?
14. In what ways have the presence or absence of a mentor impacted your overall journey at your institution/department?
15. What does mentoring mean to you personally?

16. Does race and gender matter when seeking mentorship? Why/Why not?
17. Do you see mentorship helpful/unhelpful for you? Why? Why not?
18. What is your understanding of race and gender and racegender?
19. How does race and gender shape the challenges that you? How?
20. How do race and gender dynamics shape the mentorship you sought or found helpful?



#### **Appendix D: Writing Prompt Questions for Diary**

1. Are there any areas of concern that I did not discuss in the interview that you would like to journal about in your diary?
2. If you could choose again, would you be a graduate student at a predominately White college campus?
3. If you a daughter who was considering graduate school what would you tell her about your experiences and how to deal/avoid them?
4. How are you feeling being a participant in this study as a African American woman graduate student being conducted by another African American woman in graduate school?
5. The experienced I faced..... made me feel.....? Why
6. The experiences I faced were race, gender, or both? How?
7. I navigated the challenges with the help from....?
8. Today, I feel.... about graduate school? Why?
9. The last time I felt doubtful was? Why
10. Why is race or gender salient?
11. I feel that I have to negotiate..... to navigate school. Why?
12. What in your life has changed drastically since being enrolled in college?
13. How are you surviving or thriving graduate school with all the challenges?