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# "OH, YOU ARE AN EXCEPTION!" ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND BLACK MALE STUDENTS RESISTANCE TO SYSTEMIC RACISM

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“OH, YOU ARE AN EXCEPTION!” ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND BLACK MALE  
STUDENTS RESISTANCE TO SYSTEMIC RACISM

by

LaCharles Travell Ward

B.S., Southern Illinois University, 2011

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Arts in Speech Communication

Department of Speech Communication  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
August 2013

THESIS APPROVAL

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Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Master of Arts in the field of Speech Communication

Approved by:

Dr. Rachel Alicia Griffin, Chair

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Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
May 7, 2013

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

LaCharles Travell Ward, for the Master of Arts degree in Speech Communication, presented on Tuesday, May 7, 2013 at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: “OH, YOU ARE AN EXCEPTION!” ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND BLACK MALE STUDENTS RESISTANCE TO SYSTEMIC RACISM

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Rachel Alicia Griffin

This study theorizes how Black male students narrate their experiences at a traditionally White institution (TWI). To date, research focusing on Black men in higher education highlights the continual struggles of Black men against racism (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Harper, 2006, 2009, 2012; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007); however, what remains to be extensively theorized is Black male academic excellence. Thus, I argue that it is vital to progressively broaden what we know about Black male students as intellectuals. In this study I forefront how Black male students articulate their intellectual identities and educational experiences on a traditionally White campus. Guided by critical race theory (CRT), this study positions Black male undergraduate interviewees to speak to the following themes: 1) racism as everyday, 2) Black male students’ educational experiences, and 3) counterstories that resist dominant racial ideologies. Their narratives are crucial because the voices and experiences of Black male students are often marginalized in higher education in general, and the field of communication in particular. Ultimately, insight gained from this study encourages scholars to include Black male students who academically excel in the realm of academic inquiry, especially scholars who have an interest in the success of Black male students.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents, who are all present in spirit. It is also dedicated to my mother, Audrean Ward, who worked tirelessly to provide for my siblings and I and to create a healthy and safe environment to learn and grow. Your belief and faith in me has been unyielding. To my father, Charles Cox, wherever you are, know that this thesis is also dedicated to you. To my sisters, Jamela and Janey and my brother, Travis, you are all shining beacons. Lastly, to Ward and Cox family members near and far, this thesis is dedicated to you as well.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As with any large project or new journey, there are always great people who stand ready to offer support and insight. This project, and indeed new journey, is no different. I would like to express my utmost gratitude to those who have supported me, cried with me, laughed with me, and guided me through this chapter of my academic journey. I am deeply honored to have had the opportunity to work with mind-blowing scholars here at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and the Department of Speech Communication specifically. The warm, creative, and intellectual space here is full of energy and synergy that I am fortunate to have been a part of.

I am most highly indebted to my mentor, professor, friend, and Type A thesis chair, Dr. Rachel A. Griffin, whose time and dedication has been insurmountable. Your guidance over the years has consistently provided me with an unwavering faith in my ability to move through the terrains of graduate school. Your intellectual acumen and loving criticisms regularly forced me to rethink and rewrite. Without your expertise and unflinching belief in this project, and me, I am not so sure I would be writing this very sentence. Lastly, your pedagogical love is a force to be reckoned with; I am grateful to have experienced it.

Additionally, I would like to offer my deepest appreciation to my additional committee members, Drs. Nilanjana Bardhan and Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway. Dr. Bardhan: your critical insight, both as my professor and committee member, has been formative in my development as a budding scholar. Dr. Pensoneau-Conway: your incisive intellect and thought-provoking feedback as a professor and committee member have been refreshing and reassuring. Also, your frequent comments and “Likes” on Facebook, have served as inspiration to me in this process.

I would also like to send out love and appreciation to my family back in Chicago who have supported me emotionally, physically, and mentally from afar. Your love, belief, and humor

have kept me grounded and encouraged. Mom, your motherly love and faith in me has constantly reenergized my spirit and mind. Not only that, you have always reminded me of the importance of my work, even when I was uncertain of it; thank you. Janey, your inspirational calls and text messages have always lifted my spirits—thank you. Jamela, your humor and conversations have always kept me up on life and mindful of my humanness. Travis, where do I start? I am the proudest brother in the world; your kindness, stubbornness, and ratchet humor is more than I can ask for—thank you.

Thanks to all my friends and colleagues for their constant support and faith in me. I would especially like to thank my partner, Brianna Johnson, for her loving support and patience throughout this entire process. I promise I will do my best to make up for our missed date nights, long conversations, and spontaneous fun. I am thankful for your understanding and willingness to put up with my tears, stress, and irritation (at every little thing). Thank you for endlessly pushing me to work towards my goals, overcoming my intellectual obstacles, and chiding me when I fell into an abyss of self-doubt.

Lastly, I would like to give thanks to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for carrying me through hard moments and exciting moments. Your grace and kindness is unending, and your faithfulness is majestic.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

At a time when public discourse around race and racism is filled with platitudes such as: we now live in a “postracial” world, race and racism are of the past, or, the more commonplace accusation, you are pulling the “race-card,” it is easy to lose sight of subtle and systemic manifestations of racism (Cobb, 2011; Joseph, 2009; Ono, 2010; Squires, Watts, Vavrus, Ono, Feyh, Calafell, & Brouwer, 2010). For example, although we have an African American biracial president who identifies as Black (Kenyan) and White American there are still young Black men who are disproportionately imprisoned in the U.S. (Alexander, 2010). Lacy and Ono (2011) remind us that instantiations of racism can play out at individual and institutional levels. Historically, overt forms of racism were easy to mark (e.g., lynching, segregating, and beating people of color); while these forms still exist today, racism has become increasingly more difficult to identify (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Doane (2006) writes that a “key division in the debate over the nature of racism is between the definition of racism as [an] individual attitude or behavior and the view of racism as a set of systemic and institutional practices” (p. 267). It is my contention that this is one reason for the incorrect assertion that we live in a “postracial” society. More specifically, I believe that our lack of discussion about institutional racism prevents us from seeing the larger effects of racism on bodies of color.

Systemic racism is a part of the daily lives of Black men in the U.S., most noticeably, in the criminal justice and education systems (Alexander, 2010; Foster, 2005; Griffin & Cummins, 2012). Recognizing the importance of narrative to resist the imposition of racism, Baszile (2008) calls for “critical race testimony” to bear witness to the particular ways “racism is inflicted on and inflected in one’s life experiences” (p. 251). In the following paragraphs, I share a story

about my experience with racism in an undergraduate psychology course to highlight how I have and continue to make meaning of my body being targeted by my instructor in the classroom. It was a brisk fall day in October, roughly two months into my sophomore year. Sticking to my daily routine, I had lunch at the nearby campus-dining hall before walking over to my psychology class in Lawson Hall. Upon entering our classroom, I mingled with my classmates and we discussed the readings on racial stereotypes that were assigned for the day. When I noticed that the professor, who I read as a White middle-aged woman, started to lecture, I ended my side conversations so that I could take notes and engage the readings. What happened during this lecture has stayed with me because I felt the pain of being publicly marginalized by a professor who I believe embodied racism.

She began class by discussing the current literature on stereotypes and how humans use stereotypes to organize multiple experiences and frames of the world. I nodded in agreement. At the time it sounded right to me so I did not think to problematize her assertions. She continued describing how psychologists have found that most of the stereotypes that people employ on a daily basis are grounded in truths—again, I nodded in affirmation although less enthusiastically. Then a hand jolted up and a classmate who I read as White asked, “what about the stereotypes about minority groups that the article spoke about?” The professor’s response was, “those too, are more or less grounded in truth.” At this point, I became a little uncomfortable because I sensed where this conversation was headed. Frustrated and seeing glances indicating that other Black students were too, I raised my hand seeking her acknowledgement. She said, “yes, you” and I remember saying something along the lines of, “the authors discussed that stereotypes about minority groups while grounded in truths are never productive and can offend individuals who belong to minority groups.” Tired of the coded language, I just wanted to replace “minority”

with “Black,” since it was clear to me that this was the referent. She responded with something along the lines of “Wow, you read the article, what is your name?” Choosing not to give my name, my exact words to her were, “Of course I read, why wouldn’t I read? What are you trying to say?” Her response to this question is what set off a firestorm. She said, “I wasn’t expecting someone like you to have read the articles for class...I just wasn’t.” Appalled, offended, and deeply hurt by her response, I realized my options were to: storm out of the classroom or respond to her comments. I chose the latter and politely said, “not sure about you, but if those are your expectations of Black students then perhaps you shouldn’t be teaching.” I remember saying this because afterwards I called my mom and I questioned whether or not what I said was respectful. My mom said that what transpired was not positive, especially the remarks made by my professor, and my comments could have been worded better. However, she urged me to go speak with the professor after my emotions subsided. We spoke for about an hour and at the end of our phone conversation my mom reminded me of how proud she was of me for not remaining silent.

This was my first of many encounters with this particular professor; unfortunately, our subsequent interactions did not get any better. I share this story for two reasons: one, to bear witness to an experience that I perceive as covert racism and, two, because I believe that Black men in our university classrooms experience similar ugly and mundane forms of racism. My story, a reflection of our stories, is not unique. Scholars, in alignment with my experiences, indicate that Black men are up against structures of racism or people who, intentionally and unintentionally, reproduce systemic racism (Cummins & Griffin, 2012; Feagin, 2006; Griffin & Cummins, 2012; Hill, 2008; Trepagnier, 2010). In this way, the remarks by my professor reflect a White racial frame which, according to Hill (2008), is an organized set “of racialized ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to discriminate” (p. 4). This type of covert racist

discourse serves as one example of systemic racism that according to Hill (2008), Bonilla-Silva (2010), and Lacy and Ono (2011), is important to study because it maintains and reproduces (even in the most subtle instantiations) dominant racial ideologies. For my thesis, I am less interested in overt instantiations of racism and more interested in the covert instantiations of racism, particularly in the lives of U.S. American Black male students on traditionally White campuses.

### **Rationale**

Given the complexity of race and racism in today's society, I believe that a sustained discussion of systemic racism in the field of communication is warranted. However, critical discussions of racism in the U.S. remain limited in communication (see Flores & Moon, 2002; Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003; Hendrix, 2005; Jackson, 2000; Jackson & Garner, 1998). For instance, communication scholar Brenda Allen (2007) writes "mainstream communication theory is culturally biased because it neglects to delve into race in critical, substantive ways" (p. 259). Communication works that do address racism often point to its topical importance but rarely do authors provide a critical discussion of racism (Allen, 2004; Orbe & Allen, 2008). To be fair, communication scholars are steadily incorporating more critical discussions on race and racism (Cobb, 2011; Flores & Moon, 2002; Griffin, 2012; Joseph, 2009, 2011, 2013; Lacy & Ono, 2011; Orbe, 2011; Moshin & Jackson, 2011) but their efforts have yet to yield a critical mass. With regard to Black male students in particular, there is a paucity of literature in the field of communication (Alexander, 1999, 2010; Cummins & Griffin, 2012; Griffin & Cummins, 2012; Jackson & Hopson, 2011).

Looking back to my experience in my psychology class, the professor's statement revealed a myriad of racialized beliefs to me: the comparison of Black bodies to White bodies;

stereotypical assumptions that Black men do not read; and the notion that Black men are automatically deemed underachievers before being given the opportunity to prove otherwise. All of these assumptions are a reminder of how deeply ingrained dominant racial ideologies are in the fabric of institutional structures. To date, research focusing on the underachievement of Black men in higher education highlights the continual struggles of Black men against racism (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Harper, 2006, 2009, 2012; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007); however, what remains to be extensively theorized is Black male academic excellence. Given this absence, it is vital to progressively broaden what we know about Black male students as intellectuals.

Research on Black men in higher education is largely deficit-oriented meaning that most of the work only highlights our failures and the racial achievement gap between Black and White students (Palmer & Maramba, 2011; Rowley & Wright, 2011). This research is important since it points to major problems in the education system. However, when most of the literature on Black men only documents our failures (Jackson & Moore, 2008) and excludes narratives of academic excellence, a narrow picture of our educational experiences as Black men is presented. As Harper (2009) notes, if we are to continue to “claim an ethic of care for Black males” (p. 699), it is important to understand how racism impacts our experiences in education. Challenging these “uneven” stories (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002, p. 326; Harper, 2006) requires that researchers provide counterstories that resist dominant narratives that largely define Black men as failures, at-risk, and incapable of learning. More importantly, doing so allows Black men to narrate themselves intellectually.

## **Overview of Chapters**

In Chapter 1, I provide an overview of what my study entails. Additionally, I note the relevance of writing about the experiences of Black male students. Chapter 2 provides a literature review where I locate my study in past and current scholarly work on the experiences of Black men in higher education. Chapter 2 has four sections: 1) systemic racism towards Black men, 2) U.S. American Black male students in higher education, 3) Black masculinity in communication, and 4) communication research on Black men in higher education. In Chapter 3, I provide an overview of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the theoretical framework that drives my project. The chapter is divided into four sections: 1) history of CRT, 2) tenets of CRT, 3) interdisciplinary uses of CRT, and 4) research on Black males that employs CRT. In Chapter 4, I explain the methodology employed to collect and analyze the interviews. Chapter 5 is dedicated to analyzing the interviews and discussing the pertinent findings of my study. Lastly, in Chapter 6, I answer the research questions that frame this study and address the theoretical and practical implications of my findings. I end with suggestions for future research in the area of race, communication, and education.

## CHAPTER 2

### OVERVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This literature review is organized into four sections. The first section presents an overview of systemic racism and its manifestations in the lives of Black men. The second section describes how education scholars have written about achievement and Black male students in U.S. American higher education. The third section is an overview of Black masculinity research in the field of communication. Lastly, the fourth section, discusses how the experiences of Black male students in the U.S. are written about in the discipline of communication.

#### *Systemic Racism towards Black Men*

The definition of racism differs from person-to-person, especially given the influence of diverse lived experiences. One of the many reasons why there is difficulty in defining racism is because there is not enough discussion around the specifics of racism (Doane, 2006; Yancy, 2008). When Holland (2012) writes “we focus on race, but rarely on the *everyday* [original emphasis] system of terror and pleasure that in varying proportions makes race so useful a category of difference” (p. 6), she marks the complexities of race. Generally, there is a large amount of discussion about individual racism, which is typically overt, attitudinal, and behavioral (Feagin, 2000). However, there tends to be a *laissez-faire* discussion about systemic racism (Feagin, 2000, 2006), or what Essed (1991) calls everyday racism, which is when “racist notions and actions infiltrate everyday life and become part of the reproduction of the system” (p. 50).

In her book *I Have Been Waiting: Race and U.S. Higher Education*, Simpson (2003) provides a definition of racism that I rely upon for this study. She writes:

Racism occurs in courts, classrooms, grocery stores, religious conventions, all-white suburbs, in the media, on the job, at fast food and fine restaurants. It is routine and often subtle, especially to white eyes. Racism engages ideologies and structures, depends on both ideas and behaviors, and “is all around us.” Finally, racism is individual and structural. (Simpson, 2003, p. 15)

This definition is important to understanding how Black men in the U.S. experience racism on a daily basis. Similarly, viewing racism as a process allows one to see how structures and ideologies are reproduced through routine practices (Bonilla- Silva, 2010; Essed, 1991; Hall, 1986, 2003; Holland, 2012; Warren, 2001, 2009). Writing about structural racism, Doane (2006) states:

Individual prejudice and discrimination are but symptoms of larger structural problems, racial inequality is a pervasive aspect of everyday life and the normal functioning of institutions, and the ultimate solution to racial oppression involves far-reaching changes in social institutions. (p. 268)

Systemic racism, then, can be understood as an entrenched, oppressive system that reproduces racist ideology, attitudes, and beliefs at individual and institutional levels (Essed, 1991; Feagin, 2006; Perry, 2011; Simpson, 2003; Trepagnier, 2010). U.S. American racism is both a complex and highly relational system that necessitates bodies of color in order to continuously function in different permutations. For example, Feagin (2006) argues “the operation of systemic racism involves the recurring exercise of coercive power by white Americans over black Americans, as well as over other Americans of color” (p. 21).

Systemic racism impacts Black men in a myriad of contexts, including employment, housing, criminal justice, education, health care, and politics (Doane, 2006; Essed, 1991; Feagin,



2006; Trepagnier, 2010). Social institutions such as the criminal justice system, medicine (healthcare), and education systematically perpetuate racism vis-à-vis policies and laws. In her important book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander (2010) argues that the mass incarceration of Black men is, in her words, a “racial caste system” (p. 2) that labors to marginalize Black men both in prison and after their prison sentences are served. Additionally, Alexander (2010) contends that the criminal justice system is one of most insidious places where one can witness the perpetual racial oppression of Black men.

Systemic racism also influences which racial groups acquire the best health coverage and live far longer lives (Feagin, 2006). In her book *Dying while Black*, Vernellia Randall (2006) discusses the unjust experiences of African Americans in the U.S. American healthcare system and how due to nebulous discriminatory practices (e.g., limited access to healthcare, assumed income-based treatments, delayed wait times at hospitals/clinics, etc.) render it difficult to point out explicit racist acts. Researchers Cheatham, Barksdale, and Rodgers (2008) note that Black men have cited racism as being a large barrier to seeking health care; they argue, “racism, whether actual or perceived, is faced by many Black men when they contemplate seeking care and when they actually seek care” (p. 557). If we only look at racism at the individual level, we risk overlooking its connection to larger institutions, which subsequently muddles our understanding of why Black people and other people of color experience harsh systemic treatment. Rather we must recognize, as Bell (2005) notes, that racism is an integral and permanent building block of our society.

In the context of higher education, systemic racism functions on multiple levels. Research on racism in higher education has generally focused on the experiences of Black students and not just Black men. In their book *The Agony of Education: Black Students at White Colleges and*

*Universities*, Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996) highlight manifestations of systemic racism, ranging from admission decisions to recruitment and retention to everyday experiences including teacher-student encounters, student-student encounters, and student-institution encounters.

Feagin et al. (1996) contend “Both inside and outside institutions of higher learning, there has been a widespread attack on the gains made by African Americans since the 1950’s” (p. 158).

Many Black college students enter traditionally White institutions (TWIs) that are not only unwelcoming but are also visibly hostile towards Black students. Feagin et al., (1996) state, “Most African American students, including those with top grades, have some difficulties in coping with the unwelcoming climate of these college campuses” (p. 160). Further illuminating some of the experiences of Black students, Feagin (2006) writes “Every day the African American students go through a series of interpersonal exchanges on campus, interactions from which they learn how they are viewed and how they must act and react” (p. 96). Foster (2005) notes that among Black college students, many of their interactions with White people are not necessarily outrageous acts of visible racism (though these still exist and are important) but are mostly interactions that involve subtle microaggressions. In conversation with Foster (2005), Feagin et al. (1996) believe that students on university campuses face increasingly more problems with faculty members who tout to be racially sensitive but are unreflective about their privilege opposed to outright racist professors. Moreover, through counterstories, Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2007) assert that Black male students’ worst experiences are the actions and/or inactions of their White peers on college and university campuses. Important to note is that these works are significant additions to the literature on racism in higher education because they point to the nuanced manifestations of quotidian racism.

### *Black Male Students in Higher Education*

Research on the achievement of Black students in higher education is overwhelmingly written in the field of education. Most of the studies that I have reviewed focus specifically on the achievement gap between Black and White students (Hughes & North, 2012; Palmer & Maramba, 2011; Rowley & Wright, 2011). According to Harper (2006), Black men account for less than 4.3% of the total enrollment of 4-year institutions. Black male completion rates are also the lowest among racial and ethnic groups in higher education (Harper, 2012). According to the Schott Foundation of Public Education (2010), 47% of Black men graduate on time from college compared to 78% of White men. While documenting the achievement gap of Black students in higher education is important, it is equally important for scholars to continue to counter the cloud of gloom that hovers over Black men in the educational system (Jackson & Moore, 2008). From my perspective, a way to avoid the singular focus on Black men as failures is to include research that focuses on Black male student narratives of academic excellence.

In her article on achiever isolation among Black students, Fries-Britt (1998) asserts that research about Black students only reveals a story of academic struggle (e.g., Fleming, 1984; Nettles, 1988; Allen, 1992). In this way, the publications on Black students at TWIs paint only one picture of the problem. Fries-Britt (1998) writes “the disproportionate focus on Black underachievement in the literature not only distorts the image of the community of Black collegians, it creates, perhaps unintentionally, a lower set of expectations for Black student achievement” (p. 556). From my experiences, not only do Black students internalize these lower expectations, they are also used by Whites to reinforce racist assumptions about the intellectual capabilities of Black students. Though her work specifically focuses on gifted Black collegians,

it is still useful for documenting the effects of research that focuses only on the failures of Black students.

In her follow-up study “High-Achieving Black Collegians,” Fries-Britt (2002) argues that understanding the experiences of Black students who have been successful can “have a direct impact on campus policy and programs designed to enhance retention of black students” (p. 4). In addition, Fries-Britt (2002) posits that understanding the experiences of Black students who are performing well on college campuses, especially on TWIs, can potentially create more dialogue about the overall educational experiences of Black students. Noting the dearth of research on academic success among Black students, Fries-Britt (2002) writes:

Because few studies focus on populations of successful blacks, it is easy to assume that academic excellence in blacks is uncommon, resulting in a distorted image of African American students as academically ill-equipped. This coupled with the fact that in our larger society intelligence is generally associated with the white community increases the likelihood that black students will encounter negative stereotypes about their academic abilities on campus. (p. 4)

Interestingly, many of the Black students in her study voice that they always felt a need to prove themselves and their intellectual ability to their White peers.

The experiences of Black students in different types of institutions, such as traditionally White or historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) remain exceptionally different. In their article “Uneven Stories: Successful Black Collegians at a Black and a White Campus,” Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) discuss the academic and social experiences of Black students on TWIs and HBCUs to theorize their academic success. What is important about Fries-Britt and Turner’s (2002) study is that they discuss how Black students experience TWIs and HBCUs

differently. Unsurprisingly, the students who attended HBCUs felt more racially at home and welcomed by their peers and administrators while students who attended TWIs believed that they lacked a critical mass of Black peers and were not welcomed by their White peers (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). For example, several students who attended TWIs expressed that the energy that should be devoted to learning is used to educate their White peers about racism and diversity (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Additionally, several students noted that they must actively find ways to resist stereotypes by changing their behavior inside and outside of the classroom. Students also indicated that this subtracted from their ability to learn, which sometimes positioned them awkwardly in the classroom.

In a more recent article, Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007), explore the academic and social experiences of nine Black students (six women and three men) categorized as high achievers. Their findings indicate that despite their high academic ability, “Black high achievers felt that they were judged based on prevalent social stereotypes regarding the academic abilities of Black students” (p. 509). While I disagree with their use of IQ and other quantitative tests to measure academic talent, given the inherent racial and cultural biases (see Suzuki & Aronson, 2005), they importantly argue why it is significant to study students who do not identify with academic failure. What is also important about Fries-Britt and Griffin’s (2007) study is that they offer vivid examples of when students’ peers and faculty “begin to attribute negative characteristics based on assumptions and stereotypes” (p. 510). For example, several students shared experiences similar to mine where their intelligence was questioned by White students and/or professors. They also narrated spending most of their time trying to prove that they are intelligent by answering questions quickly and aiming to do exceedingly better than Whites on classroom assignments.

Thus far I have discussed previous research on academic achievement as it relates to Black students in general. In recent years, Harper (2006; 2009; 2012) has written extensively about Black male achievement at TWIs. Harper (2006) evokes the work of bell hooks (2004) to discuss the damaging impact racism has on the experiences of Black male students at TWIs. He argues that more than any other raced and gendered group, Black males are assumed to lack intellectual skills (Harper, 2006). Harper (2006) further notes that on campus, Black men must learn how to deal with the plethora of negative stereotypes imbedded in the White racial frame that are reinforced by professors, classmates, and other university officials.

Harper (2009) writes that Black male students' "individual and collective belongingness at PWIs [Predominantly White Institutions] is threatened by the constant reinforcement of racist stereotypes" (p. 700) that label them as dumb jocks, local criminals, and underprepared students. Similarly, the Black men in his study encountered racist stereotyping such as the assumption that they were an athlete or enrolled because of affirmative action. Furthermore, Harper (2009) suggests that "little is known about the psychological and sociopolitical strategies employed by those who consciously decide to defy racist stereotypes, exceed expectations, and offer more affirming views of their individual selves and the Black male collective" (p. 699). Sadly, given the extant research on Black male students in U.S. American educational contexts, one could conclude that most Black male students are doomed to failure without recourse. This, of course, is not true but narratives of academic success are rare and overshadowed by narratives of underachievement.

In their article "African American Male Achievement: Using a Tenet of Critical Theory to Explain the African American Male Achievement Disparity," Palmer and Maramba (2011) argue that a hidden curriculum is hindering the academic achievement of Black male students.

Moving beyond how Black men are discussed in academic literature, they contend that the media play an important role in the reinforcement of negative images (see Entman, 1992; Entman & Rojecki, 2000) about Black male students which, in turn, “contributes to the problems that African American men experience in education” (Palmer & Maramba, 2011, p. 437). In a study by Harris III, Palmer and Struve (2011) on Black males and academic success on U.S. college campuses, they found that nearly all of the students arrived to campus with some idea of academic success and had learned to value it. In this study, many of the Black male students “saw their academic success as a strategy for combating negative stereotypes about Black men” (p. 54). Both of these studies are important because they conceptualize how narratives about Black male academic success can be used as a strategy to combat institutional racism.

In “They (Don’t) Care About Education: A Counternarrative on Black Male Students’ Responses to Inequitable Schooling,” Harper and Davis III (2012) use data collected from Black male students who applied to a summer academic academy at the University of Pennsylvania to talk about what compelled Black men to care about education. The driving question of their study was: “What compels Black male students to care so much about education, despite what is consistently reported in the literature regarding their gradual disinvestment in schooling?” (Harper & Davis III, 2012, p. 107). Using counterstories, they found that many of the men were cognizant of narratives that portrayed them as disinvested in education and actively sought to resist those dominant narratives by excelling academically. Additionally, many of the participants articulated that despite the inequity in schools, they still viewed education as important to their identities and “espoused a belief in the power of education” (Harper & Davis III, 2012, p. 113). Moreover, many of the participants articulated how pursuing and ultimately attaining “doctorates would confirm for persons from backgrounds similar to theirs that Black

men can and do persist to the highest level of education” (Harper & Davis III, 2012, p. 115), which resists the belief that Black men are uninterested in education. Now that I have discussed previous research on academic achievement in the discipline of education, the next sections discuss research on Black masculinity and higher education in the field of communication.

### *Black Masculinity in Communication*

In the field of communication, Black masculinity has been an important area of study, especially for scholars whose research interests are at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and identity (Alexander, 2006, 2012; Brown, 2006; Jackson, 2006; Johnson, 2003). For instance, Jackson and Dangerfield (2003) call for new conceptualizations of Black masculinity within the field of communication. For them, the literature on Black masculinity typically presents negative portraits of Black males and by extension, Black masculinity. They argue that the extant literature on Black masculinity has done little to debunk the deleterious stereotypes of Black men as criminal, incompetent, and uneducated. Therefore, Jackson and Dangerfield (2003) contribute to the important work of defining, or in this case, redefining Black masculinity to generate more positive and nuanced understandings. They write “the public narratives pertaining to Black men’s lives comply with several racialized social projections about the Black masculine body as (1) violent, (2) sexual, and (3) incompetent” (Jackson & Dangerfield, 2003, p. 123). Germane to this study, Jackson and Dangerfield (2003) also discuss how stereotypical assumptions about Black masculinity and Black men are reinforced in the media and have consequential effects in the realm of education. In response to the conflicting images about Black masculinity, Jackson and Dangerfield (2003) note that some Black males find themselves negotiating their masculinity “in light of how they are socially and communicatively perceived” (p. 125).



In the field of communication, there has been a particular focus on the representation of Black masculinity in the media (Orbe & Hopson, 2002). For example, through his focus on National Basketball Association basketball star Allen Iverson, Brown (2005) explains how Black men are assumed (or expected) to embody negative stereotypes of Black masculinity that are constructed by the media. He argues that when Black men, for whatever reasons, do not align with or fit into confined media images rooted in racism, they are met with confusion, hostility, and/or resentment by dominant culture. This tension between Black men who decide to construct identities outside of dominant definitions that function to place Black men in predetermined constructs, is what Brown (2005) labels a “cultural site of struggle” (p. 81). Moreover, he asserts, “Black masculinity will continue to be a cultural site of struggle that merits attention, action, and strategies for transforming the ‘center’ from the ‘margins’ to alleviate these cultural clashes” (Brown, 2005, p. 81).

In addition to the work done by Jackson and Dangerfield (2003) and Brown (2005), in *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*, Jackson (2006) explicates how the mass media consistently scripts the Black body to perpetuate negative stereotypes of Black bodies, particularly Black men. “Scripting” is how the media defines, interprets, and consequently constructs Black bodies vis-à-vis text, images, and discourse (Jackson, 2006). Jackson (2006) highlights the consequences of such scripting when Black bodies implicitly accept these constructions of Blackness. For example,

In the present day, it is not that some Black males intrinsically sense that they cannot achieve, but rather the social conditions and mass media reinforcement of stereotypes remind and convince the Black male population that they will experience struggle that this is inevitable. (Jackson, 2006, p. 85)

Such reinforcement of failure clouds the ability to believe that Black men can achieve, not just academically but also in relation to attaining and maintaining a job in today's society. Jackson (2006) compels us to look at the complexities of Black masculinity beyond the normative boundaries of mass media.

In her chapter, Bell-Jordan (2011) writes that recent theorizing about Black masculinity points to numerous issues including the pervasive pathologizing of Black males and their lived experiences alongside how “black males construct their identities differently from the mainstream” (p. 129). Despite the progress in theorizing about Black masculinity in an attempt to move beyond one-dimensional constructions, dominant culture persists in signifying Black masculinity as violent, sexual, criminal, and uneducated (Jackson, 2006; Jackson & Dangerfield, 2003; Neal, 2006). Bell-Jordan (2011) contributes to the theoretical discourse on Black masculinity by deconstructing the problematic ways Black men are represented in media culture, namely in magazines and advertising (e.g., *Vibe* and *Sports Illustrated* magazines depiction of Black men as always “horny” and “bad”). In conversation with previous and current literature on Black masculinity (Brown, 2006, 2008; Jackson & Dangerfield, 2003; Jackson & Hopson, 2011), Bell-Jordan (2011) reminds of us of the importance of looking at the relationships between Black males, their social environment and their positionality within larger society to progressively articulate more “meaningful perspectives on black masculinity” (p. 131).

Discussing Black masculinity via a performance and queer lens, in his book *Performing Black Masculinity: Race, Culture, and Queer Identity*, Alexander (2006) explores how Blackness, masculinity, and culture are contested, negotiated, and performed. Alexander's (2006) work unsettles the binaristic assumptions that govern the perceptions about Black men and by extension, Black masculinity. For example, he talks about the often-contradictory performances

of Black masculinity as the “Good Man-Bad Man” (p. 74) dilemma. He argues that within White spaces, such as university classrooms, he is read as the “Good Man” (p. 75) because he is articulate, intelligent, and polite. However, via this same performance in predominantly Black spaces, he is often perceived as the “Bad Man” (p. 75) because he is articulate. From my perspective, Alexander (2006) gets at the dialectical tensions often present in the performance of Black masculinity by shedding light on the politics of how Black men choose to perform (or, are perceived to perform) their identities. Lastly, he elucidates how Black men make a decision to perform “Good Man-Bad Man” (Alexander, 2006, p. 74). He says that it is at times “political,” “crafted,” and “conniving,” but often a choice (Alexander, 2006, p. 81).

In their edited book *Masculinity in the Black Imagination: Politics of Communicating Race and Manhood*, editors Jackson and Hopson (2011) and others contribute immensely to the growing area of Black masculinity research. In their introduction, Jackson and Hopson (2011) call for research on Black masculinity to move beyond a “singular” focus on masculinity to a place where we theorize Black masculinities. Jackson and Hopson (2011) write, “We must shift how we imagine Black masculinities, Black men, Black boys, and Black males” (p. 3). For them, such theorizing would unsettle the idea of there being an “authentic” Black masculinity. The contributors offer imaginative possibilities on what Black masculinities can be, beyond dominant imagery. Many of the essays in this book critique, (re) vision<sup>1</sup>, subvert, and (re)define how Black masculinity has been traditionally talked about within everyday discourse. Additionally, according to Jackson and Hopson (2011), one way of resisting the negative representations of Black masculinity is through “acquiring one’s ‘voice,’” as they argue, to “speak on one’s own

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<sup>1</sup> I use the parenthesis in “(re)” to mark the ongoing process of revisioning and redefining and to

behalf” (p. 3). Doing so counters a social climate that has muted racially marginalized voices and positive images of Black bodies.

In her essay in the aforementioned edited volume entitled “Bearing Witness and Paying Mind: (Re)Defining the Meanings of Black Male Success,” Griffin (2011) contributes to the liberating discourse on Black masculinity by redefining how we understand Black masculine identities. Using the narratives of retired Black male athletes, Griffin (2011) theorizes how “black men can (re)envision the embodiment of black male identity and the achievement of black manhood” (p. 168). Important to Griffin’s (2011) work is that she creates a space where Black men can narrate their own epistemological experiences. Additionally, she highlights how they define success differently from dominant narratives of success that often emphasize the “cool pose” proposed by Major and Billson (1992). Griffin (2011) explores the “cool pose” façade to see how Black men redefine success and embody progressive forms of masculinity.

In alignment with the aforementioned authors, I believe that progressively theorizing Black masculinities requires attention to both race and gender. Ultimately, each argues that we must continue to challenge the rigid constructions of Black masculinity by theorizing the complex, nuanced, and intersectional experiences of Black men. In the section that follows, I discuss the research that does so in the context of Black males in higher education.

#### *Communication Research on Black Men in Higher Education*

As is probably clear, most research on U.S. American Black male students has been done in the field of education. However, there is a small amount of work on Black male students by communication scholars who write about Black masculinity, identity, and race. Orbe (1994, 2003) offers an important analysis of the communicative process of Black men by noting the absence of research on their experiences. He notes that the engagement in such research could

“initiate a greater understanding of one specific ethnic and gender group” (Orbe, 2003, p. 288). Additionally, Orbe (1994) illuminates the “issues surrounding African American communication” (p. 288) via narratives collected from Black men for two years. In the article, he presents six essential themes regarding the communicative experiences of Black men that emerge from his data, including: (1) the importance of communicating with other Black peers; (2) learning how to act with non-Blacks; (3) playing the part (SNAP); (4) keeping a safe distance (from non-Blacks); (5) testing the sincerity of non-Blacks; (6) and feeling an intense social responsibility. While not focused solely on Black male students, he still provides a stepping-stone for theorizing about the communicative experiences of Black male students.

In another article on the communicative experiences of African American first generation college students, Orbe (2003) takes an intersectional approach to describe the strategies Black college students use to survive and succeed on campus. While he hints at how Black first generation college students survive on racially hostile campuses; an explicit discussion of racism is not included. Nevertheless, the students in his study note that sometimes they had to negotiate their identities or prove their intelligence to avoid negative stereotypes. Adding to this conversation, Hopson and Orbe (2007) explore the interracial and intercultural challenges that Black men encounter in traditionally White institutional settings. In this article, Hopson and Orbe (2007) employ co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998) to help us understand the experiences of Black men. While their article does focus specifically on Black men, it does not focus on the experiences of Black male students. Still, they offer an important call to continue exploring how “Black men negotiate tensions within oppressive organizational structures” (p. 83).

In “Performing Culture in the Classroom: An Instructional (Auto)Ethnography,” Alexander (1999) addresses how Black male teachers and Black male students perform and

negotiate culture in the classroom via their lived experiences. Using performance, Alexander (1999) highlights the complex process of performing identity/ies and culture in the classroom for both Black male teachers and students who share similar yet different experiences. From a pedagogical perspective, Alexander (1999) reflexively writes about how TWIs affect their experiences. Building upon his previous work (Alexander 1999, 2007), a more recent chapter explores his relationship with his Black male students (Alexander, 2010). As a Black male teacher, he believes that his relationship with his students is inextricably linked and contradictory. For example, he writes “It is within our relationship that I struggle against the conflation—‘this (Black man) but not that (teacher)’ – or visa versa: ‘teacher, but not Black man’” (Alexander, 2010, p. 365). Likewise, he highlights how Black male students and teachers are marked, minimized, and marginalized by individuals and structures. For example, Alexander (2010) beautifully writes:

In this site [traditionally White university] they (we) are reduced to numbers, literal ‘minorities.’ We are alike in that we rarely see ourselves represented in the curriculum, much less in the classroom or the university structure, as teachers or administrators. Our connection as teacher and student is forged not only in our shared Blackness but in the shared and collectively felt oppression that comes from isolation. (p. 368)

From my perspective, Alexander (2010) captures the problematic experiences of Black male students at TWIs, especially the impact of the lack of Black male representation on their everyday experiences.

In “‘It’s a Struggle, It’s a Journey, It’s a Mountain that you Gotta Climb’: Black Misandry, Education, and the Strategic Embrace of Black Male Counterstories,” Griffin and Cummins (2012) use critical race theory (CRT) to write about the lived experiences of Black

male students on a TWI. They highlight several themes that surfaced via focus group discussions including the omnipresence of stereotype threat, everyday struggles with stereotypes, and negotiating stereotypes and stereotype threat. Griffin and Cummins (2012) contend that centering the voices of Black male students “can serve as a conduit for Black male agency” (p. 259). In addition, from their perspective, “shamefully absent [from the field] is the identification of Black men as intellectual, academically inclined, and educationally invested” (Griffin & Cummins, 2012, p. 260). Additionally, they mark the role of systemic oppression in the experiences of Black male students and how they negotiate their identities on traditionally White campuses. Griffin and Cummins’ (2012) article is crucial to this study in that it is one of two articles written by communication scholars that not only focuses on Black male students but also positions CRT as a theoretical framework. Their article is also important because it theorizes the role of systemic oppression as a communicative phenomenon in the lives of Black male students. Griffin and Cummins (2012) write “communication scholars should be invested in examining the experiences of students of color because systems of oppression such as racism are communicative phenomena that have an impact on our interactions and relationships in educational settings” (p. 264). Furthermore, doing so is significant because as Allen (2007) and Orbe and Allen (2008) assert, racism should not be at the margins of communication research but should be brought to the center.

Finally, Cummins and Griffin (2012) reveal how stereotypes, stereotype threat, microaggressions, prejudice, and the “normalized expectation of Black male failure” (p. 86) manifest through the narratives of Black male students and faculty. In this article, they look at systemic problems that impact Black men and their academic success at TWIs. For example, they write “Dominant deficit and ‘at risk’ discourse unremittingly blames Black male students

for their academic struggles; in contrast, we shift toward an outlook mindful of how power, privilege, and oppression infiltrate educational spaces” (Cummins & Griffin, 2012, p. 86). Furthermore, Cummins and Griffin (2012) highlight the possibility of an inclusive pedagogy by bridging CRT and Critical Communication Pedagogy (CCP) to discuss Black male experiences as students and faculty. Termed “pedagogical love,” they describe the interactions between Black male faculty and students that cultivate “relationships, respect, and possibilities through challenging one another without pandering” (Cummins & Griffin, 2012, p. 91).

In this literature review, I laid the foundation for the scholarly conversation that my thesis contributes to. Recognizing that most of the literature I draw from is in education, it is important to emphasize the limited amount of research about the experiences of Black male students in communication. Nevertheless communication, as a discipline, offers an important space to further explore the influence that institutional racism has on how Black men negotiate and narrate their intellectual identities in education. The aforementioned communication scholarship, evoking Halualani, Mendoza, and Drzewiecka (2009), signals a “juncture” (p. 32) to incorporate research on the experiences of intellectual Black male students who are excelling. According to Jackson II and Hopson (2011), we must “shift how we imagine Black masculinities, Black men, Black boys, and Black males” (p. 3). In agreement, I believe that we must do so in the context of education.



## CHAPTER 3

### CRITICAL RACE THEORY

#### Overview

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was established by a group of legal scholars in the 1970s and 1980s who believed that race and racism were not actively discussed in law (Crenshaw, 2002; Matsuda, 1991). Generally speaking, CRT is a movement of legal scholars who examine and challenge how race, racism and power dynamics maintain dominant racial ideologies (Onwuachi-Willig, 2009; Patton & Catching, 2009). CRT scholars are unified by two common goals: (1) to understand how White supremacy and its systemic marginalization of people of color has been created and maintained in U.S. American society and (2) to challenge systemic racial oppression (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado, 2010).

#### *History of CRT*

The roots of CRT can be traced back to the 1970s during a very political time in U.S. American society regarding race and civil rights. The initial formation of CRT appeared when Derrick Bell left Harvard Law School (HLS) and after Bell's departure, administrators at HLS chose not to continue offering Bell's important course on race and American law (Crenshaw, 2002). Several law students of color challenged HLS to offer the aforementioned class or one analogous to it so that students could have access to Bell's curriculum (Crenshaw, 2002, 2011; Litowitz, 2009). Instead HLS suggested a mini-course for the students of color, as a panacea, for their dissidence with the law school administrators (Crenshaw, 2011). The law students of color rejected this cure-all approach offered and subsequently formed the alternative course as an act of resistance (Crenshaw, 2002). The alternative course entailed critical discussions about racism and mainstream law led by invited guest lecturers (Crenshaw, 2002; 2011; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Harris, 2002; Litowitz, 2009). This course countered the argument by

the dean of HLS that there were no qualified scholars of color to hire who were worthy of teaching at Harvard (Crenshaw, 2002, 2011).

Another key event in the history of CRT is the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) conference that many of the alternative course participants attended. According to Crenshaw (2002), members of CLS were “progressive allies” (p. 15) to those emerging as critical race scholars. To be clear, most scholars in CLS did do critical race work; however, this is where scholars of color would align themselves to do critical work on race in legal studies. Despite the alliance, the goals and aims of CLS scholars and burgeoning critical race scholars differed particularly with regard to racial power and racism (Crenshaw, 2002; 2011; Crenshaw, et al., 1995). Many critical race scholars argued that CLS scholars talked about bodies of color “out there” but rarely positioned race and Whiteness at the center of their research. This puzzled and unsettled the legal scholars of color who were interested in deeply examining the interworkings of race in their discipline.

The resistance to addressing Whiteness in CLS, exuded by the mostly White group of legal scholars, caused the “race crits” to express uncertainty about CLS being a place to adequately address race-related issues (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xxii). To evoke Thomas Kuhn (2012), the inability of CLS scholars and critical race scholars to agree on what should be their collective focus resulted in a paradigmatic shift. To explicitly mark their departure, critical race scholars argued that to better understand racism scholars must consider how racial power can be produced within liberal spaces (i.e., CLS) and not just outside of liberal institutions (Crenshaw, 2002, 2011; Crenshaw, et al., 1995; Tate, 1997). The departure from CLS marked an important step in the development of an intellectually critical account of race in the field of law (Crenshaw, 2002; Crenshaw, et al., 1995). Following the CLS conference in Los Angeles in 1987, critical

race scholars organized their first “Critical Race Theory Workshop” in 1988, which developed the theory and set an agenda to define CRT (Crenshaw, et al., 1995).

### *Tenets of Critical Race Theory*

Although CRT is diverse and cannot be linearly defined, there are at least seven theoretical tenets of CRT that are largely agreed upon, including: (1) racism as omnipresent; (2) race as a social construction; (3) Whiteness as property; (4) interest convergence; (5) racial oppression as intersectional; (6) colorblindness as insufficient, and (7) counterstories as key (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 2002; Crenshaw, et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993, 2012). In the following paragraphs, I explain each of the above tenets of CRT.

#### *Racism as Omnipresent*

CRT scholars begin with the belief that racism is not aberrant but rather normal and omnipresent (Crenshaw, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2012). CRT also holds that racism manifests at both individual and institutional levels and is maintained by a system of racial power that disadvantages bodies of color. In writing about the omnipresence of race in our society, Haney López (2000) contends:

Race dominates our personal lives. It manifests itself in our speech, dance, neighbors, and friends—“our very ways of talking, walking, eating and dreaming are ineluctably shaped by notions of race” [Omi & Winant, 1986]. Race permeates our politics. It alters electoral boundaries, shapes disbursements of local, state, and federal funds, fuels the creation and collapse of political alliance, and twists the conduct of law enforcement. In short, *race mediates every aspect of our lives* [emphasis added]. (p. 164)

Similarly, Litowitz (2009) writes “racism is deeply ingrained, not merely in certain aspects of our legal system, but in our collective unconscious and our everyday attitudes toward people of

color” (p. 296). In this sense, because of the presence of race in everything we do, say or do not say, watch or do not watch, wear or do not wear, it’s of importance to examine its oppressive manifestations.

Moreover, because racism is common and at times unconscious, it is extremely difficult to fully expose racism so it is important to examine its underpinnings (Ikemoto, 2000). For example microaggressions, which are everyday slights that affect bodies of color, are easy to ignore due to their subtlety (Davis, 2000; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). However microaggressions, such as racialized verbal comments, carry implications for bodies of color that experience them on a daily basis and thus merit examination. CRT maintains that because race and racism are “America’s single most confounding problem,” (Haney Lòpez, 2000, p. 165) scholars must shed light on its inescapability.

### *Social Construction of Race*

This tenet of CRT holds that race is an identity category that is intentionally constructed by society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Refuting the idea that race is biologically fixed, Haney Lòpez (2000) writes that race must be understood as a social phenomenon “in which contested systems of meaning serve as the connections between physical features, faces, and personal characteristics” (p. 265). In other words, how we understand race is informed by historical, cultural, and social factors that provide the language to talk about race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Haney Lòpez, 2000). Similarly, because race is socially constructed, our ideas about race become part of the “social fabric” (Haney Lòpez, 2000, p. 265) in which identity markers are interpreted. In tandem with communication work on race (Alexander, 2012; Joseph, 2013; Johnson, 2003), this tenet posits that because race is socially constructed it is never immune to contestation. Understanding race as socially constructed provides CRT scholars with a space to

illustrate how racial hierarchies are maintained in favor of those who identify as White (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harris, 1995).

### *Whiteness as Property*

Additionally, viewing race a socially constructed means that Whiteness becomes an important site to interrogate and challenge White privilege. In U.S. American society, Whiteness is viewed as the normative standard according to which all bodies of color are measured (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Leonardo, 2009; Warren, 2001). Several scholars argue that Whiteness is reinforced through racial hierarchy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dyer, 1997; Warren, 1999). Shome (1999) writes that Whiteness is a “power-laden discursive formation that privileges, secures, and normalizes” (p. 108) the White body while oppressing bodies of color. Similarly, Cheryl Harris (1995) suggests that Whiteness is best understood as a form of property. In this way, Whiteness provides material and symbolic privileges to White people, and to an extent, those who pass and/or perform Whiteness (Alexander, 2004a, 2004b; Harris, 1995; Warren, 2001). Given its power according to dominant society, CRT scholars aim to both mark and challenge Whiteness and its systemic manifestations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

### *Interest Convergence*

Interest convergence asserts that if the interests of White people and people of color do not converge then the interests of people of color will go unmet. For example, Bell (1980, 2004) argues that if the interests of White and Black people did not converge, *Brown vs. Board of Education* would not have resulted in school desegregation. Accordingly, White interests (e.g., international embarrassment) instead of Black interests (e.g., educational inadequacies), are argued to have dictated the outcome of *Brown* (Dudziak, 2000). Ultimately, interest convergence reminds us that unless it is in the interest of White bodies, bodies of color can only receive

limited success under a system that privileges the dominant group (Crenshaw, 2002; Crenshaw, et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

### *Intersectionality*

Intersectionality recognizes accounts of oppression as layered and acknowledges that racism intersects with other forms of domination, such as sexism, heterosexism, and classism. For example, if a person of color who also identifies as gay experiences racism, a critical race perspective would take into account how homophobia intersects with racist domination. This tenet reminds us that bodies of color are not monolithic and thus it is unproductive to assume so because such assumptions ignore the multiple positionalities that people of color embody. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) write that “no person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity (p. 10). Therefore, CRT maintains that when considering how bodies of color are marginalized, it is necessary to take into account multiple identity markers to theorize how their oppression might be informed by the intersections of multiple marginalized identities and/or the intersections of marginalization and privilege. CRT also holds that an intersectional approach is useful in avoiding an oversimplification of human experiences (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

### *Rejection of Colorblindness*

CRT scholars also believe that it is important to challenge dominant racial ideology by denouncing colorblind ideology commonly articulated via assertions of race neutrality, meritocracy, and postracialism (Cho, 2009; Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Onwuachi-Willig, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2009). Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010) notes that colorblindness refers to belief that an individual does not see race, which bolsters the assertion that everyone should be treated equally without regard to racial identity. CRT scholars

contend that this attempt to look past or not see race does not negate the fact that bodies of color still face racial discrimination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gotanda, 2000). In similar fashion, CRT scholars challenge the notion that we live in a postracial society because it too asserts that race no longer matters and that racism does not exist (Cho, 2009; Onwuachi-Willig, 2009). Reflecting on colorblindness and postracialism, Crenshaw (2011) utilizes Obama's election as an example of illusory racial progress. She says "his breakthrough did not open up a raceless space beyond the glass ceiling so much as it created a new space for race in uncharted terrain" (Crenshaw, 2011, p. 1312).

### *Counterstories*

Last but not least, CRT places a strong emphasis on counterstories. CRT scholars recognize that the voices, knowledges, and experiences of people of color are critical to understanding the everyday experiences of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Fernández, 2002). In fact, centering the knowledges and lived experiences of people of color disrupts dominant discourses about race and racism (Gillborn, 2006). Writing about voices of color as unique, Delgado and Stefancic (2012) say:

Because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, black, American Indian, Asian, and Latino/a writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know. Minority status, in other words, brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism. (p. 10)

Additionally, by placing value on experiential stories and narratives, researchers are able to uncover the everyday instantiations of racism (Delgado, 1990; Warren, 2001, 2009). Likewise, Ladson-Billings (1998) writes, "the use of voice of 'naming your reality' is a way that CRT links form and substance to scholarship" (p. 13). By marking the production of knowledge through

narratives of the oppressed, CRT resists canonical ways of epistemological production (Banks, 1993).

Because experiential knowledge is forefronted, readers are invited into a “new and unfamiliar world” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 48) to imagine what life is like from the perspectives of people of color. Doing so has the potential to create a space for dialogue that is often unavailable in some disciplines and/or areas of research. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2012), counterstories are used to “challenge, displace, or mock” (p. 49) dominant narratives and oppressive viewpoints (Delgado, 1993). Lastly, and important to my work, Solórzano and Yosso (2009) contend that this tenet of CRT exposes “deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color” (p. 133). Stated differently, highlighting experiential knowledge is crucial to exposing the power and worthiness of subjugated knowledge.

#### *Interdisciplinary Uses of CRT*

Though critical race theory (CRT) was developed in the legal field, it has begun to appear in disciplines beyond law (Crenshaw, 2011; Cummins & Griffin, 2012; Epperson, 2004; Fernández, 2002; Gillborn, 2006; Griffin, 2010; Griffin & Cummins, 2012; Rossing, 2010). For example, in education, CRT is used to deconstruct racist educational policies and practices (e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). In their important article “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education,” Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that CRT is useful for educational researchers who seek to understand education inequalities. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1998) writes, “If we look at the way that public education is currently configured, it is possible to see the ways that CRT can be a powerful explanatory tool for the sustained inequity that people of color experience” (p. 18). Overall, CRT scholars in education assume that race and racism are



pervasive and aim to contest dominant racial ideologies, confront race neutrality, and eliminate racial oppression (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Patton & Catching, 2009).

Although still in its nascent stages, CRT has also spilled over in the field of communication (Griffin, 2010; Harris & Weber, 2010; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Rossing, 2010; Simpson, 2010). In a special issue of *Communication Law Review*, Griffin (2010) argues that CRT stands as a productive theoretical and methodological framework that:

can aid and abet communication scholars who labor to name, decenter and map whiteness as a consequential identity, a structure and a space. Thus, studies of whiteness in our field can benefit from the historical specificity that CRT offers in relation to the ways that whiteness is leveraged and protected as a form of property. Likewise, CRT serves to heighten the disruption of whiteness as the normative status quo by rendering social institutions such as law and education vulnerable to incessant racial critique. (p. 3-4)

Making a similar argument on the utility of CRT in communication, Lindlof and Taylor (2011) write in *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*:

For several reasons, CRT resonates strongly with communication scholars. One is that it focuses analysis on the discourse and images that create, maintain, and transform cultural relations of meaning and power *as* [original emphasis] racial phenomena. This analysis goes beyond the simple identification of overt stereotypes to consider the more subtle, complex, and often contradictory processes by which symbolic codes are organized and activated in the development, production, and reception of cultural performances and texts. (p. 63)

Combined, Griffin (2010) and Lindlof and Taylor (2011) speak to the value of CRT scholarship in the field of communication. Certainly, as Griffin (2010) eloquently notes, “communication

and CRT scholars whose work speaks to and with the voices of people of color bravely redefine racism by ‘looking to the bottom’ toward those who bear the brunt of the U.S. American racial hierarchy” (p. 4). In the last section, I discuss research on Black males that utilize CRT as the theoretical framework.

#### *Research on Black Males that Employs CRT*

CRT has been used as a theoretical and methodological framework to investigate the educational experiences of Black male students by several scholars (Cummins & Griffin, 2012; Griffin & Cummins, 2012; Smith, Yosso, Solórzano, 2007). Such studies typically use one or more tenets of CRT to deconstruct how racialized beliefs and behaviors impact the lives of Black male students on college campuses. More specifically, some explore how microaggressions take a toll on the lives of Black male college students, particularly on TWIs (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). Yet, other studies use critical race counterstories to position the voices of Black male students to resist dominant educational narratives (Griffin & Cummins, 2012; Harper, 2009). Below, to set a nuanced foundation for my study, I briefly discuss three articles that have used CRT in educational contexts to address the experiences of Black male students.

In their article “Racial Primes and Black Misandry on Historically White Campuses: Toward a Critical Race Accountability in Educational Administration,” education scholars Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2007) use CRT to understand how racism and racial ideologies at the intersections of race and gender reinforce an unfriendly and racially charged campus. Specifically, they “examine how Black men experience race and racism in historically White university settings” (p. 560). In this article, Smith et al., (2007) use CRT as a framework to

question gendered racism<sup>1</sup> in higher education and examine how racial priming shapes the social experiences of Black male students. They also highlight how racial ideologies about Black men, termed Black misandry, are reproduced to oppress Black male students. Smith et al., (2007) write, “Black misandry refers to an exaggerated pathological aversion toward Black men created and reinforced in societal, institutional, and individual ideologies, practices, and behaviors” (p. 563). These authors use CRT as an analytical framework to “better understand the particular racial-gender history in the United States that positions African American men on society’s margins” (Smith, et al., p. 563). To explain how Black misandric beliefs and stereotypes in traditionally White space impact the lived experiences of Black male students, Smith et al., (2007) use counterstories as a methodology to illuminate the lived experiences of the Black male students.

Education scholar Harper (2009) also uses counterstories to oppose dominant narratives about the experiences of Black male students. Through narratives derived from interviews with 143 Black males, Harper (2009) counters dominant discourse about the low achievement of Black male students by presenting narratives of achievement. To do so, Harper (2009) foregrounds the following tenets of CRT: intersectionality, critique of colorblindness, and counterstories. Ultimately, Harper’s (2009) article reveals the potential of counterstories to expose deficit informed research that ignores the “epistemologies of people of color” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 23). More specifically, the counterstories Harper (2009) presents counter the commonplace and racialized negative assumptions about Black male students.

Lastly, Griffin and Cummins’ (2012) article on the experiences of Black male students also employs CRT as a theoretical framework. Theoretically binding CRT and Black misandry,

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<sup>1</sup> For Smith et al., (2007), this refers to that idea that Black men are confronted by oppression that is not just informed by race but also by gender. In other words, Black male oppression is intersectional; similar to but not the same as Black women who might experience sexism and racism combined.

Griffin and Cummins (2012) theorize how Black male students are understood in educational spaces and, more importantly, how they narrate their experiences. Griffin and Cummins (2012) contend that by “positioning critical race sensibilities as the theoretical prism through which Black male voices can be heard, we mark and struggle against the reproduction of oppressive ideologies while simultaneously addressing the absence of Black male perspectives in our discipline” (p. 9-10). Overall, their study reveals how Black men articulate their everyday struggles with stereotypes and resistance on traditionally White campuses.

Drawing upon CRT for this study fosters an understanding of how Black men not only experience racism but also how they navigate and narrate hostile spaces. Similarly, CRT is useful because it establishes the importance of lived experiences and subjugated knowledge. If we are to truly understand the experiences of Black students like myself, there needs to be more conversation about systemic barriers and personal agency in education. As such, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Black males describe themselves intellectually?
2. How do Black males negotiate their intellectual identities in traditionally White educational spaces?
3. At the intersections of race and gender, how do oppressive ideologies inform the educational experiences of Black males?

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **METHODOLOGY**

To gain insight into the experiences of Black male students on TWIs, I couple critical race theory (CRT) with qualitative interviewing as a method because it allows the researcher to gain in-depth knowledge from the participants interviewed. In trying to create a space where marginalized voices and perspectives are heard and valued, I use interviews to position the voices of Black male students as absolutely essential to understanding the experiences we have on college campuses. In this study, rather than using interviews to definitively “explain” the experiences of Black male students, I use this method to illuminate our respective experiences. The purpose of this chapter is to outline my methodological choices and process.

#### **Researcher Positionality**

As a researcher, I arrive to this project as an intellectual Black male graduate student who continues to experience what I interpret as racism on my traditionally White campus. As such, I position myself as a complete-member-researcher. According to Ellis and Bochner (as cited in Toyosaki, 2011), “complete-member-researchers are those who are...full members of a culture they are interpreting and reporting” (p. 63). Recognizing this, I engage in this research as a “co-researcher” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) and reflexively engaged my own experiences with racism, resisting stereotypes, and struggling against images that depict Black men as uneducated and disengaged. As a complete-member-researcher, my interviewees and I share similar cultural codes, symbols, and meanings that situate us in an intimate space where we might share mutual understandings of our experiences as well as elements that mark our differences (Alexander, 2010; Toyosaki, 2011). These cultural similarities and differences create a space where participants might be more willing to speak candidly. Throughout the interview process I draw

from their experiences, my experiences, and our experiences to, as transparently as possible, represent their stories and how their stories speak to and with my own.

### **Qualitative Interviewing**

Qualitative interviewing is one of the leading methods to collect data due to its ability to obtain rich knowledge about the experiences of those being interviewed (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Qualitative interviewing serves as a useful method to collect narratives from participants to learn about their experiences in a social world (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) and allows the researcher to, albeit temporarily and vicariously, enter into the experiences and perspectives of those being interviewed (Patton, 2002). In my case, interviewing allowed me to enter into a space that I am familiar with to learn how Black male students narrate their individual lived experiences with education and racism.

Researchers who use qualitative interviewing as method generally have similar goals, including collecting information about a person's life, understanding how their worldviews have shaped their experiences, and obtaining responses to interview questions about a particular topic or issue (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2012). Patton (2002) writes, "Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, to gather their *stories* [my emphasis]" (p. 341). Lindlof and Taylor (2011) contend that there are three forms of interview talk including stories, accounts, and explanations. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), stories give "shape to the human experience" and storytelling is "an opportunity for people to tell their stories as they see fit" (p. 174). Ultimately, qualitative interviewing allows researchers to understand people's experiences, especially those experiences that we cannot observe (Patton, 2002).

While there is a shared system of characteristics that mark qualitative interviewing as a methodological means to collect data, there are several different types of qualitative interviewing (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Patton, 2002). Generally speaking, qualitative interviewing is divided up between different types depending on the data being sought after. For example, Lindlof and Taylor (2011) outline several different types of interviewing: ethnographic interviews, informant interviews, respondent interviews, narrative interviews, and focus group interviews. Briefly, ethnographic interviews, also known as informal conversational interviews (see Patton, 2002), are considered the most informal and spontaneous form of interviewing. These interviews “typically [occur] in a cultural scene” while the researcher is immersed in the space of the people being studied (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 176; see Toyosaki, 2004, 2011 for examples).

Contrary to informant interviews, respondent interviews produce open-ended responses to questions about the person being interviewed, “respondents speak only for, and about, themselves” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 179). Narrative interviews (see Corey, 1996 for an example) are a method for capturing stories told by the person being interviewed. For example, Lindlof and Taylor (2011) write, “the narrative interview is not only a method for ‘capturing’ stories; it also assumes that people understand who they are partly through their everyday performances of narrative” (p. 180). Lastly, Lindlof and Taylor (2011) note that focus group interviews are typically interviews with more than two people, which are used to garner multiple opinions on a particular topic or issue by diverse groups of participants (see Griffin & Cummins, 2012 for an example).

In qualitative interviewing, there are also several types of question guides such as structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. Structured question guides include a set of

questions created by the researcher that each participant answers (Fontana & Frey, 2000). This type of question guide means that the researcher heavily controls the interview so that all of the questions are answered and the interview does not veer away from the specified questions (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Semi-structured question guides consist of questions that the researcher hopes to ask each participant during the interview (Fontana & Frey, 2000). The questions serve as a potential checklist during the interview rather than an absolute requirement (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Patton, 2002). Lastly, the unstructured interview generally relies on “the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of the interaction” (Patton, 2002, p. 342). The conversation during the interview is free flowing and the interview guide, if there is one, is flexible (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Fontana and Frey (2000) argue that semi-structured and unstructured interviewing can provide a greater breadth of participant responses than structured forms of interviewing. The interviews for this study were semi-structured and resembled narrative interviewing (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Patton, 2002; van Manen, 1990), which allowed interviewees to talk about what they regarded as important.

## **Data Collection**

### *Site*

Interviewees for this study were recruited on the campus of Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC). SIUC is a public university located at the southern tip of Illinois. According to SIUC’s website (2013), the majority of students are from the state of Illinois with a large proportion from Chicago or the Chicago-land (i.e., suburbs) area. In fall 2011, 3,244 out of 15, 000 undergraduates identified as Black; however, the number of Black undergraduates dropped to 3,086 students out of 14,130 in fall 2012 (SIU Institutional Research and Studies, 2013). By comparison, White students make up the bulk of the student population at SIUC as



they accounted for 9,035 out 14,130 undergraduates in 2012 (SIU Institutional Research and Studies, 2013).

### *Interviewees*

Interviewees for this study were located via criterion-sampling methods, which means that potential interviewees were recruited based upon predetermined criteria that I set as the researcher (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). For this study, I recruited 10 interviewees from campus who: (1) identify themselves as Black male students; (2) have a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or higher<sup>2</sup>; (3) are involved in at least one student organization or leadership position; and (4) have participated in summer academic and/or research programs (i.e., McNair, Research Rookies, study abroad, and service learning). I chose these criteria because research has documented the positive relationship between involvement in student organizations and academic success for Black students (Harper, 2006; Palmer & Young, 2009). Interviewees were solicited via email, word-of-mouth, Facebook, and, in some instances, snowball sampling. Snowball sampling refers to when research participants recommend future participants who might fit the criteria to the researcher (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Additionally, faculty and administrators on campus recommended students that they believed met the criteria. Lastly, interviewees were recruited via campus centers and organizations such as the Black Resource Center, Black Male Initiative (BMI), and Men of Distinction (MoD).

Based on the demographic survey filled out by each interviewee before the interview began (see Appendix A), all of the interviewees identified as African American and U.S. American in respect to racial identity and nationality. In terms of gender and sexuality, all of the interviewees identified as male and heterosexual. Their ages ranged from 20 to 25-years-old. Six

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<sup>2</sup> In the last chapter, I will discuss the implications of setting this GPA requirement.

of the interviewees identified as middle class while the remaining four identified as lower middle class or lower class. In regard to student status, one of the interviewees identified as sophomore, four as juniors, three as seniors, one is in a post-baccalaureate program, and one is an undeclared graduate student. Their areas of study ranged from the hard sciences to the humanities. Almost all of the interviewees are either currently involved in or have been involved in Registered Student Organizations (RSOs), several participated in research programs such as Research Enriched Academic Challenge (REACH) and/or the McNair Scholars Program, and one is a member of a Black Greek fraternity. Lastly, their grade point averages (GPAs) ranged between 2.7 and 3.9.

### *Methods*

In this study, interviewees participated in face-to-face interviews that lasted approximately 60-70 minutes each. Given that facial expressions and body language are a telling communicative behavior in interactions, face-to-face interviews are a benefit to qualitative interviewing, especially during the analysis of the interview (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Eight of the interviews took place in a study room in Morris Library on the SIUC campus, which allowed for a common meeting place and relative privacy. The remaining two interviews took place outside of Morris Library, one in a private area of a campus dining room and the other in a closed off section in the Student Center. The interviews were conducted from December 2012 to January 2013. Prior to data collection interviewees read and signed an informed consent. Before starting the interview, interviewees were asked to complete a demographic survey whereupon they selected their own pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

I used an interview guide with 14 questions (see Appendix B), most of which I asked each interviewee depending on how our conversation transpired. The interview questions are

informed by tenets of critical race theory (CRT) and the guiding questions outlined in Chapter 3. The questions revolved around several topics including interviewees': 1) educational experiences as Black men, 2) narratives about academic success and intellectual identity, 3) experiences with racism, and d) negotiation and/or resistance of racist assumptions about their educational and cultural identities. For example, I asked questions like "What does being a Black male intellectual mean to you?" and "Have you experienced racism on campus? If so, please describe in what ways."

All of the interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) note that the researcher must read the transcripts after transcription so that the researcher does not feel alienated from the transcriptions. Thus, after receiving the interview transcripts, I listened to each interview with the transcripts to verify that the transcriptions were as accurate as possible. Most importantly, I wanted to make sure the transcribers did not "clean up" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 215) the narratives shared, especially in regards to language and dialect. As a member of the cultural group being interviewed at the intersections of race and gender, this was an important step for me to ensure that I could represent their stories, accents, cultural references, and linguistic choices as genuinely as possible.

### **Data Analysis**

Immediately after receiving the transcripts, I used what Lindlof and Taylor (2011) define as in-process writing, which refers to "early tentative attempts to come to grips with the current state of your research" (p. 246). I went through each transcript, word for word, adding commentaries and/or asides in the margins. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), asides are

generally brief and reflective pieces of analytic writing that are often in parenthesis and brackets. Commentaries are a more “elaborate reflection on some specific event or issue” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 244) and they also help highlight broader issues and themes in the transcript. Commentaries and asides allowed me to engage the interviews more intimately by documenting my reactions to and interpretations of the interviews. This interaction with the data sparked my initial stages of analyzing the participants’ narratives. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) write that analysis is the “process of labeling and breaking down (or decontextualizing) raw data and then reconstituting them into” (p. 243) categories, patterns, and themes. After listening to the interviews and reading my transcripts several times, I went through each of them to identify themes, concepts, and/or ideas that related to my overall research questions and theoretical framework.

Following the in-process writing and preliminary engagement with the transcripts, I used an inductive and deductive approach (Patton, 2002). I created categories from themes that emerged from the narratives (inductive); however, categories were also rooted in tenets of CRT (deductive). Lindlof and Taylor (2011) and Patton (2002) posit that researchers who apply concepts from existing theoretical frameworks and research to code their data use an etic form of coding. Mirroring the tenets of CRT, my specific categories for coding were: (1) social construction of race, (2) racism as everyday, (3) intersectionality, and (4) counterstories, and (5) Black males in the classroom. After I identified and solidified the categories and codes, I created a codebook with five major codes so that my coding process would be more focused and organized. Categories refer to an “array of general phenomena” (p. 246) such as concepts, constructs, and themes in which to put similar items or data chunks; categories help the researcher to explain the meaning of the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Codes are more

mechanical, they serve as a shorthand technique to label, separate, compile, and organize data; codes are “the linkages between data and the categories” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 248). Lastly, sub-codes are subsidiary or tertiary codes to major codes; in other words, they aid in further organizing data (Charmaz, 2006).

To identify key exemplars of the codes, I used line-by-line coding which Charmaz (2006) notes as particularly useful when researchers are dealing with detailed data. Line-by-line coding allowed me to draw out patterns and examples that could be connected to codes and larger sub-codes. This type of coding allowed me to constantly approach the interview transcripts anew just in case there were nuanced connections and interpretations (Charmaz, 2006). To maintain organization throughout the coding process, I used color-coded pens, highlighters, and post-it notes to mark important examples that I believed represented certain codes in my codebook. I started with five codes, which were: (1) social construction of race, (2) racism as everyday, (3) intersectionality, (4) counterstories, and (5) Black males in the classroom. However, after I began coding and realized that code five could be merged with code three, I wheedled down to only four codes: (1) social construction of race, (2) racism as everyday, (3) intersectionality, and (4) counterstories. For Chapter 5, I chose three overarching codes to forefront which are (1) racism as everyday, (2) intersectionality, and (3) counterstories. Next, in Chapter 5, I present and interpret narratives from my interviews with 10 Black male students who articulate their experiences in higher education.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this chapter is to transparently represent the thoughts and experiences of Black male students at a traditionally White institution (TWI). The narratives in this chapter are positioned to challenge dominant racial ideologies that position Black male students as unintelligent and disengaged. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, I am a complete-member researcher (Toyosaki, 2008) and therefore, I position my emotions, thoughts, and own experiences in conversation with the narratives of the Black male participants. To maintain anonymity, I use pseudonyms chosen by each of the Black men in this study. In the sections that follow, I focus on three themes from the interviews including: 1) racism as everyday, 2) intersectionality, and 3) counterstories that speak back to dominant racial ideologies. These themes are situated in relation to Critical Race Theory (CRT) and are framed to respond to the research questions in Chapter 3.

#### **Racism as Everyday**

Critical race theory (CRT) maintains that racism is normal and not an anomaly in the lives of people of color (Crenshaw, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2012). In conversation with CRT, Philomena Essed (1991) argues that everyday racism relates to the day-to-day racial slights that people of color experience. This section explores Black male students' everyday experiences with racism on a traditionally White campus. Specifically, the narratives in this section speak to how Black male students define racism and their everyday experiences with racism on and off campus.

*“It’s a simple question, but its hard to answer:”<sup>3</sup> Black Men Defining Racism*

Before discussing the different ways my interviewees experience racism, I asked them first to define and/or describe racism. The descriptions of racism that they provided ranged from overt to covert dislike. For example BP, a 25-year-old post-baccalaureate student, says, “I think racism is a dislike of a certain group of people based on stereotypes.” He went on to argue that the stereotypes are not “absolute” but are just an assumption about certain racial groups. In a follow-up question, I asked BP if racism was only about stereotypes, and he responded, “I think it [stereotypes] can lead towards racist behavior towards a certain group.” Law, a 21-year-old junior, says that racism is a belief that is often false, and constantly “...pushing us down. Such as neglect, mistreatment, and stereotypes.” Combined, both BP and Law, elucidate the ways in which certain assumptions, such as stereotypes, can lead to racism. In his description of racism and stereotypes, 21-year-old junior, Martin Woods, said stereotypes and other assumptions about Black people are “a means of control.” Specifically, Martin Woods believes that stereotypes are a form of racism because it’s a way to keep people of color in their place. Taken together, all three participants narrate how stereotypes are a manifestation of racism that works in tandem with additional factors.

One participant, Ace, defines racism as being only an overt form of domination towards certain groups. He initially noted that racism for him was just prejudice towards people of color because of their skin tone and that racism is mostly “one-to-one,” which I read to mean individual racism. However, in a preceding narrative, Ace describes how he felt that racism played a role in him not getting financial aid. He noted that because of his skin tone, he does not get the “things that normally a Caucasian would get. So I would say that’s racism for me. That is

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<sup>3</sup> This quote is from Law’s response to how he defines racism.

probably more of a systematic thing.” So, while Ace articulates that racism is mostly individual, he nonetheless describes and names a situation that he believes involves a system.

Other Black men in the study articulate racism in a more multifaceted way. For example, William Banks, a 23-year-old senior, defines racism in the following way:

I say it’s twofold. You have one-to-one racism and then you have the institutional racism. The issue is, a lot of people get stuck on the one-to-one issue. To me the one that’s more stifling, I guess, if you will, is the systemic aspect, which is how I’m treated differently solely based off the color of my skin, how my body makes property value go down or how I don’t get a fair shake.

In conversation with William Banks, Charles, a 21-year-old senior, gives the following examples of racism:

Not holistically looking at Black male students, I think that’s racism. The fact that there’s so many Black and brown males incarcerated, that’s definitely racism. The lack of—not even just the lack of funding in schools—but in urban schools, inner city schools, that’s definitely racism.

Jeff, a 25-year-old undeclared graduate student, provides an incisive yet simple view on the machinations of systemic racism. He says:

Some people look at racism from the inside out, I look at it from the outside in. Some people look at it from like the micro to the person to the community to the system. I look at it from the system, to the community, to the person. That’s how I look at it because I think if somebody—if I walked into Walgreen’s right now and somebody looks at me and



assumes I'm going to steal, I think that comes from a system assuming that this is what I'm supposed to do.

Together, their definitions build upon understandings of individual racism and speak to how systemic racism impacts the lives of people of color. From my perspective, their insight also speaks to the importance of understanding how systemic racism works. For example, Jeff's view of systemic racism encourages us to think about how racism as a powerful ideology is constantly reproduced in society. Bonilla-Silva (2010) contends that due to the pervasive nature of racism, it has not disappeared despite our attempts to run away from it. In tandem with Bonilla-Silva (2010), Holland (2012) argues that racism has a "rhetoric, a style through which it survives. In order for this style to be recognized, it has to be reiterated" (p. 30) in a society. For instance, the belief that Jeff is going to steal is informed by racialized ideologies that are constantly reproduced by individuals such as sale clerks at Walgreen's. Additionally, Jeff and Charles both highlight how racism is still very much a part of the structures of society.

Hidden racism was also very much a part of our conversations about racism. For example, BP narrates a hypothetical story to define what he labels "hidden racism." He says:

I would think like in terms of like maybe like a certain position at a job or something, like a person might get denied. Let's say a person who is not of color, you know, has applied for a job and interviews and a person of color interviews for the same job, they have like similar credentials, you know, maybe the person of color interviewed better but the person of color didn't get hired. The interviewer already has certain ideas about the person of color. I think situations like that, you know, it's hidden but its there.

Likewise, Jeff says that for him racism is usually subtle; he describes racism as “sneaky, sleek, very sleek” comments. Jeff was not the only participant to describe racism as sleek. Bob, a 20-year-old junior, says, “When I got here [campus], I started noticing things and seeing how other people, how Whites treated Blacks here in the subtle ways. It’s real subtle.” Similarly, Dwight, a 20-year-old sophomore, humorously notes, “it’s the irritating stuff. It’s just ignorance. It’s the stuff that makes you mad for one minute.” Adding to the voices of Jeff, Bob, and Dwight, Law, a 21-year-old junior, said it’s “just a feeling. I mean just a feeling of being slighted. I can’t always name it but I feel it.”

Drawing a connection between their narratives and critical race work, I believe that they all speak to microaggressions, which are subtle individual slights informed by racism (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). Importantly, the fact that several participants note racism as “sleek” supports CRT’s assertion that racism is not aberrant but is always present. As Rollock (2012) and Sue, Capodilupo and Holder (2008) note, these “sleek” racial microaggressions serve to remind Black men that they are judged differently than their White counterparts. Collectively, their stories name the realness of racism. Solórzano and Yosso (2009) argue that by examining and naming ideologies of racism, “victims of racism can find their voice” (p. 134). Additionally, hearing our own and other’s stories reminds us that we are not alone in our marginalization. In the next section, the Black men narrate the effects of racial stereotypes.

### *The Effects of Stereotypes*

During the interviews, many of the Black men discussed the impact of negative stereotypes. They marked the negative implications of stereotypes in their individual experiences

and also their impact on Black men as a collective. Speaking about the impact of stereotypes, Charles says:

I guess the first would be when you see these stereotypes and assumptions, as a Black male myself, growing up, you kind of take it on I guess like what they call labeling or something like that. You internalize the things you see and the things you hear about Black males and you kind of compare yourself to that because I know a lot of times growing up, education or doing well in school wasn't something that was important.

In conversation with Charles, Law talks about the effects of stereotypes on Black male bodies in the following way:

Being a black man is a lot of pressure especially because of the negative propaganda, the stereotypes, the setup for failure. Its hard to say, being targeted by the law and society itself. I mean it, it has an effect on you if you can't make it. It has certain methods. It has certain outlets... I mean, its conditioned in our minds. They say use our bodies as assets, for playing sports, basketball, instead of using our minds.

Jeff highlights several stereotypes of Black men and how the media plays a role in disseminating negative stereotypical images. He says:

I know how certain media outlets want to just project certain stories and want to perpetuate certain stereotypes, even though they may not say that, they'll never come out and just say we want to tell people that Black men don't succeed. Its implicit, you kind of see, this is all that you're talking about. It's a stereotype. You have images of Black men as aggressive, violent, and uneducated. I think media has an enormous role in that. Black men learn from these images.

Charles, Law, and Jeff bring to light the long-term effects of negative stereotypes on the psyche of Black men. From a critical race perspective, they all speak to internalized oppression, whereby Black men can inadvertently reproduce stereotypes that bolster dominant racial ideologies that “position them as inferior” (Griffin & Cummins, 2012, p. 21).

As Jenkins (2006) and Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2007) note, the stereotypes that Charles, Law, and Jeff refer to are those that assume Black men to be deviant, criminal, incapable, ignorant, and lazy. From a critical race perspective, it is very difficult for Black male students to feel welcome on campus where they are negatively caricatured (Solórzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000; Solórzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002; Staples, 1997). As a Black male student, I can attest to feeling unwelcome and ignored on campus. It is important to note that our experiences as Black males serve as a reminder of the power of stereotype threat and the ways that stereotypes can hinder people of color (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Steele (1997, 2010) in alignment with the interviewees, defines stereotype threat as the expectation that one will be judged based on a particular stereotype. Recognizing that stereotype threat exists, Black men must negotiate (in the ways they know how) oppressive stereotypes that are ascribed to their bodies on traditionally White campuses (Duncan, 2002; Griffin & Cummins, 2012; Jenkins, 2006).

Critical race theory also implores us to think about how stereotypes function, in concert with larger systems of oppression, to marginalize Black male students. The narratives shared in this study are quite similar to what I experienced in my psychology class as an undergraduate student. It is my contention that my instructor’s comments, despite her intentions, were informed by racist stereotypes about students of color. As the Black male students in this project narrate, and I agree, stereotypes themselves aren’t always racist; however, the ideologies that fuel

stereotypes are informed by race. Indeed, as Jackson (2006) argues, the negative scripting of Black male bodies is an ideologically driven discursive act informed by racism.

*“Racism is definitely real:” Black Male Students’ Experiences with Racism*

Overwhelmingly, most of the men discussed personally experiencing racism and being able to tangibly label it as such. However, one participant expressed uncertainty around having experienced racism. For example, when asked if he experienced racism on campus, BP responded, “No, I wouldn’t say I have.” Yet, in a rather swift manner, he follows up with, “well, if I have, it wasn’t something that I recognized, which means it wasn’t racist or I didn’t take it that way but I know racism exists.” BP’s response is interesting because for him, if he can’t recognize something as racist then it is not racism, but he does believe that racism exists. Differently from BP, other men in the study clearly pointed to experiences that they believe to be racist. For example, Dwight shares a story where he felt an older White patron consistently treated him in a racist way at his job. After reporting it to his supervisors, he shares below his interpretation of their disregard:

I said do you know what he said to me? She was like “no, what’s the problem?” His language was demeaning and racist. And they [his supervisors] was like “well, you need to calm down.” So now, I’m an angry Black man, big angry Black man. So it’s like oh well, we’ve got to make sure that he’s calmed down and he can’t serve that guy [White patron] anymore, but the guy can still come. And I’m like, I should have more respect than that as a person. You all know history.

As a Black employee, Dwight reflects on how racism played out while on the job. He alludes to how when Black males express what they interpret as racism to White people, they risk being

positioned as irrational, or in Dwight's case, the stereotypical angry Black man. Drawing on CRT, I interpret his White supervisor's comments as an attempt to deny Dwight's experience of racism. Bonilla-Silva (2010) argues that this sort of response is one example of how Whites minimize the significance of racism while negating the experiences of people of color. The aforementioned experience has influenced Dwight to share less and react differently when in the presence of White people. For example, he says:

It made me cautious. It makes me hesitant and it makes me always aware about where I am at and how to go about things. I don't interrupt [Whites]. I don't want to get fired. They will look for reasons. Sometimes they'll say something to me and I think sometimes they'll wait for me to say something.

Again, Dwight illustrates how an experience with racism changed how he navigates his everyday life on campus and at work. His narrative is an important indicator of how racist experiences can shape the communicative interactions people of color have with their White peers and/or supervisors.

A majority of the men's stories and experiences hint at small racial incidents, opposed to extremely overt racism. For example, Jeff voices:

I can say my entire life, I've only had maybe one time where I've seen like some really, like, overt, blatant racism directly to my face. I was in sixth grade; a kid called me the N-word straight to my face. That's the first time I hit someone. But other than that, most of my experiences have been subtle.

William Banks notes that the manifestation of racism that denies people who look like him access to certain things is the racism that affects him. He remarks, "I think it's more about access

to opportunity. When I am denied opportunity that's racism that matters to me. That's the racism that impacts me. Its subtle though, easy to deny." In another example of subtle racism, Charles discusses his graduate school acceptance into an Ivy League university in class. For him, subtle racism occurs when his professors are generally amazed or shocked that he will soon start a Ph.D. program. While he feels that their startled looks and words of surprise mean something more, he is not quite sure. He said that after the exchanges, he would think about it later, saying, "was that racism or am I just thinking about it too much? Is it because I am Black? I always have to think about it." Taken together, Jeff, William Banks, and Charles' narratives reveal that their experiences with racism are mostly subtle and perhaps unintentional.

Interestingly but not surprisingly, most participants noted that a large proportion of their racist experiences were subtle and often left them in a state of contemplation. The quotidian nature of racism makes it difficult to mark (Holland, 2012; Perry, 2011); however, what is important to this project is that the Black men felt and/or thought about when they were racially slighted. From a critical race perspective, this is paramount because in a society where attempts to deny racism are abundant, their narratives remind us of its subtle omnipresence. Today blatant racist acts are, often but not always, quickly condemned; still, as Bonilla-Silva (2010), Crenshaw (2011), and Holland (2012) suggest, it has become more arduous to argue the fact that subtle forms of racism still exist. As such, narratives of everyday racism serve as powerful exemplars to support CRT's assertion that racism is omnipresent despite a post-racist climate that constantly denies the racist experiences of people of color (Crenshaw, 2011; Onwuachi-Willig, 2009). In the words of one participant, Martin Woods, "racism is definitely real." In the following section, the Black men voice their experiences as Black males on a TWI.

## **Black Male Students Experiences On Campus**

In this section, I highlight how the Black men locate themselves on campus and in the classroom as Black male students. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) is useful here because several participants discuss the various ways they are marginalized at the intersections of race and gender on campus by the administration, and in the classroom by their peers and instructors.

### *“Feeling welcome is relative”: Voices on Campus Inclusion*

Several of the men shared their experiences on campus, which ranged from feeling welcomed to feeling excluded due to having to combat stereotypes and other forms of gendered racism. Gendered racism refers to the ways gendered oppression and racism work in tandem to hinder Black students from succeeding (Mutua, 2006). Interestingly the responses across the board were very similar. For example, most express that feeling welcome is relative, meaning that it depends on the context and whether or not the space was majority Black. Additionally, some of the men express that at times they felt welcomed temporarily when it was in the best interest of the university to appear as an “inclusive” campus. This became extremely important during conversations about the Inclusive Excellence model our university is slowly transitioning to.

William Banks, in comparing the university system to a business model, says, “if you [university] is going to accept Black students and take their money, you [university] are accountable to accommodate them.” In other words, when the university can reap the benefits of the Black male students being at the institution, they attempt to make Black male students feel welcome. For them, feeling welcomed is almost always tied to, in the words of Martin Woods,



“what is in the best interest of the university.” This was especially true for William Banks when he talked about the re-branding that is happening at the university and how the re-branding seems like a further attempt to “marginalize Black men” on campus. In many ways, this sentiment harkens back to Bell’s (1980) notion of interest convergence. More specifically, many interviewees indicated only feeling welcome when it was in the best interest of the university.

In an attempt to get at the systemic nature of why Black males do not feel welcome, I asked William Banks if he felt welcome on campus. In response, he says, “No I don’t. As a Black male, I rarely feel welcomed anywhere given that the system is not built for me [Black men] to succeed.” This feeling is very consistent with past research that suggests that there are various systemic barriers that hinder Black male students from feeling included in traditionally White educational contexts (Foster, 2005; Noguera, 2008). In a similar story, Jeff articulates that in his daily life on campus he has,

...to understand that maybe as a Black male in education there may be systems that want to work against me. There may be, you know—there may be fellow students, faculty, maybe administrators who don’t want to see me walk across the stage and get a Ph.D. or anything like that.

Ace, in a brusque tone, says, “Yeah, I don’t think they [university] care as much for us African Americans as for the Caucasian Americans.” Quite clearly, Jeff, William Banks, and Ace are extremely cognizant of how race and racism can affect their daily experiences on campus. Such forces also shape whether they feel welcome and/or excluded on campus.

While many of the men stated that they felt unwelcomed or excluded on campus, it is important to note that one of the Black male students, Bob, believed that he felt included on

campus. In fact, his responses often diverged from those of the other participants throughout our conversations. For example, when asked about his experiences, Bob states:

As a Black male student on campus I feel very welcomed. My personality is people-oriented so I look for ways to connect with others naturally. I've partaken in various groups and organized events to make my college experience enjoyable. I think my department does a really good job trying to lead you in experiences wise, trying to give you the best ability or best experience possible and they do kind of—well, I'll put it like this. Since I do work at [departmental job] and I do try to and make myself involved, I have more of an advantage than most people.

As a researcher, it is important for me to note the voices that diverge from the answers of the other participants; however, it is equally important that I provide some interpretation of this. On the one hand, I appreciate that Bob is candid in his response and feels welcome—this is a good thing. On the other hand, what sticks out to me are his comments that he “looks” for ways to connect and that he organizes events “to make” his college and work experiences pleasing. From my perspective, Bob is creating his own welcoming space rather than the university itself providing an environment for Bob to feel welcome. So, while there is an individual effort via Bob's actions, I do not interpret explicit effort on an institutional level based on his comments. As Harper (2009) and Smith et al., (2011) note, when Black males must devote their energy to resisting negative stereotypes and coping with/in an unwelcome environment, it takes away the energy and time they could be devoting to their studies. My concern is with whether or not Bob is diverting attention away from his studies to ensure feeling welcome. In agreement with Griffin and Cummins (2012), there should be institutional efforts to embrace the experiences of all

students opposed to students who represent marginalized identity groups making themselves feel welcome when it is likely that their privileged counterparts do not undertake such efforts.

*Back Male Voices in the Classroom*

Most of the Black male students discussed their experiences in the classroom and their responses were consistent with other studies that describe Black men being tokenized and/or feeling the pressure to prove themselves to White peers (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). The participants often share stories that indicate the classroom as a racialized space. In accordance with their perceptions, communication scholar Alexander (2006) notes in his work on race, Black masculinity, and queer identity that the classroom is always already a racialized space, especially when Black male bodies are present. Several of the Black men share how their voices are commonly marginalized; unless they were called on to respond to issues related to race. For example, in response to “have you ever felt like you spoke for all Black men?”

William Banks says:

I'd say I feel like the voice of reason as far as sometimes I speak up with them but not that I speak for them. I think, I don't feel that way, I don't think so, but I can't say that my narratives aren't taken that way. And then also, I don't know if people look to me because my perspective is interesting or if its like, okay, let's see what the Black guy has to say. I didn't really get that feeling, but it's a possibility because I don't know how I'm read, you know. But like I've been in class in like a circle set up and its just like the teacher is just waiting for me to say something. So I don't know if she is intrigued by my perspective or if she's waiting for the Black voice.

In a similar situation, Alexander Jackson felt like he had to speak up often in class, sometimes because he was the only Black person in class. Also, his speaking up was to educate his classmates and to avoid being labeled as aloof and unprepared. He remarks:

Sometimes I am the only person of color, period, in [name of class] class. It just makes me feel like sometimes I have to raise my hand more because if they don't hear me talking, they automatically assume that I don't know. I didn't do the reading. I shouldn't be here and sometimes it's a lot of pressure on that. Other times, I become the spokesperson anything race related, for example, when the Trayvon incident happened, everyone expected me to speak up. Its definitely uncomfortable.

In similar fashion, Charles says:

In the classroom when it comes to racial topics, especially because we're reading this book right now in my gender class, *Bad Boys* about Black masculinity and public schools and when we're talking about that book, I often feel like I shouldn't talk because it's expected. But they're like of course, he's going to say something, so I definitely—think I am often viewed as the token Black person.

Alexander Jackson and Charles' narratives speak to how the classroom is a racialized space; in other words, race is always present (Alexander, 1999, 2006).

Scholars have addressed people of color as being the tokenized voice—meaning that Whites can inadvertently position a single Black voice as representative of the entire Black community (Carter, 2008). Such practices often cause discomfort for Black students in that doing so implies that their voices are only be valued when there is a need for Whites to enhance their knowledge (Carter, 2008; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Education scholar, Carter (2008)

calls this racial spotlighting, which is “when a Black student perceives he/she is being positioned as racially hypervisible, particularly by a White teacher or White students” (p. 231). In addition, and very consistent with the narratives in this project, Carter (2008) noted that in her research, students “perceived that their White teachers and White peers racially spotlighted and racially ignored them in classroom situations, making them feel alternately hypervisible and invisible” (p. 231). Beyond needing a “Black” voice in traditionally White classrooms, Black male voices are often silenced, ignored, and/or misunderstood (Carter, 2008). In the next section, I highlight some of the ways Black men resist dominant narratives about our experiences.

### **Counterstories: Narratives About Education**

As a reminder, counterstories place value on subjugated knowledge by necessitating that the experiences of people of color be centered (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Fernández, 2002). Similarly, counterstories are used to challenge and displace dominant narratives (Delgado, 1993). Finally, as noted in Chapter 3, counterstories are useful in exposing “deficit informed research” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 133) that both ignores and warps the experiences of people of color. In this section, I forefront the voices of Black male students to “talk back” (hooks, 1989, p. 5) to dominant narratives about their educational experiences. Additionally, the Black male students define their own intellectual and educational identities as opposed to having them defined for them. Lastly, I position their narratives to highlight the ways in which they resist some of the systemic racial barriers that I highlighted in the previous sections.

#### *“Wow, You Read the Article” Responses to Dominant Narratives of Failure*

Education scholars such as Foster (2005), Fries-Britt and Turner (2002), Harper (2009), and Harper and Davis III (2012) have noted in study after study how Black male students are

assumed to be disengaged, lazy, criminal, and academic failures. Likewise, Griffin and Cummins (2012), Harper (2009), Fries-Britt (1998) and Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) contend that deficit narratives about Black male students reinforce negative racialized perspectives about their academic ability. Many of the Black men express that the narratives of Black male students as failures does nothing to help understand the experiences of Black men holistically. In response to a question about the impact of narratives about Black male academic failure, Jeff says:

I think it just adds to the failure, or to this idea that Black men are meant to fail because you always hear about the bad stuff first. And especially when it comes to young black males like—it's really hard because you already have a group, I guess community if you want to call it that, a community of young men who come from communities of men who *have* [my emphasis] failed. And so the few times that they probably do hear about education, it's about Black males failing, and that can't be good. That has to be detrimental. I just don't—I don't think it helps at all.

In addition, in response to the lack of positive images, Martin Woods says:

Growing up I didn't really know anyone who was successful, so I had to create an image in my mind of what I thought a successful African American was because I'd never seen one myself. It's hard to see something that you've never seen before. If there were less negative images and more positive, Black males would want to be better.

I argue that the effects of these narratives are injurious to the educational experiences of Black men such as myself. Returning to my experience with my professor, it wasn't just her words that hurt me, but also the fact that I realized quite clearly that her interpretation of me reflects a societal belief.

Also speaking to the detrimental effects of narratives of Black male failure, Charles expresses:

As a Black male myself, growing up you kind of take it [narratives of failure] on. You internalize the things you see and the things you hear about black males in education and you kind of compare yourself to that because that is all you are expected to be. I struggled with the dominant narratives about Black men. I think I did internalize it and now I am getting outside of that mode.

Alexander Jackson adds that these narratives can and do shape the ultimate experiences of Black male students by explaining:

So when teachers start to say you're not capable of doing this and that, those assumptions really affect the student who really—he just know what's being told because he hasn't heard anything different. He starts to believe that others are superior to him and that black students won't achieve, and only a few will make it. These narratives can really limit the potential of Black male students.

Alexander Jackson speaks to an important point in that if Black male students are hearing that they are failures from teachers, it makes it difficult for Black male students to remain hopeful. Additionally, Alexander Jackson speaks to a larger discourse on how failure becomes normalized and, therefore, contributes to the burden and constant disparagement of Black students (Noguera, 2008). Similarly, Harper (2009) argues that Black men are repeatedly reminded of our subordination in larger society, especially in education. In dialogue with this sentiment, Dwight says:

It [narratives of failure] does a lot. If you see something and you hear something everyday, sooner or later, its going to be—it sticks to your mind, and then you start believing it. That’s like telling a kid everyday, look here, you’re stupid. Sooner or later, this little kid is going to believe that he or she is stupid. Same with Black men who only hear and see stories of failure.

Mirroring current research (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2007; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011), the Black men in this study challenge deficit-informed research by also speaking to the ways in which dominant narratives inhibit Black males from focusing on their studies. They also illuminate how continuing to only focus on the problems encountered by Black men does nothing to encourage and promote an ethos that values the achievement of Black male students. Rather, these narratives create an environment that fosters racism by allowing people to believe that Black men are mere failures. Pushing back against narratives of failure, Jeff says:

It means a lot to be a Black male student. It means, at least to me, it means going against what society expects of me because I am Black. I feel like society, to a degree, doesn’t expect me to succeed, doesn’t expect me to pursue a higher education. But I am automatically pushing back against this. I like to push back against almost anything anybody says I can’t do. The fact that there aren’t many Black males in education is more motivation for me to push against what is thought of me.

Echoing Jeff, Law adds:

Failure motivates me. The negative stereotypes just motivate me to do better. If they say I can’t do it, I’ll try to do it. I like using my mind. You resist stereotypes and narratives of



failure by doing the opposite. It's a struggle but I have visions I want to accomplish and I need education in order accomplish that.

It is my belief that dominant narratives of Black male failure ignore the comprehensive approaches necessary to creating a better educational environment for Black male students. Instead of persistent narratives and studies about Black male students as failures, what might it mean to provide insight into how we describe our intellectual and educational identity/ies opposed to who we are being defined for us? In the next section, the participants describe their intellectual and educational identities as Black men.

### *Black Men Defining Intellectualism*

In her article on Black male intellectualism and hip-hop, Jenkins (2011) argues that knowledge and intelligence within hip-hop doesn't seem to have a presence in conventional U.S. American popular culture. As an avid hip-hop fan and someone who has been shaped by the intellectual and artistic culture of hip-hop, I cannot agree more with Jenkins (2011). Extending her impression of intellectualism, I argue that we can take this same understanding and apply it to the American educational system. To support my contention, I point to the fact that most of the literature about Black male students rarely, if ever, forefronts their intellectual and educational identities (Harper, 2009; Palmer & Maramba, 2011; Jenkins, 2006, 2011). Instead, we are most often positioned as the problem and devoid of any intellectual abilities. This is problematic on multiple levels because it speaks to a larger system of racial domination. More specifically, Jenkins (2011) aptly contends that the "broader trend within American society [is] to disregard the experiences, perspectives, and ways of being, knowing, and expressing that are offered forth by African American men" (p. 4).

Viewing Black men as intelligent producers of knowledge challenges the traditional conceptualization of the “intellectual,” which usually brings White Western men to mind in accordance with dominant ideologies (Jenkins, 2006, 2011). In opposition, I use intellectualism to connote the intelligence of Black men. Similarly, I use Black intellectualism as an attempt to unsettle dominant narratives about who can be an intellectual. Ultimately, I believe that the narratives that the Black men share about their intellectual identities function as critical race counterstories.

When asked generally about intellectualism many of the Black male student’s began by naming characteristics that are associated with Westernized descriptions of intellect. For example, Dwight says, “it’s someone who philosophizes.” In conversation with Dwight, Alexander Jackson associates intellectualism with “pursuing academics to its core.” Law, shares that he is not sure he is an intellectual because “I don’t feel like I’m Albert Einstein.” From my perspective rooted in CRT, Law is associating intellectualism with Whiteness and also with iconic figures that have helped define what constitutes intellectualism from a dominant perspective. More importantly, he also notes the absence of Black male images in intellectualism by saying, “Black male intellectuals are rare.” BP associates being intellectual with having formal degrees and/or education, which he believes represents the dominant perspective in society.

Interestingly, although the participants gave descriptors of intellectualism some of them struggled to identify with their descriptions of what it means to be an intellectual. However, several also express how intellectualism could emerge from experiential knowledge and not just formal knowledge. For example, BP says this about his uncle:

I have an uncle, he is like—he's not like educated at all, like in terms of the formal sense, he's not like a reader [of academic books] or anything like that, but he knows so much about everything. So like just to know that you can be like intelligent or like well-informed in certain areas and not ever, you know, have a formal education in any special area.

Clearly, BP pushes back against the belief that intelligence and intellectualism must come from formal education. In concert with a core tenet of CRT, BP believes that experiential and alternative ways of knowing are equally as important and valuable as the dominant understanding of knowledge production.

In addition to the general question I asked about intellectualism, I also asked the Black male students to talk about what it means to be a Black male intellectual or, stated differently, an intellectual Black male. The responses varied to some extent but were also very similar in others. Martin Woods, in a very solemn tone, states:

An intellectual African American male is a threat. [He] is a threat to everybody. And the reason I say that is because you just don't know smart he really is. You just don't know how deep his pain really goes. He uses all of the built up pain to work harder and build up his community.

Martin Woods's response takes contextual factors such as pain and marginalization into account as one way intellectual identities of Black men are shaped. In another response, Jeff discusses different ways of being a Black male intellectual, he says:

I thought about it in the sense of who I may consider a Black male intellectual [e.g., he mentioned Michael Eric Dyson and Cornel West]. As far as like criteria, I never thought

about it before. I always just—I just—when I hear Black intellectual, those are the faces I think about. I think of core Black men who are educated on a high level. So given this, I would describe myself as an intellectual, because Black intellectuals aren't confined to one level. They're not confined to just Ph.D.s in my opinion. Before I only thought traditionally. You can be intellectual at all different kinds of levels.

Getting at a similar idea, Bob discusses how (according to what I perceive as dominant images of an intellectual), he does not fit the image. He says:

It's just because I don't spend a lot of time thinking and in deep thought. I don't spend a lot of time thinking and doing a lot of reading, things that somebody who are thought to be intellectual do. But I am still smart and intelligent, just differently. I have experiences too and I think critically.

In dialogue with Martin Woods, Bob, and Jeff, Ace says that for him, being a “Black male intellectual means going against the grain because we're seen as those who don't want to do good in school. But to go against the grain is to remind them [White people], I think, that Black men are smart and intelligent.” Collectively, their narratives point to the importance of embracing counterstories about education. Equally their perspectives, as Barnes (1990) argues, “make explicit the need for fundamental change in the ways we think and construct knowledge” (p. 1864).

While many of the Black male students express that being an educated Black male is important to resisting dominant racial ideologies, they, nonetheless, express critiques of and resistance to defining themselves as Black male intellectuals. For example, William Banks indicates that he purposely resists any totalizing definitions of intellectualism in general,

including defining himself as a Black male intellectual because “It’s like, it’s a box.” He further states, “I feel like I know I’m smart, you know, I know that I can think critically and hold multiple perspectives but I don’t hold anyone of those things up.” In many ways, he positions himself in opposition to the exception. He says, “I don’t look at myself as the Black success.” This is important because most students of color, in this case Black men, who defy dominant scripts about their abilities, are considered an exception. However, as William Banks rightfully notes, exceptionalist thinking does nothing for “changing how other Black men are perceived on campus.”

In another critical response about categorization and elitism, Martin Woods states, “Yeah, I can say it’s sort of an elitist way of thinking. Some African Americans probably don’t want to be put in that category [Black intellectualism]. I don’t want to be put in that category because that’s not me.” Interestingly, Martin Wood also hesitantly notes, “But intellectual, I guess I’m intellectual. I am inquisitive and engaged as a student.” Both of their responses speak to the fact that Black men can be educated without subscribing to certain labels. Similarly, though divergent from the narratives of the other Black male students, William Banks and Martin Woods’ narratives highlight the importance of gaining insight into how Black male students describe our intellectual identities. Thus, many of the Black male students’ narratives highlight how their educational identities do not necessarily align with dominant descriptions of intellectualism. Instead, intellectualism for Black men can and does manifest in myriad ways depending on our lived experiences.

*A Mode of Survival: Persisting in the Face of Systemic Barriers*

An important aspect of this project was also to understand how Black men persist despite the constant racial barriers we must overcome to academically succeed. Honestly, one of the most important and encouraging parts of this entire journey was hearing how men who look like me prevail in a traditionally White educational environment where we must fight, sometimes to the point of exhaustion, for opportunity and recognition. During the interviews, we often shared narratives of support, encouragement, and ways to tread through the sea of racialized hurt, pain, loss, and insults. In an attempt not to end in hopelessness, I end this chapter with narratives of hope in relation to overcoming systemic barriers.

In response to how he moves forward in the face of systemic racial barriers, Jeff says:

By recognizing that they're there because I feel like the worst thing you can do is walk through this world and act like there's not going to be people that don't want to knock you down because that's how you get blindsided. Its sad to live with the fact that as a Black man in education there are systems that want to work against me. That there are fellow students, faculty, and administrators who don't want to see me walk across the stage. Black men must know that these systems exist in order to fight back. They have to know that we are not our circumstances and that we can prevail from anything.

Offering similar insight, Martin Woods says:

To move forward in life you need to understand who you are and who you are not. You have to always be one step ahead of everybody else, especially being African American because there's going to be so many obstacles placed upon you, you have to understand the more pressure that they put on you, the brighter you're going to shine. You have to have enough faith in yourself.

For both Jeff and Martin Woods, part of surviving in a world where there will always be obstacles for Black men means recognizing that they exist. Not only are their stories a form of resistance, they are also self-empowering in that they encourage other Black men to remain resilient. Similar to the Black men of Harper and Davis' (2012) study, the Black men in this project maintain hope and faith in the face of struggle.

As a Black male student, I can attest that the most difficult aspect of being on a traditionally White campus is learning how to persist despite systemic forms of oppression. There have, and still are, moments where I cry because I feel like I am constantly battling a system of marginalization. Living in a society where Black men are still very much invisible (Ellison, 1995), I lose faith at times because it seems like everyday I am fighting a new battle. On occasion, especially as a student, I feel like I am always in survival mode, just trying to focus and resist impositions of racial ideologies. My experiences are not unique; many of the Black men in this study spoke about their struggles with systemic oppression. During one interview, I teared up when Law shared the following:

You have to maintain strength. Keep continuing what you are doing. It's hard to keep pushing forward. Staying focused is very hard. Its not because of schoolwork, its because of external factors outside. Racism, stereotypes, all that just keeps punching you in your face and you just have to keep taking it and keep getting up. It hurts, if you need to cry, cry. Cry while you are studying. That's the best thing is keep going, just don't give up. If there's a will, there's a way.

Similar to their stories, I often remind myself of the great figures who have come before me including Zora Neal Hurston and W. E. B. DuBois. I survive by strategically learning about

racism in order to resist it as best I can. Collectively, the narratives shared in this chapter speak to the resilient characteristics of Black male students, and indeed, of most marginalized groups. As Ikemoto (1997) cautions, these stories must be more than just responses to the dominant narratives; rather, they must engage in practices that are representative of the “shifted narrative” (Perry, 2011, p. 188). As such, drawing from Solórzano and Yosso (2009), the counterstories shared in this chapter, jointly “help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance” (p. 139). They also challenge the imposition of racist ideology that manifests constantly in the lives of Black male students. Additionally, from a critical race perspective, the counterstories highlight quite clearly the omnipresence of racism as it plays out in different permutations. Lastly, these countestories illustrate the power of voice(s) from the margins and how Black male students can and do take control of our stories (Bernal, 2002; Dunbar, 2008; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).



## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to theorize how Black male students narrate their experiences at a traditional White institution (TWI). Additionally, because research on Black male students mostly highlights our failures in higher education, I emphasized how Black male students articulate their intellectual and educational identities. Their articulations serve as counterstories to the dominant narratives about Black male students. It is important to note that our counterstories are rarely positioned at the center of educational conversations; as such, this study is key to extending what is currently known about Black male students in the field of communication.

Ultimately, this study encourages scholars to consider different perspectives on the lived experiences of Black male students, especially scholars who have an interest in the success of Black male students. As I noted in Chapter 1, it is vital to theorize Black male academic excellence if we are to progressively contribute to what we know about Black male students as intellectuals. This is not to create a hierarchy among Black students and types of knowledge but rather to begin thinking about differing educational experiences among Black men. Certainly, many of the Black male students in this study located their experiences on a spectrum opposed to defining themselves in accordance with dominant racial logics. In conversation with Griffin and Cummins (2012) and Cummins and Griffin (2012), this study creates a space where Black men can speak for themselves. As a Black male, I believe that there is profound power in hearing how Black male students narrate their intellectual experiences and identities instead of having them narrated and defined by other people.

## **Implications of Study**

### *Responses to Research Questions*

In regards to my first research question, I asked: How do Black males describe themselves intellectually? The response from participants varied. Still, there are several commonalities that can be drawn across the narratives shared. First, given that most of the Black men defined intellectualism in association with Whiteness and from within a Western frame, it might behoove scholars to begin considering how traditional definitions of intellectualism can exclude people of color, in this case, Black men. Underscoring the participants' narratives in this study, Jenkins (2011) contends that intellectualism in U.S. American society does not acknowledge Black men, and I would add people of color in general. For example, Jeff succinctly notes, "You know, I think there's this socially constructed idea that Black people aren't intellectual or don't have the capacity to be intellectual at the same level of White counterparts." His insight is useful for scholars because it highlights how Black male students can experience assumptions about their intellect.

Second, how Black male students defined themselves intellectually also reveal some limitations in what is traditionally considered intellectualism in higher education. Undoubtedly, the Black men provided counterstories as to what is considered knowledge. In other words, they critiqued what types of epistemologies get positioned over others. From a pedagogical perspective, this insight is critical for scholars both in communication and education, as it highlights how we as educators and researchers, implicitly or explicitly, racialize the value of types of knowledge. I would posit that the participants also caution us (myself included as a Black male, educator, and researcher), to consider how we define Black male students'

intellectual abilities in contradistinction to dominant standards that are organized around Whiteness. Martin Woods, Bob, and Jeff's comments on the importance of centering and valuing subjugated knowledges make clear that their intellectual capabilities should not be defined according to White standards. Instead of our intellectual identities being secondary, or even tertiary, to our White counterparts, I argue that a shift needs to occur to communicate that the intellectual experiences of Black male students are not thought of as inferior or additive. This shift in perspective is vital if scholars are to truly value the intellectual potential and contributions of Black male students.

Moreover, my second research question asked: How do Black male students negotiate their intellectual identities in traditionally White educational spaces? Many of the Black men shared how they negotiated their intellectual identities on TWIs. From my perspective, one major implication can be extrapolated from their narratives. More specifically, many of the students expressed that because their White peers already assume that they are disengaged students, they spend a considerable amount of time trying to prove that they are intelligent in the classroom. For example, when Alexander Jackson discusses feeling obligated to raise his hand in class, this pressure is rooted in negative stereotypes that foster the assumption that he is not academically engaged. From my experiences, Alexander Jackson's experience is not inimitable. As a Black male student, I have also felt the need to speak up because if I did not I risked conforming to negative stereotypes about Black men. It is important for researchers to recognize that Black male students are constantly negotiating who they are and what larger society expects of them. However, more importantly, this constant negotiation saps energy from learning in classrooms.

Likewise, consistent with Carter's (2008) findings, participant responses also indicate that part of their negotiations entail figuring out if they are speaking only to educate White

students (at their request) or if their voice is genuinely welcomed in classroom spaces. Hence, Black male students must be aware of when they are being racially spotlighted and/or racially ignored (Carter, 2008); either way this can put Black men in very tense and precarious situations. To illustrate, some Black male students choose not to speak in class at certain times to avoid being labeled as the voice of all Black male students while others try to avoid being categorized as exceptional. Ultimately, as we continue to theorize the experiences of Black male intellectual students, it is important that researchers consider the complexities and consequences associated with the negotiation of our intellectual identities.

My last research question asks: At the intersections of race and gender, how do oppressive ideologies inform the educational experiences of Black males? As I hope is clear from the narratives highlighted throughout my analysis that the omnipresence of racist ideologies has a detrimental impact on Black men like myself. Though I focused mostly on racism, many of the participants alluded to other systems of oppression that manifest in their lives. It would be advantageous for scholars who research Black male students to purposefully focus on how multiple systems of oppression work simultaneously to hinder Black men. For example, Dwight and Ace expressed how classism operates as a system that hindered their experiences on campus. Ace discussed how due to his financial situation, he was unable to attain books for the semester because neither he nor his family had the money to purchase them. He also discussed how students knew about his financial situation and responded by distancing themselves from him. Despite this barrier, Ace was able to attain a 3.4 G.P.A., but he noted that it was very rough by saying “its hard, its really hard.” Certainly we can interpret Ace’s situation in multiple ways, and I interpret his situation as being an outcome of a larger system that does not value Black men at the intersections of race, gender, and class.

Additionally, considering that most of the Black men in this study described the impact of systemic racism on their educational experiences, it is important that future researchers further explore the machinations of systemic racism. As Feagin (2000, 2006), Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996), Doane (2006), Lacy and Ono (2011) and Bonilla-Silva (2010) remind us, ideologies are what foster the reproduction of racial oppression. As demonstrated in this study, critical race theory (CRT) is an extremely useful theoretical framework to assist scholars in examining systemic racism and dominant racial ideologies. By exploring oppressive ideologies via a critical lens, scholars might also be better able to understand how oppressive stereotypes about Black men inform public policies that have long-term implications. As a Black male graduate student, it is my hope that future researchers will critically examine how oppressive ideologies consistently silence marginalized voices in higher education with a sense of urgency. The counterstories presented in this study illuminate how Black men attempt to negotiate and resist the imposition of racism; my wish is that even more scholars and educators will join our efforts to challenge racial and gendered oppression.

### *Contributions to Communication*

If we understand systems of oppression as a communicative phenomenon (Chávez, 2012; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Hall, 2012), I contend that how Black men narrated their experiences with systemic racism is exceptionally relevant to the field of communication. Thus, their narratives provide insight into how the educational system serves as one site of systematic domination and resistance. More specifically, their insight can assist communication scholars in understanding how marginalized individuals, such as Black men, are communicatively resisting oppressive ideologies. Given that there have been several calls by scholars (Allen, 2007; Ono, 2010; Orbe & Allen, 2008; Griffin, 2010) in our field to address racism in substantive ways, this

study answers that call by exposing how systemic racism manifests in the everyday lives of Black male students. In agreement with Griffin and Cummins (2012), the use of CRT as a framework in the field of communication adds greatly to the extant frameworks that critically explore how racism operates in the lives of people of color.

In respect to the numerous scholars who research Black masculinity in the field of communication, my study contributes to the literature that calls for progressive theorizing on Black masculinities (Alexander, 2004a, 2006, 2012; Bell-Jordan, 2011; Brown, 2006; Griffin, 2011; Jackson, 2006; Jackson & Hopson, 2011; Johnson, 2003). Overall, positioning the voices of Black men to define their educational identities is useful because it counters dominant racial ideology that links Black masculinity with Black men who are lazy, uneducated, and unengaged. This study importantly created a space for Black men, like me, to locate ourselves on a spectrum of Black masculinities as opposed to being confined to a particular embodiment of Black masculinity. Furthermore, the participants defined, albeit in different ways, what it means for them to be an intelligent Black man. This is extremely important because our voices contribute to conversations that are being had about our experiences. Together, our voices also push back against “hegemonic scripts of Black masculinity” (Jackson & Hopson, 2011, p. 5).

### **Limitations**

While this study importantly forefronts the experiences of Black male students, there are limitations as well. First, embracing reflexivity, when I chose the G.P.A. requirements of 3.0 or higher, I undoubtedly subscribed to dominant standards to define academic ability. More specifically, as a Black male researcher, I reproduced a dominant ideology that defines academic dexterity according to high G.P.A.s. In many ways, one could argue that my choice reinforced

the hierarchy of knowledge that this study sought to work against. This became extremely apparent when I was implicitly called out on my choice by one of my participants but also when recruiting participants. In both instances, I realized how I divorced Black men from their intellect vis-à-vis quantitative measurements.

Also given that this study was under time constraints, the sample size was relatively small. I only interviewed 10 Black male students. However, a larger sample size would have been preferred in order to hear a wider variety of perspectives. Similarly, though the Black male students who participated came from a range of majors and backgrounds, they were mostly undergraduate students. I think that collecting narratives from Black male graduate students as well would provide more insight into our experiences. By interviewing graduate students, researchers could gain insight into how similar oppressive structures manifest in graduate education. Lastly, the study was geographically based in a mid-sized Midwestern town in the United States at a public university, and subsequently may not be generalizable to other geographic areas. I surmise that some of the responses would likely change had my study been done at a larger public university or a private university in a different part of the United States.

In regards to the interviews themselves, there were also limitations. On two occasions, interviews were interrupted by students and we had to pause the interview and change rooms. While I am not sure the exact effect of having to switch rooms, perhaps the move may have affected the responses of the Black men being interviewed. Lastly, during one of the interviews, my tape recorder stopped due to memory issues. After freeing up more space, the interview resumed. However, as a researcher, I cannot say with exactitude that all of the participants' responses were actually recorded.

### *Future Directions*

In addition to positioning the participants' narratives as critical race counterstories, I would like to extend an invitation for research in communication that explores how the narratives of Black men might also be understood as counterpublics, or, multiple counterpublics (Asen, 2000; Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1992; Young, 1997). From my perspective, this might be another useful way for scholars in communication interested in the experiences of marginalized groups to further examine communicative ways people of color resist. Communication scholar Squires (2002) articulates Black counterpublics as those that stand in opposition to dominant publics. According to Fraser (1992), the dominant public sphere refers to White dominant culture, which largely consists of White, middle-to upper-class males who maintain the majority of the power to influence society. This dominant public, in the context of this study, can be understood in like manner but with more emphasis on dominant publics that reproduce oppressive discourses about Black men.

Feminist scholar Felski (1989) argues that counterpublics are useful because they create possibilities for resistance. In similar fashion, Asen (2000) suggests that we view the "counter" in counterpublics as a way in which marginalized groups articulate unjust exclusions from the larger public. Ultimately, Asen (2000) posits that counterpublics consist of collectives that emerge to communicate their exclusion and to "imagine themselves explicitly as alternative collectives" (p. 440). To extend the work of Squires (2002) and Asen (2000), the consideration of Black counterpublics is a useful way to further study how Black male students describe, negotiate, and resist dominant ideologies as a collective.



Questions that come to mind are: How might we understand the diverse experiences of Black students in general as multiple counterpublics? How might Black male students' narratives about their intellectual identities serve as multiple counterpublics to dominant publics and assumptions about who can be defined as intellectual? Theoretically, what would it look like to combine CRT's tenet of counterstories with counterpublics to theorize the experiences of marginalized groups on traditionally White campuses?

### **Coda: A Classroom Experience Revisited**

Throughout this study, I revisited my experience in my psychology classroom as an undergraduate student. As the coda of my study, I want to share how I would have liked for that interaction to play out differently. First, though I do not apologize for my response to my professor, I wish I could have opened up dialogue rather than shutting it down. In other words, I wish I would have known the importance and power of dialogue in situations rife with tension. For example, rather than making a statement that ended our conversation in class that day, I would have asked: What are the harmful implications of assuming that Black men don't read?

Similarly, I wish I had known more about the ways in which racist ideology operates and how, at times, some individuals reproduce certain oppressive racial ideologies unconsciously. Though this experience remains emotional for me, even now as a graduate student, I wonder how inviting words would have shifted the classroom space from feeling divisive to feeling more generative. Fassett and Warren (2007) contend that "Critical communication pedagogy is about engaging the classroom as site of social influence, as a space where people shape each other for better and for worse; it is about respecting teachers and students and the possible actions they can take" (p. 8). Although this is rather optimistic, I wish that I had the knowledge as an

undergraduate to embrace an ethic of critical communication pedagogy during my psychology class. As a Black male student, I hope that other Black male students and students of color do not have experiences like mine. While of course they will, the knowledge and power to create a pedagogical opportunity, I believe, can create more room for both dialogue and agency.

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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Demographic Survey

**Directions: Please complete the following survey.**

1. Please indicate the racial/ethnic cultural group(s) you most closely identify with (Example: Caucasian, African American, Latina/o etc.):

\_\_\_\_\_

**\_\_\_\_\_ Please indicate with an “X” if you would prefer not to answer the above question.**

2. Please identify your nationality (i.e. African, Canadian, American, etc.):

\_\_\_\_\_

**\_\_\_\_\_ Please indicate with an “X” if you would prefer not to answer the above question.**

3. Please indicate your gender: \_\_\_\_\_

**\_\_\_\_\_ Please indicate with an “X” if you would prefer not to answer the above question.**

4. Please describe your sexual orientation: \_\_\_\_\_

**\_\_\_\_\_ Please indicate with an “X” if you would prefer not to answer the above question.**

5. Please list your age: \_\_\_\_\_

**\_\_\_\_\_ Please indicate with an “X” if you would prefer not to answer the above question.**

6. How would you describe your current class status?

\_\_\_\_\_ Upper class    \_\_\_\_\_ Middle Class    \_\_\_\_\_ Lower Class

**\_\_\_\_\_ Please indicate with an “X” if you would prefer not to answer the above question.**



7. Please list your year in school (i.e. freshman, sophomore, etc.):

---

Please indicate with an "X" if you would prefer not to answer the above question.

8. How many semesters have you attended SIUC? \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate with an "X" if you would prefer not to answer the above question.

9. What is your major?

---

Please indicate with an "X" if you would prefer not to answer the above question.

10. What is your current G.P.A.? \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate with an "X" if you would prefer not to answer the above question.

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Guide

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Can you describe your educational experiences to me?
2. Did you grow up with books or other academic texts in your house?
3. As you might already be aware, a large amount of research on Black male students highlights our failures in education. Can you talk briefly about what type of impact you believe these stories have on Black males overall success in higher education?
4. As a Black male student, what are some of the things that have contributed to your academic success on campus?
5. What does being an intellectual Black male mean to you?
6. Do you think of yourself, or would you describe yourself as intellectual?
7. Can you remember moments during your college career when a faculty member encouraged you to excel academically? If so, please talk about those moments.
8. Can you remember moments where you believed your academic success was undermined or stifled while on campus perhaps by teachers, students, friends, administrators, etc.? If so, can you please talk about them?
9. Do you believe that your educational experiences are informed by race? If so, do you mind talking a little bit about how?
10. Recognizing that certain people define racism differently, how do you define and/or understand racism?

11. Have you experienced racism on campus? If so, please describe in what ways.
12. Do you believe that you have to negotiate who you are as a Black male in the classroom?  
If so, can you talk a little about why you feel you have to?
13. How do you exercise agency in the context of your education? Asked differently, what choices have you made in your academic career that you believe had a large impact on you as a student?
14. What specific things do you do to negotiate your identity in the classroom?

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Griffin, R. A., **Ward**, L., & Phillips, A. (Under Review). Still flies in the buttermilk: Black male faculty, critical race theory, and composite counterstorytelling. This manuscript is under review at the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*. (First draft submitted July 2012/R & R in Progress).