BLACK WOMEN UNDERGRADUATES:
CHALLENGING HISTORY TO REFRAME ITS CONTEXT
IN A PWI

by

ROSALIND LENIKA MOORE
NATALIE G. ADAMS, COMMITTEE CHAIR
NIRMALLA EREVELLES
BECKY ATKINSON
AARON KUNTZ
KARRI HOLLEY

A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the experiences of women at South University, a southeastern predominately white institution, as they grappled with the complex intersection of their race and gender, the history of the institution, and academic expectations. Framed within Critical Race Feminism, this study utilizes storytelling to illuminate challenges experienced by Black women in mitigating access to opportunities for leadership, challenging stereotype assumptions from the institution and theirs peers, cultivating cultural capital, and exploring personal constructions of themselves within an educational setting. The individual stories told by women illuminate the knotty terrain that exists between historical context and those doubly bound by both race and gender scripts. Results of the study demonstrate that Black women at South University need both formal and informal systems of support to be successful. Further, experiences of Black women at PWIs are difficult because of both institutional and historical systems of oppression in the way they experience the classroom, adapt representations of themselves within the environment, and in the way that they respond to institutional barriers. Students ultimately believed that they could have a quality education, but felt that current institutional practices failed to acknowledge and represent the challenges that the intersection of their race and gender. This study is important because it examines the impact of the historical and present day context that exists at PWIs in relation to the lived experiences of Black women and challenges institutions to pay attention to the rarely discussed impact of that environment on their educational experience. A primary recommendation of the study is to require institutions marred by negative history to publicly and systematically engage diversity, equity, and inclusion
by acknowledging past issues, requiring curriculum and teachings about those challenges, and by establishing formal systems of support through the development of policy, practices, and resource centers to aid in challenging the institution’s culture. Overall, this offers hope that the collective voices of Black women attending SU can provide a catalyst for changing institutional practices and acknowledging the power of historic circumstances.

*Keywords*: black women, predominately white institution, intersectionality, environment, southeast, qualitative, experiences, undergraduates
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Rogers and Loretta Moore, my parents, who have always believed that I could do anything. Their nurturing and support is the reason that I am here today. My mother imparted in me my strong sense of voice, passion, and opinion. My dad taught me dedication, hard work, and loyalty. They both gave me a dose of independence, which is why I have always said I got a double dose! They have also both taught me to love God and trust in his perfect plan. This dissertation is also dedicated to my husband, Montrell Miller, who saw me through countless sleepless nights in the home stretch and who always has an encouraging word of wisdom. Without my three greatest champions, I would not have been able to complete this journey. I love you guys!
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This journey is the type that tests every part of your being. In reflecting on this journey, I am coming out on the other side with a better sense of myself and with an entire host of people on my squad. I am humbled by the number of family and friends who have gone completely out of their way to do special things for me, to encourage me, and to help me keep moving along, when I didn’t want to or felt like it was impossible.

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I would also like to thank the women of South University who took out countless hours to participate in my research. You all did an amazing job and your stories were so compelling! I hope I did them justice. Because of you, additional knowledge will be added to research about Black women and their collegiate experiences. We all know more of that needs to happen.

There are just way too many people to publicly thank. But I cannot begin to stress the support of friends from the 1893 Club- Martha, Dr. Kathleen Cramer, Kaki, Dr. Pam Parker, Tonya Nelson, and Dr. Mary Lee Caldwell, that have gone above and beyond in helping me
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Finally, thank you God for this scripture which has been everything to me:

“For I know the plans I have for you”, declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you, and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.” ~Jeremiah 29:11
# CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................... ii

DEDICATION .................................................................................................................................... iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................................. v

LIST OF TABLES ....................................................................................................................... xiii

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ...................................................................................................... xiv

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................1

  Statement of the Problem ........................................................................................................2

  Purpose of the Study ................................................................................................................4

  Research Questions ................................................................................................................5

  Significance of the Study ........................................................................................................5

  Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Feminism ....................................................................6

  Research Design .....................................................................................................................9

    Researcher Positionality ......................................................................................................10

  Definition of Terms .............................................................................................................11

  Organization of the Study ...................................................................................................12

CHAPTER 2: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ....................................................................13
Black Women and their History in Higher Education .................................................................14
Black Women’s Identities within Academia .............................................................................15
Tools of Oppression within the Academy ..............................................................................20
Black Women in Leadership Roles ..........................................................................................23
Black Women at PWIs .............................................................................................................24
Controlling Images of Black Women .......................................................................................27
Images of Black Women as depicted through Media ..............................................................29
The Impact of Respectability Politics ......................................................................................31
Critical Race Feminism ..........................................................................................................33
Intersectionality .......................................................................................................................38
Resistance in CRF ....................................................................................................................41
CRF in this Research ................................................................................................................43

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY ................................................................................................45
Topic Selection and Rationale ..................................................................................................45
Research Questions ................................................................................................................46
Research Design .......................................................................................................................47
Site Selection and Rationale ....................................................................................................50
Participant Selection ......................................................................................................................52

Data Collection ..............................................................................................................................56
  Interviews....................................................................................................................................56
  Participant Observations ....................................................................................................58

Data Analysis ...................................................................................................................................59

Trustworthiness & Ethical Concerns .............................................................................................61

Challenges and Limitations of the Research ..................................................................................62

Summary ........................................................................................................................................65

CHAPTER 4: PROFILES OF THE PARTICIPANTS...........................................................................66

Profiles of Black Women at South University.................................................................................66
  Vanessa ......................................................................................................................................66
  Brandy ....................................................................................................................................72
  Aliyah .......................................................................................................................................74
  Lauryn .....................................................................................................................................76
  Nikki .......................................................................................................................................79
  Mo ..........................................................................................................................................81
  Kimberly .................................................................................................................................82
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis: Exploring Experiences of Black Women</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encounters of Resistance</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representation vs. Reality</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency in Academic Choice</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chasing Success</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support at a PWI</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersection of Identity at SU</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Messages to Black Women</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding Perspectives and Challenging the Future</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersections of Identity and Institutional Language</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success and Agency at a PWI</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse at the Intersection of Individual and Institution</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resisting Stereotypes</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectability Politics and the PWI Environment</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping Higher Education: Implications for Academic &amp; Student Affairs</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Recommendations for Future Study</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES ............................................................................................................................151

APPENDIX A:  IRB APPROVAL ..............................................................................................169

APPENDIX B:  INTERVIEW PROTOCAL ...............................................................................172

APPENDIX C:  INFORMED CONSENT ...................................................................................177

APPENDIX D:  ADVISOR CONSENT ......................................................................................185
LIST OF TABLES

3.1 South University, Student Participant Profiles .................................................................54
**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>American College Testing</td>
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<tr>
<td>AL</td>
<td>Alabama</td>
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<tr>
<td>BLK</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWI</td>
<td>Predominately White Institution</td>
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<td>CLS</td>
<td>Critical Legal Studies</td>
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<td>CRT</td>
<td>Critical Race Theory</td>
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<td>CRF</td>
<td>Critical Race Feminism</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEI</td>
<td>Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion</td>
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<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>Grade Point Average</td>
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<tr>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>Historically Black College or University</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRB</td>
<td>Institutional Review Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>ROTC</td>
<td>Reserve Officers Training Corps</td>
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<td>SA</td>
<td>Student Affairs</td>
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<td>SGA</td>
<td>Student Government Association</td>
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<td>SU</td>
<td>South University</td>
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<td>TX</td>
<td>Texas</td>
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<td>DOE</td>
<td>Department of Education</td>
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary research about the experiences of young black women in college has been either absent or very limited in its scope of acknowledging the reality of a multi-faceted higher education journey, mitigated by a number of institutional and personal factors (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Baldwin, Chambliss, & Towler, 2003; Evans, 2008; Shabazz, 2004). Just as literature on black adolescents has often limited itself to varying depictions of “at-risk” black youth, stories of young black women’s experiences in college follow a similar trajectory and tell us little about the process they ensue to attain academic success or what they encounter in navigating the political climate of the institution (Howard-Hamilton, 2004).

Typically, the story of the academic journey for students of color focuses broadly on their interaction with academia and resolves that institutions of higher learning are ill-equipped to deal with their cultural and historical baggage (Allen, 1987; Blackwell, 1987; Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Moses, 1989; Ogbu, 1986; Thomas, 1981). Also, research about black students is often viewed from the black male perspective and leaves little room to interpret what challenges or differences gender might have on the educational experience. What becomes troubling is that as a result of analyzing black women from only one or no distinct vantage points, “one analysis often implicitly denies the validity of the other” (Crenshaw, 1993, pg. 361).

The absence of analysis also prescribes a certain value on black women and leads us to believe that there is no value in exploring their experiences. According to Michelle Howard-Vital (1989), “society does not recognize, and denies, the importance of African-American
women’s lives and contributions through racial, sexual, and class oppression” (p. 180). While contemporary research might find little value in comprehensive exploration of the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in the education realm, as a budding scholar and researcher, I know these elements are important because of the increasingly multi and cross cultural world that we live in. Additionally, this analysis becomes more important where discourses exist that might impact their academic experience, like that of a predominately white institution. Often, academic communities exist within their own internal bubble from the larger society operating in a microcosmic fashion. In this establishment, the power relations of race, gender, sex, class, disability, age, and sexuality become daily factors in the experiences of those within the community. Also, because certain individuals belong to multiple communities, it is important to understand that the different ways these communities interact in and within each other present very different experiences (Burke, Cropper, and Harrison, 2000; Fordham, 1996; hooks, 1991).

In this chapter, I will provide a background for the problem and will explore education trends for black women attending PWIs, perceptions about their interaction within and with the institution, and the role of discourse in the predominately white institutional setting and its potential agency in shaping their educational experiences. These explorations will frame the purpose and significance of this study and will offer more ways of understanding the intersectional existence of black women in the academy as seen through a historical lens.

**Statement of the Problem**

*We are not makers of history. We are made by history.*

- Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, 1963

South University has a past that is particularly telling for Black students. The early 1950’s marked the first attempt at desegregating the institution when a female student by the
name of Lucy sued in the case of *Lucy v. Adams* to prevent the institution from denying her admittance solely on the basis of race. Though Lucy won that battle, on her third day of classes she was expelled from the institution when an angry mob assembled in response to her admittance. In the 1960’s desegregation would be attempted again by 2 students, but the then governor of the state stood in the door of an auditorium on campus, blocking their admittance as they arrived to register for classes. Despite the presence of the National Guard and the fact that desegregation had already taken place all over the nation, this particular valiant and defiant act by the state’s leading official would leave an indelible mark on the history of South University.

In another instance in 1986, a black sorority reported the burning of a cross in the yard of their sorority house on campus. Even as recent at 2013, Black women were still being systematically denied access to white sororities via the recruitment process and the University was fielding questions about its seemingly segregated Greek Life system amidst celebrations of their 50th anniversary of desegregation. South University’s history is one rife with both past and present day examples of racism and sexism, which is often foiled by its desire to be viewed as publicly chaste and pure as a pioneering, flagship institution of higher learning.

As an institution with both a valiant flagship story and a mired racist and sexist past, it is important to acknowledge and respond to that history in a way that supports all students. Colleges and Universities have become more welcoming, but those with a challenging past often fail to account for the complex interplay between institutional history and the subjective experiences of its students (Brewer, 1999; Fordham, 1996; Giddings, 1984; Jenson, 2002; Majors, 2001). In particular, Black women, who happen to be among the largest population of student growth across all institution types are doubly challenged in the environment of PWI (Kim, 2011). Banks (2009) points out that Black women are attending college and doing the
work to navigate their subjective beings “in the face of deeply rooted practices and discourses steeped in race, class, and gender bias and discrimination” (p. 35). Because of this, it is not only important, but it is necessary for institutions of higher education to begin to unpack the history of their institutions with purpose and a plan for reconciliation.

**Purpose of the Study**

Patricia Bell Scott (1982) notes that the experiences of Black women are typically “examined from a problems framework” (pg. 85). These “problems frameworks” are typically addressed in the literature as negative, controlling images, or experiences that are perpetuated through television, radio, video, movies, and government agencies or institutions. (Crenshaw, 1993; Fordham, 1996, 2007; Goings, 1994; Jewell, 1993; Morton, 1991; Moses, 1989; Peffley Hurwitz & Sniderman, 1997; Van Dijk, 1993). Rarely, however, are those problems attributed to the historical context in which black women find themselves. The purpose of this research was to unravel the complex subject position of young black women as they tried to navigate a PWI with a storied history of racism.

In interrogating the material environment of a PWI in the context of Black women’s lives as raced and gendered beings, the conflicts of living out that identity are examined at their point of intersection and not in relation to just being women or just being Black. Because the default of being woman is often set to white woman, and that of being black is to Black men, it is important for this particular study to focus on the point of intersection to give voice to that very specific location. As such, this research will call upon interrogating the consequences of existence within an inequitable judicial system. Ultimately the research will challenge and find a response to how black women have navigated the educational discourse prevalent at PWIs, while exploring their own subjectivities in relation to historical, political, and cultural ways of knowing.
Research Questions

The following questions guided this research project:

1. How are young black women constructing their subject positions at a predominately white institution?

2. How do young black women negotiate traditional networks of leadership at a predominately white institution?

3. How does race and gender intersect to influence academic and life choice for young black women in a predominately white institution?

Significance of the Study

Though historically unwelcome and ill-equipped to engage students of color appropriately (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Steele and Aronson, 1995; Chavous and Cogburn, 2007), PWIs find themselves with an increasing number of Black women students. This study is significant because it explores the rarely discussed interplay between the lives of black women students at PWIs, the social structure in which they exist (Brewer, 1983, 1989), and the historical context of the institution. As black women move in and out of the educational sphere, they are not only producers of their culture, but are also being produced by the academic discourse that surrounds them in their daily interactions (Banks, 2009) at these institutions. In this scenario, the social location and institution’s normative practices, becomes an important aspect of how these women interact with, within, and through the institutional environment (Walker, 1984). This process of co-ownership highlights the delicate balance young black women strike between possessing a degree of agency in the shaping of their future and in accepting their lack of agency in the process as well (Banks, 2009; Dill, 1980; Hills-Collins, 1986; White, 1984)

This study is significant because it explores the construction of the subjective self from the lens of black women attending predominately white institutions. This study was able to use the stories of Black women to help us understand the construction of subject position for black
women performing in the context of predominately white institutions that exist within an unfavorable racist and sexist past.

**Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Feminism**

Critical Race Feminism (CRF) exists as a response to the lack of racial inclusivity in feminist theory and the lack of gender inclusivity in racial theories. As such, CRF scholars, such as Kimberlee Crenshaw (2009), provide a useful perspective from which to build the theoretical perspective for this research study. Critical Race Feminism opens up a space to challenge how the experiences of black women are absent or overshadowed by the dominant discourse of black male success/support in colleges and universities. Equally important is CRF’s refusal to essentialize the black female experience. According to Crenshaw (2007) our analysis of the forces of politics and difference, “frequently conflate or ignore intragroup differences”. (p.

Utilizing this framework helps us understand the politicized nature of experience for women of color. As Crenshaw (2007) stated,

[R]acism experienced by people of color who are of a particular gender—male—tends to determine the parameters of antiracist strategies, just as sexism as experienced by women who are of a particular race—white—tends to ground the women’s movement. The problem is not simply that both discourses fail women of color by not acknowledging the “additional” issue of race or of patriarchy but that the discourses are often inadequate even to the discrete task of articulating the full dimensions of racism and sexism. Because women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women, antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms (p. 217-218).
CRF also emphasizes intersectionality because it “recognize[es] as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual” (p. 213). That shift is significant because it allows for us to view the problems women face as shaped by other dimensions of their identity and also allows for analysis in a collective manner. According to Crenshaw (2009), discussing the intersection of race and gender, can provide an outlook and additional strategies to address issues from that vantage point. The use of intersectionality in CRF challenges the assumption that there is one monolithic category of “woman” and also disrupts the default notions of individual race and gender justice which often maintain status quo responses that only benefit one or the other. This focus on intersectionality is important to a study of black women within the PWI academic context because it gives a language to their unique location and experience. For example, in her text Crenshaw (2009) discusses political intersectionality and how through it, we can acknowledge Black women and their location in a least two subordinated groups. Because of the conflict that exists within those two groups politically, often contemporary analysis of race and gender sets up “a dimension of intersectional power that men of color and white women seldom confront” (p. 217). Through knowing and understanding how intersectionality can help illuminate the experiences of Black women in PWIs, institutions can be more vigilant at responding to those locations that have seldom been addressed. When explored from the historical context of the institution, it becomes even more critical that intersectionality be used as a tool to illuminate cob webs in the corners of our institutions.

Critical Race Feminism also values the importance of history in that because of its roots in legal studies, precedent and perspective become vitally important in its application. Critical Race Feminism acknowledges the merger of historical experiences and the present day realities of Black women and how they are influenced by a legacy of racism and sexism across multiple
realms of being (Wing, 2003). As such, this tool was extremely helpful in the research of experiences within a flagship PWI. As a general tool, the use of CRF can disassemble and poke holes in institutionalized practices. For example, in her work about the sexual economy of slavery, Adrienne Davis (2004), utilized the concept of institutionalized slave labor as a way to shed light on the historicized manner in which the political economy and sex norms converged as an introductory site of what we now know as workplace institutionalized sexual harassment. Though this research was not about slave labor or sexual harassment, the knowledge presented by Davis in this framework, provided a platform for choosing CRF as a theoretical framework for this research. Just as David (2004) used space and place to make a case for her research, this research was made more rich and full through understanding the impact of the space and place of South University in the context of our Black women’s lives.

An integral component of CRF is its use of irony, storytelling, and nontraditional writing genres. Counter-storytelling for example, is a way to legitimize stories of the other by drawing on their experiences of difference as a way to highlight alternate realities and to name those realities. In addition, CRF theorists can share personal experiences in an effort to expose historical constructs that would attempt to present knowledge as linear and timeless (Wing, 1997; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). These personal forms of research strategy serve as a way to give life to the experiences of those who have been left out of the conversation. Through written work, storytelling, and alternate ways of being, individual experiences are given life and movement that make them more real. That realness can provide the fodder for future understanding of the social location that Black women exist within. CRF acknowledges that we have a problem with racism and seeks to share stories that can disrupt normal views that presently exist. In addition, it challenges our lack of involvement with context and uses the
methods like storytelling to build greater opportunities for context. Overall, this theoretical lens provided the structure and principles that were beneficial to investigating participants’ realities in order to understand how their subject positions both enacted and resisted as a result of the present, past, and future historical context of the institution.

Research Design

The research project was conducted as a basic qualitative study that employed the use of feminist ethnographic tools of interviews and participant observations. Through in-depth and multiple interviews with the participants, the researcher was able to explore how people come to understand their experiences and perceptions in relation to the historical, cultural, and personal baggage that permeates their reality (Sherman & Webb, 1995). The interview process was conducted via 3 semi-structured interview sessions which were utilized to gain rich and powerful information about the context of their arrival to South University, their experience within the institution, and any pertinent background knowledge. In addition to interviews, I chose to observe each participant in an academic or social setting of their choosing. I attending a student organization meeting with one student, went to a choir performance, observed one student leading a class discussion, and observed another student at an on campus social function. A common thread among the observations were that most of the activities had some connection to each student’s academic journey either from a social, leadership, or academic setting. During those observations of students interacting with their chosen environment, data was collected utilizing field note methods and subsequent interviews were utilized to fact-check and clarify interpretations of the student’s experiences in their observation location. In addition, the historical context of the institution site was considered to provide knowledge that might be helpful in understanding the students’ present day experiences. In order to ensure correctness or validity in interpretation, triangulation of data was employed and utilized as a check and balance.
method. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The data analysis for this study focused on exploring the themes of accessing opportunities for leadership, navigating stereotype assumptions from the institution and peers, cultivating cultural capital, and exploring constructions of themselves in the context of South University in relation to the theoretical framework and literature. The use of coding provided a way to pull information from the interviews and data to provide further themes to support the relationship between Black women, the institutions, and its historical context.

Researcher Positionality

As a black woman administrator at the site of the research, it is important to share my own experiences both personally and professionally as a snapshot into the motivation for this vein of inquiry. As a Black woman undergraduate, I graduated high school with aspirations of attending college. With just mere weeks left until my high school graduation, I made the decision to attend a small regional school in the Southeast. It was a predominately white institution. On that campus, which had an African-American make-up of roughly 15-20%, I had every opportunity available to me from academic major, to leadership experience, to general engagement in the campus experience. As I reflect back on my experience there, I don’t recall feeling as if there was any force or network unavailable to me. I had both internal and external systems of support. When I finally left that small regional institution, it was with a double major in political science and English and a master’s degree in Counselor Education. I had my first professional higher education job at that institution and then I left to pursue my second job in the field at South University, which was the location for this study.

When I asked a friend about working at South University, the first thing I was told was, “Girl you don’t want to work there! It’s racist”. I found that characterization to be comical, as
well as perhaps a bit overblown, so I asked another Black woman professional who currently worked at the institution about her opinion. She said, “You make it what you make it”. That was that. I would have to find out for myself. Ten years later, I am still at South University. However, the stark difference in historical context, tone, and perspectives that exist at South came rushing to me as I was reminded that I too attending a PWI as an undergraduate. This not so subtle nuance and shift in perception from my experience to the experiences of professional Black women and students at South University is what led me to research this topic. I became interested in understanding how and why the historical context was a driving force in present day experiences of women of color at South University. Through this research I have learned that ignoring historical context and intersectionality of perspective can be a dangerous position. That position can render both an institution impotent in having teeth to deal with the challenges of their history and render the experiences of Black women challenging without any real perspective on what can be done to make their circumstance better.

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms are defined to provide context for the location in which many of these items were situated:

**Successful**- women who are generally making acceptable progress towards their degree, have average or better grade point averages, and are engaged in two or more co-curricular activities or extracurricular experiences.

**Black women**- This term will be used to describe the undergraduate women that will be the focus of the study. Specifically, African-American women who are between the ages of 18-22 will be sought out as participants of the study.

**Deviant**- In this study, deviance will be characterized as attributes or actions categorized by the peer group. Being different or apart from the behaviors established as normative within the discourse of the PWI is discussed in this article and how it pertains to black women.

**Educational Discourse**- In this study discourse refers to the meaning in language and action, which is permeated by the historical, political, and social context of its being found specifically
in the educational setting of the PWI.

**Predominately White Institutions (PWIs)**- In this study, PWIs is the designation given to institutions of higher education where the majority of the student body is of European descent.

**Traditional Leadership**- Involvement in student organizations or experiences that are well known on campus and have a competitive or selective application process; organizations that have an active presence on campus and an engaged membership

**Organization of the Study**

This chapter provided an introduction to and overview of the dissertation. The next chapter, will present literature on the implications of educational discourse, and intersectionality within critical race theory/feminism and share the historical perspective of education as it relates to Black women and their educational experience at a particular predominately white institution. Chapter 3 contains a description of the methodology that was utilized to collect rich data within the study and I will explain the methods used to analyze the data. Chapter 4 will present the themed results of my research analysis and the stories of the women participants. Finally, Chapter 5 will include discussion, future implications for both research and practice, as well as recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER 2

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In chapter 2, I will review relevant literature and theories to provide a framework for this study. This body of literature is categorized into five main areas: (1) Black women and their history with higher education (2) black women and the negotiation of educational environments, (3) Black women’s experiences in predominately white institutions of higher learning, (4) Black women and controlling images, and (5) intersectionality. In addition, I will review and explore the constructs of Critical Race Feminism as a theoretical framework and provide a historical backdrop for understanding the elements of history and personal experiences told through storytelling that will be the basis for understanding Black women in negotiating their subject positioning and different ways of knowing in a historicized educational environment.

The opportunity to explore prevalent discourses shaping the modes of subjectivity that are enacted within the experiences of Black women at predominately white institutions (PWIs), will offer a basis for understanding how young black women are engaging in the process of construction within the context of the PWI. It will also shed light on understanding how their own interpretation of their conformity or deviance from prevalent discourse impacts that experience. In addition to understanding their role in current academic discourse, it is important to understand how prevailing stereotypes of black women have tainted the current discourse prevalent in academic arenas and how the history of those images coupled with that of institutional baggage makes. This literature review, is presented in a way that reviews the theoretical underpinnings and research, as well as offering a historical perspective in
understanding the experience of Black women at PWIs. Ultimately, this is a research project that can focus and shed light on existing paradigms experienced within a discursive environment. These paradigms play a critical role in informing the learning process for black women scholars within a predominately white institution of higher education.

**Black Women and their history in Higher Education**

Research done by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), for the past 33 years tells us that Black women have enrolled in 4-year institutions at a higher rate than their male counterparts (HERI data, 2007; Amadu Jacky Kaba, 2008) and the percentage attending has increased more than any other ethnic group, race, or gender. They are not only enrolling, but are earning degrees at a higher rate and some argue that they have positioned themselves to emulate that of the conceptual “model minority” mantra made popular through research about Asian American educational success (An, 2007; Asher, 2007; Chong and Kim, 2006; Lew, 2007; Wong and Halgin, 2006; Zhou and Kim, 2006;). This would be a positive departure from typical images of black women, but also one with disturbing consequences. Eliza Noh (2013), argued that such labels pressured minorities to live up to expectations of success, left them vulnerable to racist and sexist ideologies, and perpetuated images of success that resulted in their being overlooked for resources and services. Though Black women have blazed a successful pathway across colleges and universities all over the nation, few explorations have led to understanding how discourse has shifted or allowed their promising pathways. As a result, black women often fall into a realm of invisibility within the academy (Banks, 2009, Davis, 2004;) and stereotyping through media, which are discussed in this review of literature (Carter-Black, 2008; Dahlvig, 2010; Lomotey, 1997; Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Zamani, 2003).
Black Women’s Identities within Academia

In order to understand how black women are conceptualized in education, their history with education and the present tone of educational environments must be explored. It should be no surprise that much of the conceptualization of black women in education has to do with a set of challenging stereotypes, changing variables, and extenuating social factors. As bell hooks (1989) reminded us, “while assimilation is seen as an approach that ensures successful entry of black people into the mainstream, at its very core it is dehumanizing. Embedded in the logic of assimilation is the white supremacist assumption that blackness must be eradicated so that a new self, in this case a ‘white’ self, can come into being” (p. 67). These are the conceptualizations that have driven the conversation pertaining to black women. The social location in which an undergraduate black woman finds herself, coupled with the intersectionality of race and gender, creates an experience that is unique and specific to each individual (Banks, 2009; Brewer, 1999; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984). The history of women in higher education begins the journey into understanding the unique trajectory of Black women.

Historical accounts present a backward glimpse into the experiences of women and their uneasy engagement with education. Higher education’s own trajectory was born out of evolving times and various ideas and thoughts. “Higher education” as defined was used to describe to any academic study beyond elementary education. Higher education’s evolution to today born out of an increase in high school educated people and through the need for a more educated work force (Ewell, 1999; Forest & Kinser, 2002). This increase allowed for the raising of academic standards and ideals of what is now considered college level learning. Even for white women, the entry into “higher education” was wrought with challenge and opposition (Brubacher & Rudy, 2004; Newcomer, 1975; Solomon, 1985; Woody, 1929). However, academia provides a
great example of how the footprint of womanhood (or the woman’s experience) has evolved in terms of societal roles, influences, and experiences (Solomon, 1985). While the first woman received a degree in 1678, it would be over 160 years before an American woman even began the journey to higher education fulfillment. Still, it would not be until another 184 years before Mary Jane Patterson would graduate from Oberlin College as the first black woman to be conferred a degree (Banks, 2009; Ihle, 1992; Lomotey, 1997; Peril, 2006; Thomas, 1981;).

Since the early days of higher education’s union with women, people have been asking questions regarding what girls would learn, whether they should leave the home, and who would protect them if they sought to be educated out in the big bad world unsafe for the fragile woman image (Peril, 2006). Those topics, rather than reading and arithmetic permeated discussions about education. In early curriculums for women, the focus was on moral, literary, and domestic education for women (Riordan, 1990; Sexton, 1976). Because of the early influences found in women’s education, not only was it difficult for women to gain respect in expanding fields of study, there was also a societal stigma that was attached to the process of equal educational experiences for women (Riordan, 1990; Sadker & Sadker 1995; Sexton, 1976). Even after white women had been granted the right to education and had gained a foothold onto a few subjects outside of traditional trades like sewing and cooking, there were still few schools that would even admit black women to be taught (Franklin, 2002; Noble, 1956; Span, 2002). As the landscape began to change towards the end of 19th century, women began to gain access to degree programs and coeducational spheres. For blacks, education access would remain unequal for quite some time.

According to Noble (1987), the few black men and women who were afforded education were often relegated to trade opportunities and were not permitted to learn to read, as they were
considered sub-human or intellectually inferior and incapable of learning to read (Ihle, 1992; Lomotey, 1997; Thomas, 1981). Prior to the Civil War, the institution of slavery dictated the discourse surrounding roles for black people (Fleming, 1976; Thomas, 1981). Additionally, black women held the role of child-bearer and servant on most accounts and were far removed from conversations about education at the time.

The institution of slavery set-up a prohibition on education for Black Americans that was institutional and longstanding. Literacy and learning became something of value in the Black community because it was rarely accessible (Franklin, 2002; Lomotey, 1997; Thomas, 1981). In addition to being inaccessible, actual legislative acts prohibited slaves from learning to read and write (Thomas 1981) which minimized the chance that someone would be willing to make that happen for them. Span (2002) states that, “formerly enslaved African Americans regarded very highly the idea of being educated” and “education—or at least some degree of literacy—was a paramount and invaluable acquisition” (pg. 198). As such, blacks began to test the boundaries of their freedoms. Clandestine schools and progressive masters allowed some slaves the opportunity to learn and so those who could, passed down their knowledge to other slaves. However, the passing of the Morrill Act in 1890 began to opened doors for Black Americans to be included in institutions of higher education and for the creation of separate institutions for Black Americans (Lomotey, 1997). Those spaces would eventually aid in breaking down those stereotypes and barriers. Lincoln University and Wilberforce College became two of the only institutions in the 1850s that were established by Blacks as an access to educational opportunity (Astin, 1977; Thomas, 1981).

Prior to the passing of the Morrill Act, Blacks Americans were relegated to unequal schools in the era of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and though school was now publicly supported for both
blacks and whites, access, financial means, and equality were still issues (Berry & Asamen, 1989; Lanigan & Sneed, 1986; Thomas, 1981). Through the *Morrill Action of 1890*, black land grant institutions were established, but none offered a liberal arts education prior to 1916. During this time, there was also a shift away from just agricultural skills, which were on a decline, to those of mechanics, trade, and industries that were now flooding the job market (Bowles & Decosta, 1971; Holmes, 1934; Thomas, 1981). Black educational opportunity would continue to develop and *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) would usher in an era of challenging the doctrine of “separate but equal” at the elementary and secondary education level and would open the door for rulings in *Adams v. Richardson* (1973) a decade and a half later, which dismantled a dual system of higher education for blacks and whites.

In the larger forum, women, both black and white, were struggling with implications of this push for educational access and equality. While some women of the time embraced their entry into education, others like Virginia Woolf, felt uneasy about the possibilities that lay ahead in 1938. She stated, “…our brother who has been educated at schools and universities. Do we wish to join that procession, or don’t we? On what terms shall we join that procession? Above all, where is it leading us, the procession of educated me?” (Woolf, 1938). Woolf (1938) viewed the education of men as a type of indoctrination into a system that she was not sure she wanted to be a part of. Other women saw it as a great equalizing gesture. But, what were women of the time being permitted to learn? Generally speaking, the academic curriculum of the time consisted of skills that would secure their future as doting and subservient housewives (Brubacher & Rudy, 2004; Riordan, 1990; Sexton, 1976).

Black women entered the educational narrative in the 1800’s when Oberlin College, the first institution to admit women, also became the first to admit and graduate a Black woman.
While some Black women faced more or less struggle in their plight, one thing is certain about their pursuit of education—Black women shared a commonality in “persistent determination...in the face of many obstacles—to gain knowledge and empowerment through formal education at colleges and universities” (Ihle, 1992, xiv). Mary Church Terrell recounts her time at Oberlin, stating,

Some of my friends and schoolmates urged me to select the “gentleman’s course,” because it would take much longer to compete that the “ladies course...They argued I wouldn’t be happy if I knew more than my husband, and they warned that trying to find a man in our group who knew Greek would be like hunting for a needle in a haystack. But I loved school and liked to study too well to be allured from it by any of the arguments my friends advanced (Ihle, 1992, pg.23).

Black women, once given the opportunity to learn, changed the landscape of education. Anna Julia Cooper, in an excerpt from “The Higher Education of Women” argued that as much as there was need for the silent influence, or teacher and homemaker, there was also a need for the theologian and that her presence was “even more important and necessary” (Ihle, 1992, pg. 60).

As additional historical occurrences opened up access to more schools like University of California-Berkley and those specifically for Black women (Spelman College & Bennett College), Black men and women would begin to fight for more equitable educational experiences.

Women’s colleges began to receive criticism for teaching curriculum that individuals felt should be reserved for men (Banks, 2009; Brazzell, 1992; Noble, 1957/1987). In addition, Black women were plagued by the double assertion that their race and gender rendered them inferior or less intelligent (Banks, 2009; Brazzell, 1992). William Thomas (1901) in The American Negro
asserted that black women, even with the best of tools, could not be improved. In addition, the curriculum focus for Black women was on, “being subservient to men…and earning limited wages, when possible, to supplement the family income” (Banks, 2009, pg. 29). So though Black women had access to education, they were often still seen.

**Tools of Oppression within the Academy**

Signithia Fordham (1993) illustrated the struggle for black women to separate from controlling images in her depiction of passing in the academy and silencing as a tool of that control. She states, “African-American women are not seen as the archetypal symbol of womanhood, as is the case for white American women” and to be taken seriously that means “disassociating oneself from the image of ‘those loud Black girls’” (Fordham, 1993, pg. 22).

‘Those loud black girls” referenced by Fordham (1993) was a representation of dominant US racial discourses where identities were “created, imposed, appropriated, resisted, and embraced” and in turn homogenized and synthesized to represent a larger population. Fordham’s research not only illustrated the academy’s normalizing of white middle-class women’s lives and its impact of black women who seek to present themselves in the form of the other, but provides a platform of discovery regarding how black women utilized their positions in the academy as a form of agency and access. Fordham’s research illustrated the long-term impacts of stereotyped roles and identities for both black and white women and how the limited views inhibited black women, specifically in the academy.

Stereotypes imposed on Black women presented themselves as a blend of social, cultural, and racially stratified identities. “Those Loud Black Girls” was not just a reference to the height to which a voice was projected in the school halls of Capital High, but alluded to a deeper cultural chasm about behavior, appropriateness, and fit in an environment designed to promote
and normalize Euro-American constructs (Anderson & Collins, 1995; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Fordham, 1993; Koonce, 2003; Morgan, 1999; Morris, 2007; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Thompkins, 2004). In her 2009 research about black women undergraduates, Cerri Banks (2009) illustrated the way in which limited representations define black women, stating that black women must “navigate the knotty terrain of who there are as they challenge the limited representations and stereotypes that render them socially undesirable” (pg. 2). Still more research done by Jones and Shorter (2003) argued that because of the race and gender biases enacted upon Black women, they often engaged in shifting in order to separate themselves from those images. They state,

Black women are told that they are tough, pushy, and in charge rather than soft, feminine, and vulnerable. The image makes her someone to be feared rather than someone to be loved. These stereotypes render Black women as caricatures instead of whole people with strengths and weaknesses, tender sides and tough edges. And ultimately they make Black women invisible because they are not seen for all that they really are. (Jones & Shorter, 2003, pg. 19)

For this reason, those controlling images and black women’s response to them can be seen as an elaborate coping mechanism used to “accommodate differences in class, gender, and ethnicity” (Jones & Shorter, 2003, pg. 7). Jones and Shorter (2003) explained that for black women, this practice ultimately perpetuated feelings of invisibility and began “chipping away at her sense of self, at her feelings of wholeness and centeredness” (p. 7). This research pointed to the fact that traditional institutions were not fully supportive of African American students, particularly women (Downing, 2005; Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Levey, Blanco, & Jones, 1998) due to values steeped in Eurocentric ideologies.
Current data about black women in college further illustrated the gap between modes of representation and recognition. In the Predominately White institution (PWI) context, both representation of black women and recognition remained an issue that plague their experiences in academia. Today, Black students make up about roughly 15% of the total undergraduate student population and black women are about 7.7% of 18-24 yr. old undergraduate students attending colleges and universities. Of those numbers, approximately 80% of black students enrolled in predominately White institutions (PWIs) are women (US Department of Education, [US DOE] 2010; Watt, 2006).

Studies have shown that while African American women attending PWIs remain the largest population, they experience greater social and emotional distress than do their counterparts attending historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), as well as compared to black men (Feagin & Sikes, 1997; Fleming, 1984; Ray & Rosow, 2012; Watt, 1997). R. Deborah Davis (2004), in her research about the experiences of black students at PWIs used two defining areas for discussion. In her text, student experiences were discussed in terms of “social climate” and “academic environment” (p. 2). She stated, “social climate is something that occurs as interaction between and among students, faculty, and staff” and “takes place in the campus environment”, while “academic environment is a setting or atmosphere, conducive to learning, which is presumably structured by university policy and philosophy” (Davis, 2004, p. 2). These factors contributed to Davis’s (2004) study and she recounts stories of students experiencing invisibility or hyper-visibility as seen in the “fly in the buttermilk” syndrome (Davis, Dias-Bowie et. al, 2004; Davis, 2004). In addition, many of her students experienced being treated differently from their white peers. Struggles with fitting in and experiencing the institution in an
equal context as their white peers were recurring themes in the experiences of black student experiences at PWIs.

The studies generated about black students at PWIs also highlighted institutional approaches to support or lack thereof for black students (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Levin & Levin, 1991; Saddlemire, 1996; Smith, 1991; Steele, 1992), explored deficits in the student’s preparation for college (Rendon, et al, 2000), or provided insight regarding socialization and or the stages of development for students in general (Astin, 1985; Pascarella, 1985; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1975; 1986; 1988; Weidman, 1987). As such, the stories of black women, were often inscribed with a standard depiction and perception of a monolithic black woman experience (Crenshaw, 1993; Fordham, 1993, 1996; hooks, 1984, Lei, 2003). However, researchers like Rendon, Jalamo, and Nora (2000) and Hurtado et. al (1999), argued that these theories didn’t consider the intersection between individual and institutional characteristics as it related to socialization in college.

**Black Women in Leadership Roles**

As education became accessible for all and the discourse shifted towards education as a “self-fulfillment” (Banks, 2009, pg. 29), black women began to participate in advocacy organizations like the National Federation of African American Women or sororities. In addition to that, they fought for women’s equality and to be given rights. The fight for gender equality emerged as a force of mobilization during the Seneca Falls Convention of the late 1800’s and the Women’s Suffrage Movement of the late 19th century. Elizabeth Caddy Stanton and Lucretia Mott, modeled the following idea after the Declaration of Independence, giving it a sense of relevance and urgency for the United States:
When a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of the women under this government, and such is now the necessity, which constrains them to demand the equal station to which they are entitled (Stanton, Anthony, & Gage, 1887, p. 97)

It was through the tenacity and rigor of a group of dedicated women that concepts regarding gender equity became important in the national realm and to women’s plight in access to education. Across all levels of schooling, education has suffered from gendered biases (Cooper, 2000). However, despite gains for Black women in areas of schooling, they still maintain a difficult struggle between gender and race (Bowman, 2005; Hays, 2000).

Opportunity and stereotyping seemed to be the greatest challenges to education for Black women. Banks (2009) argues that “as black women [became] students, they remain[ed] raced, classed, and gendered beings” (pg. 27), making it difficult for them to be seen outside of their traditional subservient roles. As such, understanding the images of Black women is a necessary and important to research and best practices.

Black Women at PWIs

Research has found that on average, black students are achieving at lower rates and graduating at a lower percentage than white students at predominately white institutions (Steele, 1992; Banks, 2009; Dahlvig, 2010; Davis, 2004; Davis et. Al, 2004; Wolf-Wendel, 1998; Wolf-Wendel, Blacker, and Morphew, 2000; Zamani, 2003). With this knowledge, PWIs have spent a considerable amount of resources establishing minority programs and services to aid black students. However, in some cases this work seems to have had little or no effect on their
academic outcomes in these predominately white educational silos. In particular, the inequality of “social location” seems to play a role in the experience at PWIs. According to Banks (2009), “some social locations wield more power and privilege than others…and the effects are different for each one involved” (p. 9-10). Understanding subjectivity, which is fluid, as well as environmentally and socially constructed, can shed light on experiences of black women in these institutions. Understanding the historical elements of that background can also open up new ways to explore the topic.

Common issues faced by black students at PWIs include issues of adjustment, fit, and preparedness to enter the academic realm. According to an article by Davis, et. al (2004), predominately white campuses don’t always provide the most “hospitable environment” and often the educational tone is that of a more euro-centric ideology (p.421). Additionally, studies have found that an air of distrust often exists between students of color and dominant group faculty who may not be sensitive to perceived issues of race, gender, or class Campbell & Campbell, 2007; Cross & Slater, 2004; Dahlvig, 2010; Davis, et. al, 2004; Lee, 1999, Lometey, 1997; Steele, 1999; Sue, Bingham, Porche-Burke, & Vasquez, 1999; Williamson, 2003).

Another common discussion in the research relates to stereotypes and their impact on black undergraduates at PWIs. Students often reported feeling unwelcome or being overlooked or underestimated in classroom discussion. In a study of black students’ perceptions of PWIs, one student stated, “[I]n a university of this nature, where we’re the “minority,” we’re kind of pressured to do better than anyone else, because we’re expected to fail anyway” (Davis, 2004, p. 61-62). Yet again in several other studies, the research found that students shifted between feelings “super” visibility to being “hyper” invisible (Carter-Black, 2008; Dahlvig, 2010; Lometey, 1997; Zamani, 2003). Bouncing between plains of visibility and invisibility often left
black students questioning their fit and engagement with the PWI environments they found themselves within. In some settings black students were asked to speak and define phenomenon for their entire race, while in other situations they were overlooked or felt invisible to the conversation or experience (Banks, 2010; Davis, 2004). Research done by Judd, Park, Ryan, Brauer, and Kraus (1995), suggests that even the way in which black and white students socialize themselves to varying environments can be different and can impact minority students and their success at PWIs.

Scholars studying black students at PWIs have been consistent in highlighting experiences of isolation and expressions of “feeling different” (Carter, 2001; Cross & Slater, 2001; Dahlvig, 2010; Judd et. al, 1995; Katz & Hass, 1988; Nghe & Malhalik, 2001; Steele, 1999; Zamani, 2003). In particular, one researcher defined black students as enduring “an atmospheric haze over their experiences and all interactions that were inseparable from the fog that surrounded them” and that though “[t]he imposition was external” they “felt the effects internally, almost as if they were somehow not normal” (p. 66). While there is no belief that black students were expecting to feel “the same”, they were expecting the environment to be more open and embracing to their cultural differences.

Many PWIs organized events and recruiting experiences such as “Black Weekends” and “Minority Weekends” to depict an atmosphere of widespread acceptance and fit at their institutions. However, upon arrival in the regular academic year, many black undergraduates found the environment vastly different (Banks, 2010; Davis; 2004; Davis et. al, 2004). Davis (2004), reinterpreted the stages of Chickering (1996), Cross (1986), and Perry (1989) and found that those that most closely related to the experience of black students were establishing identity, internalization, and relativism. In particular, she found this to be a time of self-discovery and
decision-making that all students go through similar phases. However, the research centering around black students at PWIs indicates that students of color experience these phases at multiple planes and that their exploration is not just about fit at the collegiate level, but that it includes questions of race, as well as their understanding of their role within the academy (Banks, 2010; Davis, 2004; Lomotey, 1997; Glasser, 2002).

**Controlling Images of Black Women**

Research depicts a number of troubling images of Black women that have assisted in perpetuating negative narratives, as well as limiting their identity to a range of socially undesirable representations. University professor Carolyn M. West recounts a trip she once took to a national conference for psychologists. As West was leaving a hotel restaurant, a White woman stopped her in her tracks and asked her to show them to a table. West (2002) states that at that moment she was “stunned and confused” (p.287) as nothing about her attire or presence immediately stood out as servant-like. She states that this experience left an indelible mark on her day, but I would argue that it permeated much deeper below the surface of her being. As West (2002) states, she “wondered why [she], rather than the older White gentleman who was standing next to [her], was [she] mistaken for the server” (p. 287). In fact, she was dressed in a dark blue power suit and had a bundle of books in her possession. This did not stop the white woman from making such an assumption. What could have informed her white female counterpart impression that despite her immaculate dress, that she was none other than a server preparing to greet the next patron entering the restaurant? One theory lies in the prevalent societal discourse. Perceptions and images of black womanhood have been relegated to roles of servitude, motherhood, and over sexualized images (Bell, 1992; Collins, 1998; Harris-Perry, 2011; Shorter-Gooden, 2009; Wyatt, 1997). As such, the lens through which others view black
women is often colored from the perspective of those images and leaves little room for imagining new roles.

Commonly utilized oppressive images like that of mammy, superwoman, angry black bitch/woman, and others continue to propagate stereotypes that hinder the evolution of black women in societal terms. These societal terms impact institutions at all levels and types (Beauchêf-Lafontant, 2009; Foucault, 1969; Gilligan, 2006; Hill-Collins, 2002; Peterson, 1992; Pillow, 2006). Stereotypes are characterized in their simplistic form as ways of looking at individuals as all the same rather than different (Dictionary.com, retrieved April 12, 2013). The dangerous assumption of stereotypes is their rigidity and inflexibility in allowing space for alternate definitions, descriptions, and characteristics. This becomes increasingly problematic in looking at the historical background of black women in America. In the years following slavery, black women were relegated to roles of servitude and care giving. West (2002) argues,

Because [black women] were overrepresented in these fields, it appeared that Black women were inherently suited to work as domestics and caregivers. This belief became institutionalized when powerful individuals create social policies and situations, such as job training programs, that discourage higher education and redirect Black women . . . In addition to caregiving Mammies, African American women are often portrayed as sexually irresponsible, promiscuous Jezebels and as angry combative Sapphires. (West, 2002, p. 286)

Weathers (1970) echoed the sentiment of many researchers currently looking at the experiences of black women in education. In her essay, she challenged Black women to reject images of themselves as “personal sex objects, maids, baby sitters, domestics, and the like in exchange for a man’s attention” (Weathers, 1970, pg. 305). If black women are not victim to
narrow imagery, then even still, they become characterized by attributes of their personality or attitude. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) found that one of the defining qualities of black womanhood is considered strength. Even social activists such as Harriet Tubman, Fannie Lou Hamer, etc. were relegated to reference of “tireless, deeply caring, and seemingly invulnerable” perseverance as the essential mantra of black womanhood (pg. 1). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) stated that,

strength advances a virtuous claim about any Black woman whose efforts and emotional responses defy common beliefs about what is humanly possible amidst adversity. And herein lies the problem. Because the idea of strength appears to honestly reflect Black women’s extensive work and family demands, as well as their accomplishments…the concept seems to provide a simple and in fact honorable recognition of their lives. However, appearances are often deceiving, and much of the acclaim [of strength] is undermined….to defend and maintain a stratified social order by obscuring Black women’s experience of suffering, acts of desperation, and anger. (p. 2)

The discovery of these deeply societal images and perceptions of black women highlights the framework of our present understanding. Gilligan and Richards (2009) argues that subordinate groups like black women are often encouraged to embrace societal lies as their own reality or to “become wedded to what within ourselves we know is a false story” (p. 59). Those who wield the power are often able to control the defining of reality.

**Images of Black Women as depicted through Media**

Present day depictions of the jezebel can be seen throughout rap videos and in movie roles. Nelson (2011) says media has “enshrined new stereotypes of black women—the angry black activist; the promiscuous unwed mother; the child-selling crack addict; the take-no-shit,
more-man-than-woman black bitch; the beat-the-system welfare queen, and the hypersexual vixen” (pg. 22). Black women find themselves in a bind of historical perspective and current media sensationalized around catchy concepts. The implications of these stereotypes and controlling images of black women are important to education and scholarship.

According to Banks (2009), these past and present day instances “provide a glimpse into the intricacies of being black and woman in the United States” and offers an understanding of “the work that black women, and in this case, black women undergraduates must do to navigate the knotty terrain of who they are as they challenge limited representations and stereotypes that render them socially undesirable” (pg. 2). These same representations in past research have focused on their “social liabilities” and their lack of preparation for academia (Banks, 2009). According to Steele (1998) stereotypes are, “a predicament—something in the interaction between a group’s social identity and its social psychological context, rather than something essential to the group itself. Predicaments can be treated, intervened on . . .” (p. 186).

Narrow images of black womanhood were again in the forefront when Don Imus, former talk radio host, referred to 8 black undergraduate members of the Rutgers University women’s basketball team as “nappy headed hos” (Banks, 2009; Faber, 2007; Robinson, 2007), insinuating that even by the standards of first world 2007, those women were no different that the jezebel depictions of the early 1900’s and slavery era. According to West (2005), this notion was also tested when in 1998, “John Gray, an author and psychologist, appeared on the Oprah Winfrey talk show [and] instructed Ms. Winfrey, one of the most powerful women in television” to give a distressed guest a hug and then referred to Winfrey as “the mother of America” (p. 289). Gray’s comment stems deeper than its surface utterance and point back to depictions of language and imagery that was born through power.
It is possible for Black women to fall prey to marginalization from these stereotypical categories, because of “intersectional disempowerment” (Crenshaw, 1993). Crenshaw (1993) argues that, “through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics” (p. 246). What is depicted in the jezebel role of Black women has trickled into societal descriptors of black womanhood. Jezebels are often seen as aggressive, promiscuous, and willing to do anything to get promoted. The jezebel label is an example of how Black women have been forced to fight the vestiges of slavery. Some argue that the jezebel stereotype emerged to try and rationalize the atrocities against Black female bodies during the times of slavery and in the reign of the Ku Klux Klan (West, 1995; Jewell, 1993; White, 1999; Wyatt, 1997). By propagating this image, it “gave the impression that Black women could not be rape victims because the always desired sex” (West, 1995). bell hooks (2004) said, if a Black woman’s body is not presented as available, accessible and 'sexually deviant', then it is not desirable. This desirability permeates into societal ideations and is prostituted in the name of film and other sensational media caricatures, but ultimately taints the conceptualization of black women as contributing scholars. Through an in-depth understanding of the social and conceptual location of black women in academia, a greater understanding of where the research for this particular study is situated can be explored.

The Impact of Respectability Politics

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, in her book, Righteousness Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920, brought to light a movement within the black community aimed at promoting civil and moral practices held as acceptable by wider society. This notion dates back to the days of WEB Dubious and more. In perpetuating that notion within
the Black community, an unintended consequence was perhaps an undermining of Black culture and experiences that might deemed disrespectful by the majority population. The problem was how one comes to what is respectful or disrespectful when it comes to culture. This notion is particularly useful for this study in framing the challenges of experience for Black women. Research shares that respectability politics in the Black community is largely about gaining and having access to economic uplift. It suggests that it serves as “an emancipatory strategy” (Harris, 2014, pg. 35). However, what some argue it largely overlooks and does not discuss are structural forces that hinder the mobility of black people. These structural forces would not necessarily be the types of things that respectability politics would call on a black person to adjust. Rather respectability politics in some critiques is seen as absent of the depth needed to truly understand the implications of those lived experiences. One area of research stated, “uplifting stories that leave out structural barrier let alone the need for political struggle to correct those barriers, can glass over the enormous challenges the poor face in an era marked by downward mobility” (Harris, 2014, pg. 36). Respectability politics is critiqued for having the effect of steering Black Americans from making demands on structural inequalities and instead focus on self-correction and a false belief that those individual changes will have beneficial effects. Overall, respectability politics is an important aspect to this research. It serves as a strategy and is intertwined into our culture, politics and the personal. However, it also echoes problematic strategies in that it can render true activism as impotent (Harris, 2003). Harris (2014) discussed Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter’s speech at a local church admonishing youth to “pull up their pants and buy a belt” and to start looking like the type of respectable teens that don’t want to get followed around a store. Nutter was both praised and criticized within the Black community for his words, as some felt he over-essentialized his message to young men.
taking for granted the odds stacked against them, while others felt that being respectable was the best possible way to get respect from society at any level.

This example of respectability politics highlights the conundrum experienced by Black women. Respectability politics according to Johnson and Boylorn (2015), is to blame for Black’s women’s oppression against themselves. In her example, she discusses the case of Sandra Bland, a Black woman, who reached media swell attention when she was stopped by a White police officer, assaulted, subsequently arrested, and then found hanged several days later. In the court of public opinion, Sandra was scrutinized for the manner in which she responded to the officer. As respectability calls for, according to Johnson and Boylorn (2015), to fully blame her we would have to look away from the institutional forces that disproportionately target more Black Americans in traffic stops and the stereotype of angry black female. As Johnson and Boylorn (2015) points out, respectability can be a crutch by which Black women police themselves against insurmountable odds.

Critical Race Feminism

Critical Race Feminism (CRF) has its roots in the legal traditions of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Legal Studies (CLS), in that it explores the relationship between race, racism, and power through questioning the foundations of power relations. CRT, which developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a response from a group of scholars, primarily African American, who felt that critical legal studies failed to address and support race as a fundamental aspect in social analysis and judicial renderings (Crenshaw et al, 1995; Delgado & Stefanie, 2000; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2005; Yosso, 2005). Critical Legal Studies came about in the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War era as an effort to argue that the power and domination of certain groups over an unequal status quo
was continuing, and social and political change was needed” (Taylor, 2009, p. 2). Critical Legal Studies, was criticized however, because it failed to fully account for race as a defining factor of those arguments and did not fully address why cases like Brown v. Board of Education and other landmark civil rights era work did not bring about the change that was wanted for minority groups.

Central to the idea of CRT is the emphasis on system and social constructs. As an extension of CRT and CLS, CRF places power relations at the center of analysis of the discourses surrounding race, class, gender, and other forms of social oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Wing, 1997). Specifically, CRF shares philosophical similarities with CRT that were utilized to build a case for CRF in relation to this study of historical context and Black women at a PWI. In particular, according to Childers-McKee (2015), stated:

CRF shares a number of number of assumptions with CRT, including:

(1) the permanence of racism in our society;

(2) the importance of narratives, storytelling, and counter-narratives to disrupting taken-for-granted normative views about the world;

(3) the social constructedness of race;

(4) the need to critique liberalism for its individualistic and context-independent perspective of the world;

(5) the reality of interest convergence, meaning that marginalized cultures have gotten ahead only when those from the dominant culture also benefit;

(6) and the important of critical race praxis, or action to challenge the status quo (p. 395).

As stated above, like Critical Race Theory, Critical Race Feminism seeks to advance narrative and storytelling analysis, identify and break down the social constructedness of race,
and share complex perspectives of the world. But at the core of CRF, it seeks to utilize those various lenses to address “a significant group of people—who are both women and members of today’s racial/ethnic minorities” (Wing, 1997, p. 1). Ladson-Billings (1998), Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995), and others (Taylor, 2009; Gillborn, 2009; Lawrence, Matsuda, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993) began applying Critical Race Theory to their analyses of educational settings, paying particular attention to the ways in which institutions of higher learning are complicit in reproducing marginalization and inequity, despite claims and programmatic efforts to the contrary. Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) state that CRT is an important tool for, “reconstruction of human agency and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power” (p. 9). However, today CRT is largely said to be “unable to sustain racial critiques of its own professional norms, hierarchies, and ideas” (Alexander-Floyd, 2010, p. 821). The framework is best used to discuss deficiencies in our educational system, as well as shed light on areas for improvement. Yosso (2005) purports that, “CRT is a framework that can be used to theorize, examine and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact on school structures, practices, and discourse” (p. 70). Pratt-Clarke (2010) points out that CRF makes primary its desire to center itself on the experiences, roles, and narratives held by women of color. Those roles are often analyzed through the lens of their interaction with systems and institutions. As such, it is a perfect union between this theoretical frame and exploring the context of women, their narrative history, and the history of institutions such as a PWI and it expands the reach of CRT by adding a gendered and raced component to analysis. Because CRF seeks to combat multiple forms of oppression, CRF not only challenges institutional context, but also celebrates the agency and resiliency that Black women display in education settings. Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) argue that the concepts of CRF are helpful in understanding how a
multidisciplinary scope broadens the narrative of Black women helps maintain and emphasize differences in the experiences of Black women as compared to males of color or White women as a way to combat both gender and racial oppression.

CRF can be useful when discussing an educational institution because it challenges us to lift veils of ignorance or limited understanding of the effects of institutionalized racism on women of color. Matsuda (1992) argued that many women of color feel a “multiple consciousness” which is essentially an awareness of simultaneously facing oppression as a result of both race and gender (p.297). Wing (1997) and Smith-Hefner (2006) used CRF in their study of discrimination against Muslim women who were banned from wearing headscarves in public school as a violation of a French law stating no “ostentatious religious symbols [could be worn] in public schools” (p. 745). Their work argued that often women of color face multiple and simultaneous discrimination, not only on the basis of their race and gender, but often due to other factors such as religion, class, or disability. In this instance, the headscarf served as an illustrative depiction of the multiple discriminations imposed upon women. The history and context with which French people chose to interpret the wearing of the headscarf was not only additional fuel in the CRF argument, but adding to that was the idea that Muslim women voices, who were traditionally silenced due to cultural representations, would not be able to share this story of difference. For that reason, Wing and Smith (2006) argued that researchers must see themselves historically, see themselves as the other might see them, and see the other within their own context, in that the historical context and location from which we read and interpret the stories of women through CRF are as important as the aspects of that story. In the instance of the headscarf, there were multiple issues at play surrounding the agency of the women to fight their
cause and the double silencing that might have occurred as a result of their religion, as well as them not being able to share their story because of their gender.

The use of storytelling and counter-stories are central to both CRF and CRT. Both are tools to create and challenge meaning (Delgado, 1989). Through counter-storytelling, a voice can be given Women of color about their experiences that are not of the normative script and that often remain untold or unknown. Through those narratives, the ultimate goal is to expose dominant ideologies and to connect those stories with institutional or societal level of knowledge in order to impact larger and deep historical contexts. Counter-stories are important because they provide a space for marginalized people to “talk back” to oppressive forces that try to tell their story (hooks, 1999).

hooks (1999 offers an agency to Black women that relies on understanding their experiences more and on engaging their stories of oppressive forces at their points of intersection. For example, Adrienne Davis (2004) used Black women’s slave labor as a modern interpretation of sexual harassment due to the multiple ways in which the women were being oppressed. In this study, Davis (2004) compared the economic exploitation for work, abuse and forced reproduction and highlights this instance as one of the earliest locations of sexual harassment. She stated that, “taking into account African American women’s resistance to sexual harassment in slavery confounds our understanding of early feminism’s activism which is typically equated to white women’s activism” (Davis, 2004, pg. 463). Allowing Black women to add to the narratives of activism around sexual assault, offered a way to reframe the historical context of sexual assault and puts Black women in the conversation with White women. This opportunity for inclusion is providing more room for exploring stories of Black women at sites of oppression.
In another piece, Alexander-Floyd (2010) uses CRF to discuss as she says, “exposing subjectivity through the production of narrative” (p. 811). In her discussion, she supports intersectionality as a research paradigm that can give narratives more weight as applicable tools to other situations and circumstances. Wing (1997) recounted a personal experience as an example of things that CRF can address. She describes “spirit-murder” as a producer of negative social forces. Wing (1997) described an experience of having to show her ID on a flight because she was not believed to be a professor as “small injury to one’s spirit” (p.28). In the analysis of Wing’s experience, it supports that CRF can bring attention to understanding, “small fractures on the spirit lead to the eventual ‘murdering’ of the life force of women of color”. As is highlighted, the narratives of Black women and women of color don’t begin when they reach adulthood, but often make up a variety of experiences that span over lifetimes, as well as different circumstances, but “they do not simply happen during adulthood, instead, they begin during childhood, and continue throughout adulthood” (pg. 12). Ultimately, these CRF theorists are supporting the concept of “talking back” as response to negative expressions against women of color as hooks (1999) describes in her analysis.

**Intersectionality**

Intersectionality as a theoretical framework also allows researchers to highlight the manner in which identity categories become “mutually constitutive” and to emphasize the limited nature of separate evaluations of such categories (Hindman, 2011) and a key component of critical race feminism is intersectionality. Most closely associated with the work of Kimberlee Crenshaw (2009), in her book, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*, it discusses intersectionality in terms of three categories of structural, representational, and political aspects and gives examples through
depictions of battering, rape, and antiracist politics through highlighting how through those various lenses, issues of violence against Women of color are marginalized. In an explanation of intersectionality, Crenshaw used this analogy: “Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination” (p.63). She also offers another helpful definition of intersectionality when she comes it to “the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black’s women’s employment experiences” in a discussion about state employment laws (p. 214). Though this example highlights employment, Crenshaw points out that intersectionality can be applied to experiences of Black women from a structural, political, and representational framework and in other settings (Childers-McKee, 2015).

Political intersectionality refers to the ways in which traditional feminist and antiracist policy has marginalized women of color. Crenshaw (2009) explores this by comparing it to how often Black women are faced with choosing to support a political movement that benefits their gender, but disadvantages or fails to consider race. Conversely, Black women are consistently called upon to take up the cause of Black men in political issues, but are rarely rewarded with their own support of issues impacting individuals who are both women and black.

Other discussions in Crenshaw work, sought to outline the forces prevalent in narratives of structural intersectionality. For example, Crenshaw (2009) observed a battered women’s shelter located in minority communities in Los Angeles, where she found that most of the shelters were ill-equipped to engage the multilayered issues that women of color faced along
including poverty, lack of job skills, gender and class oppression, etc. Structural intersectionality is manifest in policies and practices that are institutionalized aspects of our helping guidelines (laws, programs, guidelines, etc.), but that fail to offer space for the experiences of Women of color. For instance, in the case of battered women of color, intervention strategies were put in place, but often those strategies were constructed from the position of White women. Because of that, those interventions failed to address common issues among black women like the need for government housing programs, the needs to address work preparedness needs, or cultural considerations for people of color that left them with less avenues of support from family and friends when they found themselves in difficult situations (Crenshaw, 2009). Structural intersectionality is able to highlight locations of support by recognizing additional nuances and can hone in on the site of intersection to identify circumstances that might position white women differently from Black women.

Finally, representational intersectionality discusses how cultural constructions of Black women impact laws and practices (Crenshaw, 1991). In exploring representational intersectionality more closely, Crenshaw (2009) uses an example of the 2 Live Crew Controversy. In that controversy images of women of color ignored the intersectional interests of women of color by pitting an issue with representation as a race or gender issue. This is problematic to Women of color because in 2 Live Crew’s 1990 obscenity issue, they were cited for obscene language on their album, Nasty AS They Wanna Be, where they repeatedly used vulgar language described sexually explicit acts against women and that labeled them as “suitable targets for sexual violence” (Crenshaw, 2009, p. 237). To make matters worse, the misogyny of this issue became linked to the narrative of the white woman jogger who was raped in central by a group of Black men. This narrative connection dominated the discussion, and
quickly went away from an analysis about the mistreatment of all women, but landed more squarely on an analysis of White women in relation to Black men. The additional challenge and cause for Crenshaw’s (2009) analysis came when one looked at the persecution of 2 Live Crew as the first group to ever be prosecuted for such a misogynist message. 2 Live Crew, though their message was vulgar, was certainly not the first or only group that could be persecuted for a misogynist message. However, Crenshaw (2009) at this point argues that because 2 Live Crew was Black men, the scrutiny surrounding their message was much more vocal and important from the community perspective. What was missing in analyzing this issue from the location of solely race and solely gender was a highlight on the violence and messages specifically being sent to Black women about their worth. Additionally, no consideration was given to the cultural implications of this knowledge and how those narrow and singular narratives underscored a variety of additional messages of concern related to the 2 Live Crew controversy. Intersectionality calls into question, the instinct and emphasis of our systems of justice to look at things from a singular framework.

**Resistance in CRF**

Through the use of intersectionality as a theoretical framework, Black women can explore its use as a tool of resistance (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Heron, 2005). In Collins (2000) work, she shares that resistance is acts as a marker of the resilience and strength with which Black women overcome multiple sites of oppression. Resistance from the perspective of CRF and Collins (2000) is seen as a form of activism and helps us understand the “significance of how singular and multiple forms of oppression are organized” (pg. 203). As an example, a study about Black girls in school found they were disproportionately being policed for their attitudes, bodies, and abilities more so that their female counterparts or black males (Harris,
In contrast to the multiple levels of oppression experienced by Black women, in a study done by O’Conner (1997), she found that Black girls embraced ideologies of themselves as strong, positive beings and that it assisted them in being more academically successful and prepared to resist multiple levels of oppression.

Another form of resistance addressed in CRF is for Black women to resist negative images produced within society. Rollins (1985) studied black domestic workers and found that they used both negative and positive aspects of their constructed identity as a form of resistance. Rollins (1985) stated,

Black women domestic workers report[ed] that they were often called by their White employers to play roles as deferent, contented servants grateful for handouts of old clothes in place of decent wages. But these women simultaneously resist[ed] ongoing attempts to dehumanize them…The women share stories of acting grateful for the handouts given them by their employers while throwing the things away as soon as they [left] their jobs…The Black female sphere of influence creates in this case was Black women’s refusal to relinquish control over their self-definitions. While they pretend to be mules and mammies and thus appear to conform to institutional rules, they resist by creating their own self-definitions and self-valuations in the safe spaces they create among one another (pg. 205).

It is through examples such as this, that we see CRF as a useful and necessary tool for the development of counter-narratives to combat historical perspectives. CRF’s use of resistance is a certain tool that Black women have at their disposal in the fight to create new ways of understanding and resistance against multiple layers of oppression.
CRF in this Research

In research with CRF as a framework, the researcher shifts analysis to offer new perspectives of specific phenomena and focuses more heavily on primary data like interviews, participant observations, and historical texts to share the multiple perspectives of a concept (Golpaldas, 2013). CRF is a great tool for sharing the stories of the women in this research because we rely heavily on understanding their experience in relation to historical context and the context of their oppression. Ultimately, the use of CRF and Crenshaw’s intersectionality as a theoretical framework, addresses Crenshaw’s (1991) idea of the simultaneous relation between race, class, and gender, as well as historical context. Brewer, Conrad, and King (2002), state:

According to the “simultaneity” perspective, intersectionality, simultaneity, and relationality of gender, race, and class are not theorized as trans historical realities but in historical context. The social construction of race, class, and gender occurs in a specific time and place. These social forces take on variable meanings over social historical time. They also assume meanings in relationship to the others. For this discussion, most importantly, they are inextricably intertwined and interlinked. (pg. 6)

Research into the theoretical view of CRF supports the importance of historical context and discourse as a starting point for a variety of research discussions. Cultural narratives that exist must be combated by sharing stories of the experiences of Black women from their multiple and interlocking vantage points (Hancock, 2008). Through examining prevalent discourse, CRF allows researchers to highlight the self-awareness of their participants and shed awareness on the social location that can result from the cross-over between various attributes. This form of engagement with research provides a way to improve the experiences of individuals with
considerations for race, class, and gender, etc. as well as highlighting the “unacknowledged privileges, include the privilege of remaining ignorant of marginalized people” (Garry, 2011, pg. 827).
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black women negotiate the often difficult terrain of a PWI steeped in a racist past that is still being lived out today. Using Critical Race Feminism as my theoretical framework, I sought to elicit stories from diverse Black women known at their institution as successful. As such, a basic qualitative research design was utilized. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the purpose of the study, the research questions which guided this inquiry, a description of the qualitative methods used, and an explanation of my data analysis.

Topic Selection and Rationale

The experience of black women at PWIs has been a growing and emerging topic (Butner, et. al, 2001; Dahl, 2000; Thomas, 2001; Foreman, 2003; Howard-Vital & Morgan, 1993; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996; Stewart, 2002; Tatum, 1996) and research does exist to support and shed further light on their experiences and the systems of support and challenge that exist at the institutional level. However, this study specifically seeks to compare the individual experiences of black women, along with their unique positionality in order to understand how the historical context of the institution they select can be both an influence and challenge. This nuance to the traditional experiences text, provides a different lens from which to view both the individual narrative and the impact of the institution. Through exploring this idea, it is important to understand how institutions are challenging themselves to use their historical baggage in a way that offers significance to the stories of Black women who learn and grow under their
covering. This study is significant because it investigates individual experiences in relation to institutional context and how this impact on the individual has greater and larger implications for the institution of higher education.

**Research Questions**

The following questions guided the major findings of this research project:

4. How are young black women constructing their subject positions at a predominately white institution?

5. How do young black women negotiate traditional networks of leadership at a predominately white institution?

6. How does race and gender intersect to influence academic and life choice for young black women in a predominately white institution?

In basic qualitative research, research questions provide the context and orientation for the depth and focus of the study (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 20019, Sherman & Webb, 1990). Black women undergraduates were the center of analysis for this particular qualitative study. I positioned this study to consider the environmental context of the PWI, the intersectionality of the interview subjects, and their agency in responding to the contextual environment. This research was an opportunity to shed light on black women’s response to contextual engagement with the environment, but would also be an opportunity to challenge and perhaps improve the experiences of black women at PWIs. The research questions were designed to seek out the voices and perspectives of black women as a collective and individually to provide the true range of analysis of this specific experience as compared to historical implications. Additional details related to the sample and the process of selection are described later in this chapter for further context.
Research Design

In this basic interpretive qualitative study, I utilized interviewing, along with ethnographic style inquiry methods to explore how people come to understand their experiences and perceptions in relation to the historical, cultural, and personal baggage that permeates their reality and how that interacts with the social world (Creswell, 2007; Van Manen, 1990; Merriam, 2009). Through qualitative research, the researcher locates him or herself into the world of the study subject. An effective qualitative study situates itself in the natural setting to experience the issue or problem under study. The researcher must effectively collect data from a variety of observations, analyses, and interviews. Through a qualitative research method, the research made significant the “characterization of distinctively different ways that people understand various phenomena” (Sherman & Webb, 1995, p. 146) and explored the “broader ‘cultural’ discourses” (Desjarlais, 2011; p. 28) in which underlying meanings existed. Given my objective and desire to better understand the educational culture of PWIs and its impact on intersectional roles of black women, this qualitative research focused on various tools of analysis, offering perspectives situated around the particular context and time of this study.

This qualitative approach was necessary to gain perspective into the varied stories and constructions of subjectivity that occurred for Black women in the context of predominately white institutions. Overall, the interpretive qualitative focus and ethnographic tools of this study sought to do what qualitative research describes as finding the “human society and culture” patterns within a specific group of people (Merriam, 2009). Though “culture” can be defined in various ways, for the purpose of this research, it is referring attitudes, beliefs, and patterns that shape and construct behavior in certain groups. What is the essence of an experience when one is in the middle of it? Through qualitative research, we were able to bring voice to silenced
perspectives and the essence of “whatness”, which is described as the moment of experience by Van Manen (1990). In addition to understanding that essence, utilizing tools of ethnographic inquiry provided a context to interact with individuals with the culture of the environment, which is a major aspect of the research questions. The use of multiple interviews, observation, and analysis by the participants allowed me to understand their experience from various vantage points and to draw details which would support the historicized context of this research project.

Using an ethnographic approach to the data through qualitative inquiry was able to provide what Stake (1995) describes as, “an empathetic understanding for the reader, through description, sometimes thick description, conveying to the reader what the experience itself would convey” (p. 39). This “thick description”, described as the researcher’s effort in interpreting observed interaction, as well as assigning purpose and intentionality to Black women’s interaction, was an effective method to capture the thoughts and feelings of the participants” (Denzin, 1989, Geertz, 1973, Holloway, 1997, Schwandt, 2001). Ultimately, my goal as researcher was to offer a space where I could be “cognitively and emotively [“placed”] within the research context” (Ponterotto, 2006).

In this qualitative research study, I found the concept of feminist ethnography to be an interesting nuance to looking at the data that was collected. In the feminist ethnographic style, the research “provides the kind of account of human social activity out of which cultural patterning can be discerned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 28) and allows for an in-depth study of the research questions being displayed. Henry Wolcott (1999), one of the early proponents of the ethnographic approach, stated that ethnographic methods require three things:

- A detailed description of the culture-sharing group being studied.
- An analysis of this group in terms of perceived themes or perspectives
Some interpretation of the group by the researcher as to meanings and generalization about the social life of human beings, in general.

This use of this critical feminist ethnographic method in collecting the data in this interpretive qualitative study allowed us to utilize gender as a basic organizing principle that was able to tell a story of how the data shapes the conditions of [women’s] lives” (Lather, 1991). Through adding a critical lens, this method sought to “[empower] people by giving them more authority, challenging the status quo, and addressing concerns about power and control” (Creswell, 2007, pg. 70). Reinharz (1992) further supports this method and through that “feminist ethnography had three goals in relation to this particular study:

1. to document the lives and activities of women
2. to understand the experience of women from their own point of view, and
3. to conceptualize women’s behavior as an expression of social contexts” (pg. 51)

The use of qualitative research with ethnographic tools of analysis allowed me to observe the women of this study within their social system and to also understand their lives from an individual perspective through interviewing, but to also draw conclusions about an institutional perspective. Because the women in this study existed within a particular context at the PWI, then it was vitally important to not ignore the impact that context had on interpretation. In order to effectively engage in this research type, as researcher, I committed to exploring the complexity of the culture that made up these women’s experiences. The feminist approach to this method highlighted that researchers have an important responsibility to “understanding the social realities of women as actors who previous sociological research has rendered invisible” (Reinharz, 1992, pg.46). Participating in the social society of women brought about an opportunity to understand their perspectives more clearly.
Site Selection and Rationale

One predominately white institution was selected as the primary site of interaction with the young women, which I referred to utilizing the pseudonym South University. South University, like many Southern universities, has a horrendous history of excluding black students not only from enrolling into the university but also in systematically excluding them once forced to admit them. Focusing on a singular site provided for a more comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon of the experience of forming subjectivities at a PWI. Most importantly, this particular site was selected because of the little “d” discourses that were already historically and currently known to impact black women’s academic environments. South University, as a large, coeducational public university in the Southeastern United States, had a historic and geographic context that was a great backdrop for understanding the intent and purpose of this study. South University, with its student population of a little over 37,000 undergraduate students, and about 4500 graduate students, is considered in the range of large public institutions. At the time of the study, women made up ten percent more of the student body than men and twelve percent of the undergraduate population identified as Black or African American as compared to 81 percent who identified as White, non-Hispanic. 51 percent of the student body was from out-of-state, compared to 49 percent that were native residents of the state. In addition, more than 53 percent of the incoming freshman class reports a standardized ACT test average of 30 or higher placing them in the top five percent of ACT test takers. It currently ranks in the top 50 public institutions by *U.S. News and World Report* for more than a decade. In addition, there has been a consistent 5 to 6 percent gap in retention rate across both first and second year students when comparing White, non-Hispanic students, and Black students.
Due to the emphasis on history and women’s experiences, the context of the site was very important in setting a basis for the study, but also in situating some of the context found in the data. South University admitted its first women students in 1893. This was made possible by advocacy and support from those who were interested in women becoming self-sustaining members of society at the time. However, the institution would not see the entry of Black students for roughly another 60 years. By the mid 1950’s, the first African-American student was admitted to South University. She would be expelled three days later because of fear for her safety and did not return to the institution for her undergraduate work. She did, however, return and graduate with her Master’s degree in the 90’s. The first official long-term enrollment of African-American students came in the early 1960’s, with 2 students, with the first of those students graduating several years later. This enrollment came 9 years after the Brown v. Board of Education decision passed down by the U.S. Supreme Court, which ordered the integration of all public education sites. South University is known for a variety of landmark historical moments related to race, equity, and inclusion of minors and women throughout its 125 plus year history.

In recent years, incidents of racism within organizations, between students, and anonymous racially incensed incidents have been addressed by the administration, as well as analyzed and discussed by student, local, and national media outlets. The university appointed its first female president and continued to garner media attention regarding integration as recent as 2013. In the same year that South University was poised to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its integration, it was rocked with controversy surrounding the segregated structure of the elite Sorority system during formal recruitment for that year. Student members had come forward to reveal experiences of coercion from alumni members to reject African-American women
candidates for membership. Finally, the system that had been traditional White, non-minority students, accepted its first African-American members through an open bidding process. South University continues to grapple with its history, the evolving structure of the institution, and world as it relates to dealing with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Its historical past, its location in the southern region of the country, and its importance in the larger battle for civil rights offer a compelling backdrop for examining the role of history and the construction of gendered and raced identities.

The exterior look and feel of the University hearkened back to the southern antebellum style and its history was steeped in southern folklore, as well as an apparent physical identity marked by buildings named after white males who owned slaves, restored slave quarters existing just directly behind the University President’s mansion, and remnants of barely marked slave graves existing right in the walking path of academic buildings frequented by students on a daily basis. In recent months around the time of the study, South University had embarked on a major analysis of their current support and services for minority students. Just in the recent semester when the study was concluded, South University opened a student-run diversity center to act as a safe space and resource for increasing inclusion and collaboration on the campus, which came after a group of students with faculty support submitted a list of institutional demands to the campus administration.

**Participant Selection**

To examine the subjectivities of successful Black women attending one PWI in the southeastern United States, a sample of 8 Black women, who were enrolled as full-time undergraduate students in a degree-seeking program were selected. “Successful”, for the purpose of this study, was defined as women who were making acceptable progress towards their
degree, had average or better grade point averages, and were engaged in one or more co-curricular activities or extracurricular experiences. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 22 and were purposefully selected through criterion sampling. Criterion sampling was utilized to select students who would best support the purpose of the research and the proposed questions. For this reason, as a part of the criterion, I sought minority students who exhibited behaviors of successful persistence as delineated in the literature. The specific criteria used included the following: women who identify as African American; female undergraduates who have participated in traditional leadership networks of campus; African American women who were making successful progress towards a degree, and whose current GPA was at a 3.0 or above. “Traditional networks” for the purpose of this study were defined as leadership roles which held prominence on the campus that were competitive or that were known because most students, regardless of background were aware of them and/or sought to participate in them. According to Hammersley and Atkinson’s research (1995), this form of sampling can be a useful tool in allowing the researcher to be familiarized with the social life of the particular group, as well as to “understand the contexts that might lead to different forms of behavior” (pg. 129) which was a major component of the research questions. This method was useful in providing more depth to understanding the participants, which was going to be an important aspect of the overall research project due to its historical and personal implications to the research project results.

The 8 women ranged in age from 19 to 23 and varied in terms of their academic majors as illustrated in the following chart:
Table 3.1. *South University, Student Participant Profiles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Major/GPA</th>
<th>Interesting Fact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aliyah</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Telecommunications &amp; Film/ 3.3 GPA</td>
<td>Military Dependent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Human Performance Exercise/ 3.0 GPA</td>
<td>First Generation College Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Biology &amp; Pre-Med/ 3.8 GPA</td>
<td>Military Dependent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Religious Studies &amp; African-American Studies/ 4.0 GPA</td>
<td>Honors Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mo</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Exercise Sports Science/ 3.0 GPA</td>
<td>Turned down HBCU offer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Athletic Training/ 3.0 GPA</td>
<td>Transfer Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauryn Hill</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Secondary Education/Math/ &amp; Theater/ 3.49 GPA</td>
<td>In-State Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandy</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Nursing/ 3.1 GPA</td>
<td>Out of State Student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seven of the students (referred to in the study as “participants”) began their college academic careers at South University. One student transferred from another institution, but was included in the study because she was in her third year of enrollment at South University and had a strong context for the South University experience. The participants were asked to identify a pseudonym which would be used to refer to their stories and perspectives throughout the
dissertation. I also took steps to conceal the proper names of schools, cities, individuals, or other potentially personally identifiable markers of the participants as a means of further safeguarding the identities of those selected for the sample.

Participants were recruited through a series of targeted outreach efforts. A list of student organization advisors and leadership opportunities were compiled by the researcher. From there, each advisor was emailed and asked to allow the researcher to engage with the project in one of three ways: (1) the researcher requested permission to email each organization/leadership team list with details about the study, (2) advisors were asked to share a template research recruitment email and flyer with their membership, and (3) advisors were asked to speak or present the study information at a meeting or event. From the methods utilized, a number of organizations provided contact emails of their membership and others shared the information at business and chapter meetings. Of that sample of students, potential participants were then contacted via email with details about the research project. I asked that each participant confirm interest and participation by email and then I was able confirmed their participation fully through a follow-up phone or in-person conversation. All written requests for student participation were reviewed and approved by IRB. During the phone or in-person conversation, I confirmed relevant personal information (i.e. academic major, academic status, age, class standing, GPA, etc.) As a result of those conversations, two of the interested participants were not eligible and did not continue with the study due to class standing and one due to their GPA being too low for inclusion. In conversations, I answered questions about timeline for interviews, location of interviews, and the stipulations of the photo analysis and observation process. I also introduced the informed consent to each participant and made sure that each participant had a chance to review and sign the consent. Each participant was asked their availability for interviews and I
inquired about specific locations that would be most comfortable and convenient to each participant to conduct the interviews. The times of each interview varied but were situated most frequently during the afternoon to late evening hours, as that seemed to be the most convenient time for most participants. Most interviews were conducted in a private meeting space on campus at South University. Each student was interviewed a total of three times with one interview including a photo analysis discussion, and also observed once in an activity of their choosing. After formal interviews were concluded, I conducted follow-up conversations with participants to confirm the consistency and contextual formation of the narratives constructed for the dissertation.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was ethnographic interviews and observations. In addition, historical context and data about the institution’s past and current make-up was used to provide institutional and situational context that was important to the determined purpose of the study and research questions. The data was collected through the institution’s website, as well as past articles, internal newsletters, and newspaper articles about incidents of historical significance as outlined on their institution timeline. This additional context provided a more in-depth basis from which to draw analysis related to the historical context of the institution in relation to our students.

Interviews. The interviews were semi-structured in that they followed a protocol for each of the interviews in the series. The first interview aimed to provide me with information about the student and their current campus networks that they participated and connected with. The questions were structured and asked for each participant to share basic knowledge about the specific leadership networks they belonged, what those mean to their daily experience with the
campus, and how those roles had impacted their engagement with the university environment. The second interview focused on going into detail regarding observed experiences and sharing plans regarding their photo analysis discussion. The photo analysis tool was used to add deeper context of the institution’s physical connection with the student during the interviews. Due to the institution’s physical history, this was an important aspect in providing a more layered and nuanced understanding of their experience in relation to the location. The use of photo analysis provided a view into the student’s perspective of their experiences at the PWI in relation to symbolic familiar or comfortable places. They were instructed to provide a photo or photos of an area or areas that were welcoming and important to their experiences. This exercise was facilitated by allowing the student to take photos on their smart phones over a week’s timeframe and were dictated by their own method of choosing. Through their discussion-based interpretation of photos in a subsequent interview, they provided additional data for coding and theme analysis related to the photo. The semi-structured interview protocol continued to focus on additional data gathering about student experiences. While it was not specific and varied on the availability of the participant, most of the second interviews occurred after at least one observation and allowed me a chance to discuss and follow-up on anything that was noted during observation. This second interview was also used as an attempt to draw on any themes or ideas that had come forward from the previous interview data.

A third interview allowed me to discuss evidence of information pulled from the photo analysis activity and provided follow-up and in-depth discussion of themes or revelations or experiences of the participant. During this interview, the questioning remained semi-structured and allowed an opportunity to discuss questions they might have had, but to also draw on any themes between interview participants that might be revealed by comparing the content of the
interviews and observations. The final interview also served as an opportunity to wrap-up details of the research process. This interview sought to allow the subject to correct any inconsistencies and clarify the interpretation of any themes/data presented. For some participants, additional follow-up was needed after reviewing the third interview data, but it was not necessary to meet in a formalized interview structure.

Each participant was given an “Informed Consent form” to review and sign prior to the initial interview. The informed consent document provided each participant with an outline of their rights and responsibilities, their projected time commitment, and any measures that were being taken to protect the content of each interview, and the steps required by IRB to secure the data. All of the participants agreed to have their interview recorded via a digital recorder to capture the conversation between the participant and myself as the primary researcher. Each audio recording was then transcribed into text. The recordings were stored in accordance with approved guidelines from IRB. During each interview I also made notes and recorded jottings throughout the conversation as a way to maintain focus during the interview process and to draw on important data. Though interview were semi-structured, probing and clarification techniques were used as prompts to gather deeper content and reflection from participants as they worked through the questions and situations (Merriam, 2009). This technique assisted me in providing descriptive themes and content during the analysis portion of the research process.

**Participant Observations.** The study employed the use of 1 observation with each participant as an additional data collection method. During the individual observation of each participant, I took field notes and collected information from direct observation of the participants in environments that selected based on their choosing. The participant determined the date and time of each visit. On each visit, I spent time through the beginning and conclusion
of the activity and documented all discussions and observations of the numerous interactions of the participants. Since the purpose of the research heavily focused on sharing the variance in experiences, the interviews, locations, and observations gave three unique vantage points from which to understand their experiences in relation to the PWI environment. Ethnographic methods are useful in traditional qualitative research in its intentionality in emphasizing the consciousness of an individual as their lived reality and it allowed me as the researcher to dig deep into what some regard as the “micro and macro systems” of gender, race, and other intersectional frames faced by our participants (Reinharz, 1992). Field notes were produced and utilized to draw additional information from the observation process for each participant.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research requires the researcher to engage in immediate and on-going data analysis. I transcribed each interview verbatim before reading the transcript to try and identify codes. The coding analysis then coincided with the re-reading of each of the transcribed interviews in the study. The data analysis for this study focused on exploring the themes of accessing opportunities for leadership, navigating stereotype assumptions from the institution and peers, cultivating cultural capital, and exploring constructions of themselves in the context of South University in relation to the theoretical framework and literature. The use of coding, for the purpose of this study was what is described as utilizing “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2008, p.3). This provided a way to glean information from the interviews, journaling, and observations that took place. Because there were multiple interviews, the coding process occurred across each interview session for all 8 women. The initial codes were developed based on keywords within the research questions,
concepts from Critical Race Feminism, and research literature about black women in college. The following initial codes were: “success”, “social experiences”, “motivation”, “intersectionality”, “sense of belonging”, and “leadership experiences”. Those keywords were entered onto a Microsoft Excel sheet along with descriptive information about the meaning of each code. Those designations were then color coded and utilized on the interview transcripts to identify sections of the correspondence that related to those specific themes. A tab was created for each of the three interviews and additional secondary codes were then produced from the themes by using brainstorming to further identify more specificity within the larger predetermined themes.

In a final procedure, I employed a strategy of bubble mapping as a type of brainstorming to connect the larger topical areas that emerged when looking at the three interviews and observations in totality. Through bubble mapping, each major area was outlined in a large bubble and then through searching each of the color-coded interviews and excel list of coding words, those words were grouped together with the larger bubble. Those were synthesized into overarching themes. This method is referred to by Creswell (2007) as axial coding, which is a tool for developing descriptive codes to develop larger themes. My use of bubble mapping as a visual vehicle for the axial coding method allowed me to draw connections between my participant data, research questions, and theoretical framework. Through those broad topical areas, I was able to draw inferences regarding the experiences of African American women at PWIs and paint a picture of their experience and understanding of their world in that context into more specific themes. The specificity and emphasis with which the women spoke about those particular areas were ultimately the aspects that created the overarching themes discussed during Chapter 4. I utilized those coded details to structure the content and information from each of
the interviews into thematic sections. Creating patterns in the data allowed me to organize the content of the various experiences into units of exploration. Richards and Morse (2007) in their past research have argued that coding is not just an arbitrary labeling process because “it leads you from the data to the idea, and from the idea to all of the data pertaining to the idea” (p. 137). As such, this was the journey that was completed through the analysis of the black women participants of South University.

**Trustworthiness & Ethical Concerns**

As the researcher, it was important to be aware of the power that exists in regards to my relationship with the participants and in how I interpret their voices. My ability to recognize positionality was important and necessary to properly chronicle the experience of those that I was researching. I was open about my intentions and sure to emphasize that I was conducting research to point fingers. I simply wanted to tell a story of their experience and draw on those experiences to provide space for future implications. I made it a point to use an appropriate level of disclosure in my dealings with participants. I defined this “level” as properly describing to participants the use of this research, its implications for further research, and how their contribution would aid in the research process. Lather quotes Deborah Britzman (2000) as stating, “learning to live with ghosts mean learning to understand what has been lost in self and what has been lost in the social” (p. 59). In disclosing the meaning of the research, one can move forward in allowing the participant to disclose the meaning of their experiences.

My position as a black female allowed me to open doors develop strong participant relationships quickly in my research study. However, there was a danger in participants assuming that I “knew” their experiences and a fear that it might lead to over-generalizing their situations and experiences. I carefully outlined questions and partnered one form of
methodology with another to offer space for validity and reliability. I used observation in my study along with interviews to make sure that when I begin to review data, I was able to see patterns in ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. Multiple ways of collecting data was one possible way to allow participants space to tell their story in their way.

Pink (2009) quotes Amanda Coffey as saying that “our bodies and the bodies of others are central to the practical accomplishment of fieldwork” (p. 25). I also took into consideration how embodied traits such as age, appearance, body language, and perception factored into my experiences with the women being researched. In working with women from my own racial group, some participants felt comfortable with sharing their story, while others saw their words as an opportunity to enlighten others or provide advice about what should be done differently. Through my fieldwork, I focused on the nuances in the collection of data. While having a connection with the participants was certainly helpful, as a researcher in the field, I remained diligent in my verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as in identifying factors that would thwart preconceived assumptions.

**Challenges and Limitations of the Research**

Marshall and Rossman (2011) agree that it is sometimes helpful to create a neutral space in which to conduct research and speak with participants of the study. As students at South University, their location in the hierarchy and the culture of the environment had the potential to have a profound effect on my research sample size and level of access within the organizations. In my preparation, it was important to have a working knowledge of the institutional structures in the context of my research. I considered how black female students might be placed within the particular structure and time space. This also provided a basis for understanding the culture and its impact on the experiences of black women at PWIs. However, I was careful to allow each
participant to spend considerable time in the interview establishing a historical framework for how they identified challenges within the environment, but also how they defined their interactions. Triangulation, meaning comparison between multiple data sources, was used to validate the understanding of the political boundaries of the organization offered by the participants, while also allowing consideration for my own biases and accounts of experiences in the workplace, as well as offering a voice to those being studied. How they perceive me, interpreted my motivations, and responded to such issues was a key component to my research and one that I did not want to get in the way of their analysis. At the same time, I was upfront concerning the process for the study, which put participants at ease and allowed them flexibility in defining the experience from their own perspectives. This could also be seen as a major limitation of my study. Being a black woman and also a student at South University, might give participants the impression that I had my own opinions about their answers. So, there is the potential that finding that comradery and connection among the participants might have influenced their opinions in some way. At best, I was sure to remain unbiased in my response and was clear to participants that I wanted their own perspectives of their experience and not that of anyone else.

In order to establish rapport with my participants, I acknowledged my own identity as a major reason for my interest in the research topic and made it a point to establish and explore how that identity shaped the research process. As a woman of color who had a great deal of stock in my own experience at a PWI, researching the environment from this framework was important for me. My background offered me some solace, but also a bit of nervousness as well. One of the main challenges that I faced as a researcher in this study was membership in the group being studied. By membership, I was mainly referring to my role as both an African
American and woman. However, I was not able to share complete solidarity with my participants. My age, distance from the undergraduate experience, and matriculation at a very different undergraduate institution provided distance that allowed the participants distance from me as an individual.” Conversely, I believe that my membership as a female and an administrator, provided me with a level of legitimacy and respect from the participants. However, I remained aware that these could also be things that might inhibit what students would disclose during interview sessions.

As researcher, I did not ignore my “insider” role. Instead, I worked to establish rapport with the group through ensuring that my documentation of their story was what they want to depict and by asking them to “personally define” their experience and identification of key aspects of their subject position as related to the study. Another important consideration regarding “membership” was my lack of membership in the undergraduate student category. I was intentional in ensuring that transparency was evident in every process of the research project. As with any study, carefully planning the progression of research is just as important as the method used. My interview protocol consisted of a calculated and graduated process. Casual conversation about the research and my implications for study were utilized in follow-up conversations after data analysis. I was sure not to make assumptions about membership or experiences of the participants. As Patti Lather (2007) stated in her book, Getting Lost, “we grant weight to lived experience and practical consciousness by situating the research and the researched as bearers of knowledge while simultaneously adding to the ‘price’ we pay for speaking out of discourses of truth, rationality, effects of knowledge, and relations of power” (p. 144). As researcher, I could not fully remove my influence. However, the rapport with the participants was important in bringing them along in the journey of truth creation.
Summary

This chapter has discussed the methods that were utilized in collecting and analyzing data. The qualitative methods of data collection and analysis were also discussed to support the method of feminist ethnography as a useful tool for this inquiry in a study of black women at South University. The history, methods of analysis, and limitations of the study have been discussed to provide a strong foundational understanding of the research. Factors that were major components of this research study included the research sample, institutional history/environment, and the interview protocol (Appendix B) and process for data collection.

The research design utilized for this study was chosen because it was best able to answer the overarching research questions. In the next chapter, I formally introduce the research participants and share collective themes, as well as individual narrative explorations. These results reveal the data that was collected, transcribed, and then subsequently themed to provide a rich contextual understanding of the research question posed for this study.
CHAPTER 4

PROFILES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Profiles of Black Women at South University

Vanessa

Aside from money, what drew Vanessa to South University was the beautiful campus. She was hypnotically entranced by its physical beauty and its emphasis on traditional buildings, traditional large grassy quads, and suite style residence hall catered to the new age millennial need for personal space. She couldn’t go wrong in choosing South University. The aesthetically pleasing appearance reminded her of what she felt college should be and should feel like. South University did an amazing job of embodying the collegial spirit and selling that to potential students, including families with bright expectations regarding the future and opportunity. In addition, its reputation for resources, high quality academic programs, prestige, and opportunities drew Vanessa in and checked off all of the proverbial boxes needed to make her parents feel that their investment was worthwhile. “My parents have master degrees and they are both teachers,” Vanessa said as she described her family’s connection to educational importance. Her educational opportunity was an important aspect to them, obviously as a family of educators. Vanessa grew up in the southwest, so her depiction of the “deep south”, as she coined it was somewhat limited. She stated,

Well, all of my perceptions of the south originally came from like tv and movies. And so I thought there was gonna be a whole bunch of cattle boys and stuff. But there’s actually more cattle boys in Arizona…and now here it’s like more preppy, I guess than I
thought it would be. But, I like the south. Southern hospitality is real. So, that was kinda cool to see and then it’s just cool to see the dynamics, I guess, that people of different races have here. It’s almost like stepping into a history book. You hear about the Civil War blah, blah, blah, and that happening. For us it’s just like, ok it’s a picture on Facebook. But here it’s like, ‘Oh, it happened on this campus.

Vanessa was struck by the realness with which her historical understanding of the Southern region and its current reality played together in present day. Being both a part of history and surrounded by history impacted Vanessa’s experience at South University in the interactions with her mostly white male classmates during ROTC, her navigation and understanding of the campus opportunity pipeline, and in her classroom interactions as she navigated competitive coursework and a program that relied on rankings and GPA. It colored the temperature and tone of her story and brought her to a specific understanding about what those experiences meant in the bigger picture. She said, “Even though there’s kind of a division between races, it’s almost like certain ways to get involved…so I guess it’s kind of hard to get involved if you want to get involved outside of just black SU. But I think there’s still a lot of opportunities and especially like now, we are kinda progressing in that area”.

Vanessa’s thoughts lingered concept of “kinda progressing”, because that very year, SU had elected only its second ever black SGA president in school history. To Vanessa this symbolized a slight progression in the right direction. Even still, Vanessa compared her level of opportunity to that of her time at an HBCU and largely, she felt like there were more options, but that they were somewhat limited to organizations that were not “mainstream”. “You know, SU offers a lot of different types of organizations and clubs of people and people can express their individuality. But I feel like because of how people’s relationships are (pause)...I guess social
constructs, people kind of feel limited in what they can be a part of or what is acceptable or viewed by other people as an acceptable thing to be a part of,” Vanessa stated when asked about access to involvement. Though she had heard stories of black students not experiencing the same level of opportunity as majority students, she felt that it was largely due to their own personally imposed limitations. “I mean the first day of school, I was just excited…I was like, ‘Oh my gosh! Everything is so cool and so big and beautiful!’” And when asked about the major challenges she would face, she said,

Probably initially it was just my perceptions of like, what I could and could not do…. like my own limitations, I guess. Because, kind of how I’m saying like now that people can break these barriers, but in my mind…yeah…I was so excited to be here, but I was like, ok. When I first got here it was the big sorority thing about race. So, I tried, like I kind of walked on egg shells in certain environments. And I feel like that was probably a bigger hindrance to me than the institution itself. Just like my…or what I thought was I guess the way things were, you know. If I had just gone out of my comfort zone…

Perception, a theme that will continue to surface among participants, has been an interesting factor in stories of interactions with the campus community. During Vanessa’s first semester at South University, the campus was swirling with controversy surrounding lack of integration in the 112-year-old Panhellenic sorority system, which brought light back to South University’s long standing relationship and history with racial controversy, including the infamous “Stand in the Schoolhouse Door” by the governor of the state in 1963, blocking the entrance of African-American students to the University. Vanessa’s most memorable experiences, however, have been getting involved in South’s environment through academics like ROTC and “Black South University” a subset University culture and experience many women in the study discussed. The
contrast of Vanessa’s experience in ROTC and her time in Black SU was stark and eye opening. She stated,

Well, coming here, my first experience here obviously was ROTC. I transferred so it was like culture shock for me. I was one of the few African-American girls in there. So everything was, when they would ask me questions, they would ask me from the standpoint that I had the voice of all black girls. That’s why I always tried to…It was almost like separating myself. But then I realized, ‘Why am I separating from things that I do believe?’ We talked about President Obama. And most people in there didn’t like him. They were conservative republicans. So they were like, ‘Who did you vote for?’ And I was like, ‘Oh you know…I voted for Obama.’ But why did I have to hold back? Why was I shy about that? Why didn’t I just say, ‘I voted for President Barack Hussein Obama and he won.’

After recounting that story, Vanessa laughed. She laughed from deep within her soul, like she was relieving some sort of latent stress still lingering from the day she had “the conversation about Obama” with her ROTC mostly white and male classmates. She said, “I feel like towards the end of ROTC, I was more just coming into owning who I was”. One thing she attributed to that was discovering what she described as “Black South University” and joining “The Afros”, also SU’s only African-American gospel choir.

“Honestly, I found out about Black SU at Onyx,” Vanessa said. Onyx is an annual welcome event hosted by the National Pan-Hellenic Council and the Black Student Union that represented all things black and multicultural at South U. According to Vanessa and other participants in the study, “Onyx” would bring out black students you would not ordinarily see in
class and was a display of music, organizations, and artistic talent from multicultural groups.

Vanessa said,

I was like, ‘Where did all these people come from?!’ You know, especially my first year, I was so ROTC focused. That was all I saw was them and the people that I saw on the quad and that was it. I went to Onyx and I was like wow, this is really something. And you know, coming from an HBCU, I was look for black people. So, I was kinda into that. But, it’s almost like a community within its own. The interesting thing is there are a lot of people that are like, ‘Ok we need to stick together to be successful in this place,’ and there’s also people that are like, ‘Don’t’.

Though Vanessa found comradery in the black community, it was also very complex and Vanessa felt as if she existed in a hierarchy that was within a hierarchy. “I don’t wanna speak for anybody, but in my opinion, they don’t necessarily realize…ok….an example… anytime I see a black person on campus, I just say hi. Or I go here and there and some people will look at me like, ‘Why are you speaking?’ And so there’s like I guess, some of Black SU that is like it’s almost like a competition. So instead of being like, let’s rise up together, it’s like well I’m gonna rise up and you can be under me.” Despite her critique of the black community at SU, Vanessa found commonalities and community among other black students in the gospel choir, black women’s’ organizations like the National Council of Negro Women, and more. Still the wishy washy way in which the community would embrace its members and still alienate it in class and social settings was something Vanessa does not recall being so contentious about the community during her time at an HBCU. The recent media attention on U.S. race relations have been the cause of what she says was “resistance” during her time at SU, that just might have not been felt in the more homogenous environment of her previous HBCU:
Probably I guess when we did the little Ferguson protest,” said Vanessa, “I was part of that and it was like, it was actually physical resistance (*pause*) not like “physical, but like I was trying to get around this guy and he just wouldn’t move and we were like…he said something so insulting. He was like, ‘I don’t know why I’m moving out of the way for you monkeys anyway,’ and he like physically wouldn’t move. And I feel like that to me was one of the most disheartening moments I have had here. Because I was like that actually…that exists.

All in all, support from the community has been a defining theme and Vanessa felt that of some importance were the relationships she built among other black women. “So a lot of people “Just kind of like in everyday conversation, we’ve talked about like how we should kind of support each other more”, Vanessa said about SU black women. In another discussion, she stated:

    Coming from Arizona where it’s more diverse, and then going to an HBCU, you know now I’m in that environment. And now coming here, it’s like diverse, but it’s like half and half. That you know…it kind of shaped me because I think when you or at least for myself, when I went to a Historically Black College, I was educated in a way that I wasn’t before. But it’s almost like an overwhelming environment to where you like, um wear a natural all day, you know like fighting the power and that’s what my mindset was when I came here. But then, now I have to see things from everybody’s scope and not everybody has the same experience that I’ve had and you know, I know different people come from different places. So I can not necessarily…. I’ve learned to not necessarily have to agree with everybody’s opinion, but to understand where its coming from.

Vanessa’s experience highlights the very turmoil that exists within the stories of women attending PWIs. They are often grappling with being in women’s spaces, but also being black
and a woman in an environment where sometimes very specific and prescribed images exist. Vanessa’s story exists as an example and an opening analysis of the discussion that the following pages will highlight. We will hear of women exploring their environment and we will share their triumphs, as well as their insecurities and failures as it relates to that said environment.

To assist in situating the unique experience and context of each woman’s time at South University, in the next pages I will share profiles of each participant in the study. These profiles will shed light on the various locations from which each began her journey through the halls and corridors of South University, as well as provide a snapshot on their background, family, early education, and journey to South University.

**Brandy**

“Like I had friends that were white and black and it had never been an issue. But I thought it would still be the same way when I got to college. But when I got to college there’s kind of like a greater divide…”

Brandy, a senior and Nursing major from Alabama was going into her final year, though she had hoped she would be graduating sooner from South University. Unfortunate academic setbacks, which she fully attributes to her own doing, would delay her for 2 additional semesters. She grew up an army brat around an ethnically and socially diverse environment, and the decision of her family to move from Birmingham when she was in middle school, emphasized to her that education was important. She states, “So like from a very young age, I viewed college and I knew I was gonna go to college because it was expected of me and …cause I figured out I wanted to be a nurse…like…maybe…when I finally decided to be a nurse, I was probably a freshman in HS”. Brandy one of many African American women who have felt a calling towards helping professions, embarked on South University with a broad perspective of the
world and conceded to attending SU because it had all the bells and whistles that she and her
family thought were important. “I think this environment does help me be more prepared
because I didn’t choose to go to an HBCU because I felt like this is the school I wanted to be at
and when I go out into the word everybody’s not gonna look like me”, said Brandy. Brandy’s
parents, who raised her up in a diverse military environment, echoed this sentiment in supporting
the prestige of South University, its reputation as a flagship, and it immense amenities as things
an HBCU experience could not offer their daughter. For Brandy’s parents, their investment in
this top notch education would translate more readily into tangible dollars at the time of
graduation. Brandy spoke of tapping into the network and about being more prepared to deal
with the diverse job market.

Because Brandy spent time in various parts of the U.S., like Texas, Georgia, and Arizona
before settling into life in Alabama, she had a broader perspective than most about the
opportunities afforded to her from being more comfortable around individuals of different racial
and ethnic background. She stated, “I know eventually I want to move out of Alabama, cause it I
mean, it was nice being here for the time being…. Basically what it is…I guess to sum up the
whole reason…. I don’t wanna get stuck here with that ‘stuck mentality’”. With Alabama being
the longest place that Brandy and her siblings stayed while growing up, being “stuck” was
something that lingered for Brandy. “I guess to sum up the whole reason is because a lot of
people in Alabama are kind of…(pause)…now it’s progressing, but then at the same time people
are stuck. And I don’t wanna get stuck here with that stuck mentality. And because I’ve also
lived in other places, I’m familiar with how awesome living outside of Alabama is”. For
Brandy, being “stuck” represented everything that she felt was wrong with the south. In
addition, despite growing up in an environment where diversity was emphasized and
understanding how to navigate diverse arenas, South University didn’t always allow her to do that in her own skin. Despite progressive access to opportunities, Brandy felt that stereotypes often made it difficult for students to interact across color lines.

“I forgot to mention in the last question about seeing the stereotypes here and stuff like that. Everything there I a woman and she is walking and we get an email from campus police that it is a black male 5’9 to 6’0 foot in dark clothes…I’m like that’s half…that’s a description of half of the back people here. And then you’ll get another email saying that the person came forth and said that it didn’t happen and I was like, ‘Well how many times is that going to happen?’” Brandy found that her experiences, personal aspirations for herself, and the college experience was not quite what she thought it would be and that she had a lot to learn about dealing with people and different stages of personal enlightenment.

Aliyah

“I went to a kind of predominately white high school and so even then though it was like fun…it was no type of tension, animosity, or with people. But I guess when I came to South University, it was like a whole step back in time.”

Aliyah is a junior majoring in Telecommunications and Film with a concentration in Media Production who aspires to produce and direct in front of the camera one day. Her journey to South University was not straightforward and she was emphatic that “it was not [her] first choice”. Like many African Americans who aspire to pursue higher education, Aliyah found herself grappling between going to a traditional Historically Black College or University (HBCU) or in following the crowd of her friends that were attending South University, a PWI, with its nice respectable reputation and immense resources. It was ultimately the amenities (clean bathrooms and new facilities) and hopeful friendships that led Aliyah to sign on the dotted
line at SU. Growing up in the easy and simple pace of the Alabama foothills, with its pronounced southern values, Aliyah came to SU with the blessing of her mother and father who said, “Hey, this is the type of education we have, you know”. Comparing it to that of HBCUs, Aliyah’s father did not feel that the HBCU standard could live up to South University, as he said that he just “didn’t feel like [Aliyah] would get a good education”. Having signed up for orientation in the last session, Aliyah initially came to SU with an abundance of confidence in her ability to navigate the college experience. Her parents had done it and set a great example. Aliyah soon questioned her bold declaration of security and spent the remainder of her first weeks feeling behind and worried that there was some type of secret initiation or process that she did not get to take part in. “I think I registered so late…because when classes actually started, everyone basically already had their friends. I was like, ‘Did I miss something?’ And everyone was like, ‘Oh, we met at orientation.’ I was just like, oh I didn’t go,” Aliyah explained. Her experience chronicles the tale of challenges with managing expectations and the realities of college life. She found that in her own process of understanding others, she would begin to understand herself.

Aliyah found involvement through one of her roommates. “My roommate…she’s a year older. She was already in stuff. So, I’m like ok I have a roommate that’s already in stuff and she knows people. And so she was in Collegiate 100 Black Women and she would go to all of the meetings and she was like, ‘Umm, why don’t you come to a meeting?’ And I was like, ok I’ll come to one of them just to see how it is.” Though that single outreach from her friend and roommate, Aliyah slowly began to pick up pace. The challenge for Aliyah was navigating her internal feelings of inadequacy and feeling like there were rules to the game she didn’t understand.
“But my perspective [about South University] at first…it was football. And then when I got here, it was not what I was looking for, but I decided to come here anyway and it was exactly what I thought it would be”. Aliyah underestimated the relational aspect of college and perhaps focused more heavily on the aesthetic beauty, which quickly faded away. After the new wore off of her shiny, suite style bathroom, she was left with the harsh reality of roommate disputes, discrimination, and micro aggressions. “I knew it would be different, but I didn’t think it would be THAT different,” she shared when discussing her first semesters at South University. For Aliyah the difference was so glaring that it almost derailed her entire experience. Ultimately her experience began to allow her to adapt in new and different ways. She stated, “Umm…I wanna say it’s hard. I definitely would say that even after that tidbit that semester, still that experience only involved one person…maybe two. Besides those two people, it’s really not hard…I decided to stay”. Consciously tackling uncomfortable situations and new realities is the center of Aliyah’s experience at South University.

Lauryn

“I would describe SU as like literally the capstone of learning…SU offers so many different resources and so many different majors and degree you could possibly obtain from going here, that it really just is no limit to what all you can reach here”.

Lauryn has one of the most detailed and mapped out plans for success of any of the women in the study. She began her journey at South University with optimism and a solid outlook on opportunity. A junior at South University, she strutted into her interview touting a major in Secondary Education, Mathematics, and a minor in Theater, along with a detailed plan of her first 5 years as a working professional. Her trajectory towards her future career was mapped down to her plans after graduate school and chosen duties at the high school of her first
teaching assignment. Lauryn came to South University by way of Birmingham, AL with aspirations to make the most of her experience. However, she also came to SU on the heels of her family’s legacy. Both of Lauryn’s parents attended SU in the 80’s. “So all my life, I was raised up the same way and my parents always gave me the opportunity to go anywhere I wanted to go…but my parents made me know…like their money was coming to either South University or half off tuition at Little Brother University”. For Lauryn, she felt in charge of her destiny at South University and chose a major with few women, as well as minorities. Navigating the stereotypes about black women, math, and education, was something that Lauryn encountered. Lauryn said:

With me and my major…being umm a math major, I see it a lot because they look at me like when I’m say I’m not engineering, but I’m just math. ‘Oh really…you’re just a math major?’ And then I’m like, yeah so what’s so different about it. And so it’s kind of like, I just wouldn’t expect “you” to be a math major. And me? What is me? You don’t know anything about me. You just don’t expect the outer of me to be a math major. And so like I have noticed that and definitely with classmates. I haven’t had one professor to like knock my dreams or to just kinda say rude things. But I know friends who’ve had it. Just like many students, Lauryn had a challenging freshman year. In particular, some of her challenges seemed uniquely situated around experiences in the classroom and attempting to navigate the diverse terrain of campus culture. One of Lauryn’s challenges she expressed was when she “look[s] around the classroom and [she] doesn’t see anyone else that looks like [her]”. Those realities chipped away at Lauryn’s initial cheerful analysis of campus access. Many of her insecurities could just be reduced to first time freshman jitters, but much of what she discussed was wrapped up in the environment of South University that she has learned to navigate in her
body, being both black and a woman. “It’s like we don’t reach out to the different types of organizations. Like for the fact that, here on campus, I’m black, I’m part of black SU and that’s it. I can’t go to the sorority houses like other people can. I can’t go to a frat house and not get stopped...because I need a wristband, or because I’m not a regular little sorority girl walking through with some shorts”. Lauryn’s perspective of limited crossover among groups, played out into perceptions of her performance in the classroom.

In the classroom, especially being a math major, Lauryn sometimes felt that her presence was seen as a walking stereotype:

Like I can definitely tell in Cal 3, our last test…test four… twenty-one people made an F or below. Like so when I got in the class, I got in the class maybe like, it starts at 1pm and I probably got there at 1:07pm. You know like literally a few minutes late, so he had already put up the percentages of who made what and was passing out the tests. So as I sit down, there’s a white boy on the left, a white girl on the right and I was just like, “Do y’all see this?!” They were like yeah…it was the worse. Only 5 people made A’s. 10 people made B’s and like 16 people made C’s and over 20 people made F’s. And so I was like where is my name gonna fall into this? Like, I just automatically know like this is dead. So I’m just talking to them like, ‘Oh my God! What are we gonna do?!’ So then the girl gets her paper first and she was like.... I didn’t even ask her what she made, but it was evident like that it was a low number. And so the guy next to me he didn’t get his paper until after me. So when I got mine and it said I made umm a 64 out of 75, I calculated it up and it was an 84. I was like yes! I mean, I’m loud, like excited and so he kinda gave me this side eye and I looked at him and I was like, ‘Yeah you gonna be happy for me!’ So he was like, oh yeah good job. So I’m like, I can tell right
then and there you’re looking at me cause I’m thinking I’m gonna be in the 20% that made F’s and then I actually make a B on the test… and you’re looking like “How did “YOU” make a B?”

By the final interview with Lauryn, though she had been so confident and so calculated in our initial conversation, she had decided to change her major. “When we first talked, I thought that I was gonna be a high school math teacher. Now sitting here, I know that I don’t wanna be a high school math teacher, so I don’t want that to be my profession. But if that was it, then most teachers are female… so being a teacher, I fit the mold of what society molds as a teacher,” Lauryn explained. Ultimately Lauryn explained her decision to leave education as a result of poor program management and lack of flexibility within the program, and not in as a failure of the math program. When asked about whether she felt differently about opportunities available to her, Lauryn said, “Really, the biggest thing is, now that I’m in the College of Communications, it’s a lot more diverse. It’s like 10 times more diverse. I don’t get looked at for a second for being in the classroom. It’s just like, “Oh, that’s another student.” In some ways Lauryn just wanted to be another student, while in other ways she wanted to leave a legacy and make a difference.

**Nikki**

“So, I don’t know…I think my obligations to like Honors College and other kinds of fellows really kept me grounded and kept me focused as to what I was doing on campus. If I didn’t have anything going on at the University, like if I had no obligations and just had class, I probably would have transferred.”

Attending a formal international baccalaureate program for secondary education provided Nikki with just what she needed to be prepared for university life. Nikki grew up in the state of
Texas where the spirit of “everything is bigger” drew her to pursue ambitious goals and dreams at an early age. Upon researching colleges and universities, she found South University to be the unique combination of the intensive, rigorous liberal arts education she wanted, but with the dollar signs to match. “So I visited South University umm…and the University is really great at selling itself. And I went to Honors College…and they too a personal interest in me and that really, you know, that was something that impacted me”, Nikki commented. In addition to the personal connection with faculty in the Honors College, Nikki was provided a full ride in tuition. In her first year, she dove into research projects and was struck by the vast differences in access that she noticed around campus. Even with the connections made around campus, after about a month at South, Nikki was ready to leave. She had heard about campus tensions and compared to the African American population at PWIs, Nikki and her parents felt like South University had good numbers, in comparison to similarly situated schools. Just prior to Nikki attending, SU had faced challenges of discrimination related to the lack of access for black women in traditional sororities. In addition, Nikki had already heard about campus politics described as a powerful and secret voting block which controlled campus politics.

Nikki herself had been victim to racial slurs and became very aware of an internal sense that she did not belong at South University. “I didn’t really tell anyone official about it,” she said about being called a racial slur while walking on campus. “I didn’t know who to go to or what the case would be to even do that or what the procedure was”. Though Nikki had this prior knowledge, she could not have anticipated the impact of the environment on her daily experience. When discussing how the environment impacted her own navigation both academic and social space, she stated, “But, I just don’t think that I had or could even conceptualize what that looked like and what that meant for the rest of the campus culture…I think it [a PWI] has
awakened me to...I don’t know. I saw this all the time, but UA is really like a small microcosm of what American is like. Um and the politics and the bureaucracy of it”. Nikki’s journeys at South University would unfold and reveal a lot to her about herself and her community.

Mo

“I live in a predominately white neighborhood, and one of my neighbors was just like, ‘YOU are going?’ and he put so much emphasis on “you”, and my dad was standing right next to me and he [my dad] was like, ‘Yeah, she’s going’.”

Mo is senior from Missouri, but spent majority of her youth in Georgia. She has one older sibling and prides herself on being a former athlete. For that reason, it is no surprise that she has chosen to major in Exercise and Sports Science, with a concentration in Health Promotion, Fitness, and Nutrition. Self-described as a precocious youth, turned tomboy in her teen years, Mo grew up going to predominately white secondary schools, so at the first chance to apply for college, she applied and was accepted to the prestigious HBCU, Howard University. “I applied to Howard and got in and I was like I’m going. There’s nothing you can tell me.’ And she’s [my mom] like, ‘No, you don’t wanna go there.’ We weren’t allowed to be a plane ride away. You can only be up to four hours,” Mo explained. College choice was a major decision within the family, but also among the community where Mo grew up. “Like in high school, everyone’s like, ‘Oh my god, the SAT.’ And I’m just like, ‘Oh, I’ll take it whenever.’ I was never pressed for anything. I just did stuff whenever, at last minute and I got it done. I was really nonchalant. Like if it happens, it happens. And so I didn’t really go on any tours. I toured maybe like five schools”. Mo was never concerned about going off to college.

However, perceptions of fit and place seemed to creep into stories from many of the women in the study about that decision. College, seen as an upwardly mobile power play, was
important in the community, but the college you chose seemed to also communicate specific messages within the community. Mo recounted, ‘‘They say Alabama is a red state’, one of my neighbors said…like back to politics, kind of. I’m just kind of like that has nothing to do with me and my choice of school. And then he was just like, ‘I didn’t think you would wanna go there’. As Mo discussed, the school’s reputation, both good and bad, she stated “I love saying that I go where put it on resumes, blaze blah, but yeah the reputation that this school hold, whether it’s negative or positive…the reputation’s really a big deal”. She did grapple with the option of attending a PWI, because social media and her other friends had given her such a glamorous idea of what Howard University would be like. Howard, symbolizing the elite mecca of black education, comes with it an equally impressive resume and one tailored to the African American sentiment. So for Mo, her decision to attend South University was not necessarily the first or her most popular option and it was wrapped in the expectations of her family’s 4-hour drive requirement, her desire to be immersed into black culture, and her expectations of being a part of a top tier nursing program. However, upon entering South University, Mo struggled to find her niche and relied heavily on her friendship with her best friend who attended South with her. After her best friend left, she found herself searching for other ways to connect. She found that in the community of Black South University and from then made it a point to be a connection point for other black women.

**Kimberly**

“*Coming to South University made me see race. I was no longer colorblind.*”

Kimberly grew up mastering the art of change as a military dependent. She was one of three women in the study who identified military roots as a large contributor of their upbringing and ideas of community. After traveling to many parts of the US and overseas, her family landed
in the Southern region near South University her last two years of high school. She describes herself as gaining adaptability and cross-cultural experiences that she feels set her apart and ahead of her peers. She said, “I’m the type of person that loves to take initiative, loves to meet whoever or meet new people”. Since beginning her time at South University, Kimberly has been a walking example of embracing all aspects of her community, even those perceived as inaccessible to her. Because of her personal experience with a sibling who had a medical condition at a young age, Kimberly landed on pre-med as her ultimate career goal. She wants to land within a helping profession. She also attributed her desire for a career in medicine to her big heart and passion for helping others. Kimberly did not know much about South University or its history prior to enrolling. She simply wanted to attend a school that both her and her sibling could attend together. “But honestly, South was just like a whatever school…’cause I remember the first time I went to orientation, and they were like ‘Who hasn’t taken a tour of campus?’ and I was like, ‘I haven’t,’ and these people were like ‘You really haven’t?!’” Kimberly arrived at South University, as she describes, “not really knowing what [she] was getting into”. But she quickly immersed herself strategically to position herself to have the greatest friend base, as she wanted coming into South University. She stated, “So I got a big view of the campus, so I have like different friends from different groups of the campus and getting involved branches you out to those people and you meet their friends and it’s like a chain reaction. And so, definitely it has grown into my support system.”

Kimberly’s experience at South was unique because she took the nontraditional approach to involvement. Kimberly became one of a handful of Black women who sparked the official integration of traditionally white campus sororities at South University. In the midst of that experience, she learned a lot about herself, others, as well as identity development and her peers.
“I am the type of person that likes to see action, likes to see things get fixed, and so especially with my sorority, getting involved in that. That’s been very positive for me because I have loved it. I love my sorority so much, but then you still see like…you know it’s been good being a part of that and seeing it grow and become more diverse”, Kimberly shared. Overall, Kimberly’s diverse experience with involvement offer a strong perspective regarding the climate for black women and the various roles they take on within the PWI community.

Ruth

“Ok, I’m the only woman in this room, so I have to speak for women, and I have to speak up over all these men and make my opinion known...I have to speak up.”

Ruth hails from a small town in Georgia. She is one of a few people from her home town that went off the college. “Actually, many people in general don’t leave small town Georgia for anything”, Ruth exclaimed during our first interview. She quickly understood the challenges of small town life during her upbringing. So, when the opportunity to attend college led her to South University, she didn’t look back. As she entered her last year at South University, she learned to navigate the space as a First Generation college student and overall has found success in various realms of college life at South University. Her major is Athletic training and comes with it a rigorous and competitive course of study, as well as interesting gender dynamics. This has not derailed Ruth’s determination, to not only succeed, but to also finish what she started. When she walked across the stage to receive her diploma, she was walking across carrying her memories of triumph, hardship, and growth at South University. Through her time, she learned to learn from those around her and to contextualize her interactions based on who she was. Ruth exclaimed, “So, you can have the credentials and stuff like that, and yes that will take you where you need to go, but sometimes it’s all about relations and networking and things like that”.
Ruth learned through her interactions within the community and through academia, that her relationships would take her places at South University and beyond its walls. “I feel like it’s just…it goes beyond academics when you start interacting with people, and it’s more along the lines of, who can you rub the right way so that they feel like you’re worthy of whatever field you’re going into. So, you can have the credentials and stuff like that, and yes that will take you where you need to go, but sometimes it’s all about relations and networking and things like that”.

**Data Analysis: Exploring Experiences of Black Women**

The following explorations will encompass participants’ thoughts on various aspects of their collegiate experiences to date. The following theme explorations emerged through analysis of the data collected from interviews with the women: 1) expectations of identity and respectability politics; 2) aspirations of access; and 3) actions of agency and survival. In the next 3 sections of this dissertation, I will share the participants’ experiences and connect their accounts to the themes presented and relevant findings within literature and through exploring scholars and black women in academia their understandings of themselves. These themes will shape our understanding of the position of women in the context of this PWI and how that particular context has led to their own understanding, growth, and challenges as.

**Encounters of Resistance**

One of the challenges faced by the black women interviewed for this study were consistent perceptions of their reality as black women against the representation of South University as an institution mired in racial tension, historical oppression, and present day silencing as it relates to issues of race. South University, situated in what geographers would describe as the “deep south”, is a flagship institution. Flagship institutions often bring with them a storied history and longevity of purpose. That longevity is often presented under the guise of
tradition, but is often an overwhelming force because it permeates the architecture, the historical underpinnings of the institution, and present day structure. South University, the backdrop for this study, was a major player in the civil war era of the United States. In addition, in the 1960’s the institution faced national attention when it continued to block the entrance of African American students into the institution after federal law was passed supporting integration. Coupling the institution with its unique history and its ownership of slaves, naming of buildings after Klan members, and the not so distant race challenges, exposes an interesting perspective of their public narrative. These challenges faced the women of the study in the classroom, during extracurricular activity, and even in their tone, dress, and appearance. The hyper policing of appearance, tone, etc. has in recent years been coined as “Respectability Politics” (Harris, 2014). Respectability politics, which was initially propagated as a tool of “black elites to ‘uplift the race’ by correcting the ‘bad’ traits of the black poor” continues to present major challenges and often places unintended expectations on Black America in regards to what they should or should not be able to do (Harris, 2014, pg. 33).

In exploring the implications of respectability politics in the Black community, its ideology is so successful because it relies on Black Americans perpetuating the idea that specific acts and ways of being are not desirable. For example, Harris (2014), shares, “The word ‘ghetto,’ for instance, which a generation ago was used to describe poor, segregated neighborhoods, is now used to characterize the ‘unacceptable’ behavior of black people who live anywhere from a housing project to an affluent suburb” (pg. 34). In addition to presenting unhealthy and invisible negative barriers for Black students at South University, the silent forces of respectability politics, coupled with the history and cultural discourse at PWIs increases lack of connectedness and negative perceptions of access to resources and opportunity for Black
students. In particular, Harris (2003), found that “Black women [were] particularly likely to use respectability” (pg. 213). Policing their own appearance, behavior, and actions are all tangible implications of the forces prevalent in the idea of respectability politics. An interesting aspect of this ideology also plays into the concept of surveillance. When you reflect upon Black women’s policing of their own subject position within the PWI environment and then complicate that with the concept of surveillance, it presents a challenging and nuanced position for Black women. They are double bound in how they live and enact within their daily life journey.

In a day like today when conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion are paramount to normal functioning, South University still struggles and the women in this study share stories of that current struggle. Just three years ago, when many of the participants had begun their journey at South University, the institution was struck again by public challenging of their sorority system, which had still not successfully integrated in year of 2013 and which had systematically disadvantaged black girls going through recruitment. These realities are the context for the women’s stories.

With research about students in college supporting the freshman year and particularly the first 6 weeks as one of the most critical factors of persistence (Baxter-Magolda, 1992; Kuh, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005) it is alarming to hear stories of black women’s experiences at PWIs. Of those interviewed, a prevailing theme among many narratives centered around lack of engagement, lack of sense of belonging, and often strong social isolation in the first year. Coupled with experiences of racism and latent micro aggressions, the environment for black students, specifically women in this study, was often volatile. Nikki shared:

My freshman year I was…I think I may have told you…that I was walking and I was setting up for Quid ditch on the Quad, which was an event that the Honors College
threw. And being secretary, you know, I had to volunteer and be a part of it. And one year they moved it to the Rec Fields, because it was so hard to get a permit on the Quad. So I was headed to the Rec Fields from XYZ Hall, and there were some day parties going on at the Fraternity houses…the old row fraternity houses.

And so, I was walking and I had to walk behind them to get to the Rec and so a truck full of the fraternity members came out of one of the back parts of the houses house and yelled “nigger” at me. And that was really like wow, this really happened to me. That had never been directed towards me before in a derogatory sense, so I was really shocked by it. I really didn’t know what to do and I didn’t really tell anyone “official” about it. Like, I told my friends…I didn’t know who to go to or what the case would be to even do that or what the procedure is.

Nikki was initially rocked by that encounter. She was already feeling fragile about belonging and having researched the institution before she got here, had already formed limited knowledge about hierarchies on campus, the Greek system, and racial challenges. Combining Nikki’s personal experience with the incident on fraternity row solidified a solid case that something was awry at South University. That experience brought into question feelings that the institution’s environment was already hurling her way about involvement, race, and her gender. But it now had a tangible face and it was a tipping point for Nikki. She continued:

So then, I remember AKA (one of the historically black sororities) had a forum where they were celebrating or acknowledging the 50th anniversary of the integration [of South University] and at the end of it, we talked and they kind of opened it up for people to talk about their experiences. I shared my experience and after the event, a few other women came up to me…African American women came up to me and told me that they
had similar issues and similar problems. They didn’t really know what to do about it.

And that really just kind of pushed me to work harder to foster some type of awareness
on campus and really try to bring a community together. I think our community,
especially being … now that I’m about to be a senior, I’m like, I think the community is
really broken.

Other women validated Nikki’s concern by confessing that they themselves had been victims of
similar encounters at South University. Despite Nikki’s entrée into the majority realms of
college life at South University, like Honors College, and the elite fellows program, those group
memberships could not shield her from these instances of racism and could not ease her feeling
of not belonging at SU. She shared:

In Houston, most of the separation and inequality that I was aware of was between
Texans and immigrants… Mexican immigrants. And there are a lot of slurs and that type
of thing. But when I came to Alabama and I saw there is a stark racial issue still, it
pushed me to be more inquisitive about where I come from, what my history and what
my legacy might be, as well as I wasn’t seen as being that mixed person anymore [being
Cuban and black]. I was just put into the black category. And so, I was like, “Okay”.
And that happened, and I knew I was in the black category…I got my black card
officially when I got called a nigger walking down frat row. And so, I was like, “Okay, so
know I’m a nigger. So I guess I should really be fighting for the black cause for real.

Dealing with group memberships and instances of rejection plagued participants. Many of them
felt that some of the challenge was dealing with stereotypes or politics surrounding respectable
appearance and tone. In every instance, often cultural differences and societal norms based on
the majority created instances where the participants demonstrate feeling unaccepted or abnormal.

Brandy, one of the participants, stated:

So I’ve already accepted that I’m really loud. So when I was a freshman and sophomore, when noon hit, there was nothing but black people in the student union. And I guess you know, you see people cutting up with their friends and people are loud in that manner and that’s the way you know where stereotypes can come from. And here on campus it’s just like that’s what you see. But someone else who’s not within the group and doesn’t know what’s going on and might see something else and think, ‘Oh like they’re just making up all this noise’. And so when the silent protest happened about the shooting (mike brown), there was so much…and kind of what got me about that is that people were saying all these negative things and like black people weren’t even being loud or extra or like anything like that.

There are a number of issues within Brandy’s narrative that are important to unpack. On initial interpretation, we see that she wants to debunk the myth that all black people are loud, but at the same time she embraces the attribute as part of who she is. In the second half of her narrative, you sense frustration in that even when she feels black people are behaving properly or in concert with the norm, that they still face scrutiny and judgement. She speaks to unspoken, but strong social rules that perpetuate the existence of stereotype, even when the stereotype is not visibly being played out. In alarming fashion, however, present day research regarding politics of respectability supports Brandy’s assertions about performance and challenges practices of placing these unspoken rules as directives for the masses (Dubois, 1920; Gross, 1997; Harris, 2014). According to Higginbotham (1993, pg. 187), “[t]he politics of respectability emphasized
reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of Race relations”. This concept provided the fodder of expectation for equal treatment in society. In addition, the idea hangs on the idea that by minimizing individual liberty for the good of the whole, those actions would create “political and social uplift of the collective” (Pickens, 2015, pg. 42). Exploring research about politics of respectability introduces a way to challenge systems and structures that create spaces that are hostile for people of color or people by promoting conformity to mainstream norms (Coates, 2014 & 2015; Harris, 2014). Ruth shared about her experience managing normalized expectations:

I had the bantu twists. And there were like red and then black. Yeah, so I thought about it hard, but I really wanted it, so I said to myself, “Let’s just try it out.” And like the month of February, I really didn’t have to be anywhere professional or anything of that sort. So yes, I do think about that, life if I had that hair, but then if something would have come up, I probably would have taken it out, because I just know like, going into different settings like say a planning board meeting, they would have initially perceived me like, “What in the world?!” Or “What does she have in her hair?” or, “It’s different”. Navigating politics of behavior, as well as politics of appearance and style continued to challenge participants. Kimberly, who was one of the first black women to join a Panhellenic sorority, said “For me to feel like an individual, I had to go against the grain and so especially like joining X Panhellenic Sorority, like almost everyone’s gonna know that I did, but joining a sorority and being who I valued and for what that sisterhood was, definitely stretched me against the normal grain”. Kimberly knew that her decision would cause a great deal of attention at South University and she recognized that some people wouldn’t understand her decision. But
she believed in the value system. Despite that belief, Kimberly would still experience cultural challenges and would grapple with those challenges in very personal ways. Kimberly discussed being the only black girl in her sorority:

I guess now that I’m a X Panhellenic Sorority member, I go to these high society things. Like, I went to crew ball and I swear the only…I was probably the only Black person there and it’s like this big event that gets put on. And then the only other black people are like people who are serving. And I’m just like…you know it’s like being on the other side. Like that’s what it’s for *(the crew ball)* …to exclude people of lower class and other races. And so I feel like you know, you do have to hold yourself up to the standard and make sure like, you know, you don’t like act crazy or that nothing wrong happens. So I am self-consciously aware about that. And I feel like I have to look my best, you know. Especially when I go to stuff like that. I mean, I do like to straighten my hair too when I wear a long gown, ‘cause I like to look nice. But…I don’t know, I couldn’t imagine…I mean that’s probably the only reason I could not wear my hair curly to that event.

Kimberly went on to discuss concerns she had about moving in the sorority house in the Fall semester, sharing, “Now I’m going to be living in the house. It should be fun! But, I don’t know if I can straighten my hair now because my hair stinks when its’ straight”. In this narrative we listen as Kimberly unpacks several internal concerns, to which she herself did not recognize. While anticipating her move into the house, she is already making determinations about culturally acceptable behavior and curbing her behavior to fit a perceived norm. Her experience confirms the idea of respectability politics and in the messages that are communicated to minorities about mainstream acceptability. Though Kimberly feels that she has been embraced
by the community through her difference, she fails to even recognize in herself her own efforts to
police her behaviors to meet the environmental costs of being accepted among her sorority sisters
within the house. At the cost of not fitting into the “high society” scene, Kimberly takes extra
care and measures to ensure that her appearance meets the Eurocentric standard of beauty to
which the high society community would be accustomed.

Representation vs. Reality

A similar occurrence among the women in the study surfaced relating to the concept of
representation. At South University, women in the study discussed challenges with lack of
representation of Black women and how that sometimes played into limited positions and
stereotypes. For instance, Nikki stated, “There’s a level of competition within the minority
marginalized communities because I think we all know or feel to some degree that there’s only a
certain number of spots for brown people. And like I said, there’s a pressure to be there, to be in
those spots”. After hearing that sentiment, it wasn’t too difficult to understand why Nikki
decided to run for SGA in her junior year, despite representation being narrow for minorities in
traditional and powerful South University roles. “So I did run for SGA a few times, but I
didn’t…well I’m a part of it now as a deputy director of the Multicultural Affairs branch that
William created with he was in office”, Nikki stated.

William Winner, a pseudonym for the SGA President, was only the second black student
to ever get elected as SGA president at South University. William’s election as SGA president
served as a major point of progress for minority students and those who were not a part of the
traditional structure of power at South University. When he entered the position, he immediately
established a multicultural affairs division. Nikki continued, “But I didn’t get elected into any
positions, and so that’s another sector of people who, if you’re in SGA, that’s your circle. That’s
your world….so, no, I wasn’t a part of that group”. Many participants talked about the SGA world and it not being accessible to minorities, particularly women. But more than discussing that world from the context of accessibility for black women, they discussed these representations as necessary aspects and markers of success for all students, particularly black students because they rarely broke through that ceiling. Mo stated:

Doing something white people do gets so much recognition…or just beating the odds. Like running for president or SGA stuff. Anything SGA and there’s an African American in there, they’re just like, “Oh, we good. Let’s go.” Like William Winner, for example, being president. So everybody was just like, “Making history! Oh my gosh!” He got a ton, a ton, a ton of patriotism and support for that. And then a girl crossed a white sorority and she’s black and they just were like, “Oh my god, you’re the first one to ever do that…blah, blah, blah.” It went on for days and they were just commending her and she was kind of like, “Okay. It’s just a sorority.” But they were looking at it like a black girl in a white sorority. That’s the only way they were looking at it. So they considered that being successful.

Mo used the word “patriotism” when she described the level of attention given to William winning SGA president. I asked her to expand on her use of the term more. She stated, “Well, that was probably not really the term I was saying or whatever. But like being patriotic is like the epitome of reaching the American dream and I don’t know…that’s traditionally been for white people”. While it is clear that Mo had a lack of understanding of the definition of patriotism, it is interesting that she equated the term to being essentially the pinnacle of representation of white America. Researchers have discussed patriotism in terms of Black America and have had discussed its current relationship in a post-civil rights society. (Burkley &
In recent months across the United States, a movement called “Black Lives Matter” has surfaced calling into question police brutality of Black Americans. In response, supports for the “Black Lives Matter” protests, have also been demonstrating support by protesting the National Anthem during major sporting events at the college and professional levels. In recent media discussions, some have begun to question, “Can one be truly black and patriotic?” Through recent protest and demonstration, that question continues to be explored and a cornerstone of the recent movement is its commitment to independence of political affiliation, as well as its methodical approach of occupying streets, roadways, sporting events, etc. The current movement complicates the question of Black Americans and patriotism and makes the asserted questions relevant and poignant. Important to understanding the experiences of the Black women participating in this study, is understanding that complex interplay of present movements, as well as African Americans and their longstanding sometimes perceived and sometimes accurate, wishy washy version of patriotism.

Respect for one’s identity is an important aspect of development according to Cross & Phagen-Smith (2001) as explained in their black identity development model. Both Kimberly, Mo, and Nikki experienced challenges in the context of South University where they were forced to question their existence as Black women. Still other women in the study grappled with the complexity of their intersectionality as well. When Brandy was asked to reflect on her personal experience of being black and a woman. She said, “You get the whole, “Oh you really talk so proper” speech…So it’s like me personally because I’ve grown up in the type of environment where people say stuff that probably should be considered offensive, but because you’ve heard it so much, you know them don’t mean it and you get over it”. On the one hand participants were
reaffirmed of their culture, while in some situations their comfortability with the majority environment rendered their culture absent. Vanessa shared her experience with ROTC:

I guess last year probably it was like an ROTC story…that’s all I did. When I first got here, it was kind of like…almost like I was trying to defy stereotypes. But then I kind of questioned myself, like so, “Why am I trying to be so different from who everybody is?” Like, I know most of the people in ROTC are white and they are white guys. So you know, when I do or say something, they are like, “Oh, You’re not like black girls!” And then you know, I’m just like WHOA…ok…ok. But on the inside, I’m a black girl, so how am I not like black girls? I guess that’s probably the biggest thing that’s impacting me…is trying to break this stereotype, but then realizing like ok. By being who I am, I’m breaking the stereotypes to somebody else.

While on the surface this story is about stereotypes, it morphs into an analysis on respect. Permeating the message from her white ROTC colleagues was an assertion that by not “acting black” or not reifying their narrow perspective of black womanhood, Vanessa had earned a greater level of respect or acceptance from them. She was now deemed safe by her white counterparts. This becomes a dangerous idea to engage and presupposes that the limited perspectives known to white America of Black women should be the only standard to which they aspire and that anything outside of that is “not black”. There is no one way to act like a black girl and though probably innocent, the environment experienced by Vanessa could be potentially dangerous and counterproductive in offering room for various depictions of Black women (Mitchum, 2012).

Harris (2003), reminds us that the original term “respectability politics” was coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, and was a spawn of “uplift politics” which urged African
Americans to be engage in prescribed “respectable behavior”. As a result, what are the implications of black women being the most likely to use respectability politics and to also be judged by it? It is said that these politics attempted to reinforce status divisions within the black community and “by linking worthiness for respect to sexual propriety, behavioral decorum, and neatness, respectability served as a gatekeeping function, establishing a behavioral ‘entrance fee,’ to the right to respect and the right to full citizenship” (pg. 213). As such, respectability politics can be a dangerous strategy for political and cultural mobility. It can also limit spaces that exist in a manner that excludes, rather than includes.

In the South University arena, Mo described her interactions with the concept of “respectability politics” as black students doing things that would make them fit the majority mold of the PWI environment or of the black students who had successfully been able to navigate what she described as both “Black SU”, a strictly African-American sub-culture of the larger South University, and also South University majority culture.

Doing something that they thought a white person would do that gets so much recognition, or... What's an example? Let's see... Raising your hand first in class. Some people righteously think that it's just amazing if you do that, because, typically, we don't...But, that or if they feel like since it's a PWI, not talking back, but maybe having an academic dispute with a white person...they're just like, "Okay, yeah. You better tell them. Good for you.

Equating respect to success was one way in which the politics of doing what is deemed appropriate in the particular setting was made. The challenge was in the exercise of agency. In some of these aspects, just going out and becoming SGA president sounds like a test in will and determination. But how many black students at South University truly have the capacity and
agency to run out and become SGA president? When black women don’t conform to behaviors considered respectable, does it limit their opportunity for agency or cause limited perspectives where racism can flourish? Because aspects of black womanhood that are generally antithetical to the majority, Brandy found it interesting that there was a new emphasis on black womanhood in media, etc.

All of a sudden people have this love for black women and are like this, “Oh I just love black women”. And it’s funny because probably when I…cause I really didn’t get on twitter a whole lot until I got to college, but like it’s what I do when I’m bored. I just kinda scroll up my timeline and it’s like now everyone has this love for black women and love for natural hair and all this stuff like that. But a few years ago, I couldn’t even get on twitter without there being some slander about black women. “Black women don’t work out” or “Black women don’t read books! It’s just like, I was like, “What do you mean we don’t like to read??!!” It’s ridiculous stuff like that…like black women are loud, all black women are crazy. You should get like a white woman. You should date a white woman instead of a black woman, because black women love drama and they love all this other stuff.

The constant comparison and visuals found in media, as well as enacted throughout daily life present a challenging narrative for black women. Still, part of the challenge for Kimberly was identifying with parts of the majority community, but also realizing and understanding her black as a Black woman, which sometimes was lost on her white counterparts. Being able to so nicely identify with her white sorority sisters, sometimes left her position silent, when she found herself in situations where her opinion might isolate her. During her time at South University, Kimberly ran for a prestigious campus honor. Similar to SGA president, the University had not seen many
Black students win this honor and honestly no one could remember when the last Black woman was selected. She recalled:

Well it started off with homecoming, a lot came from that, just being in a sorority and having them not support me, and I was just like, "Okay, what is this? What does my membership mean?" And it just made me realize that a part of that makes you do something... Because we pledged for X Panhellenic Sorority, so as an X Panhellenic sorority sister, you support her no matter what, and even if your sorority sister does something else, in general, you support them no matter what”.

According to Kimberly, the sorority would choose to support her, as a black candidate, or to side with the traditional voting block system where one majority candidate was selected from among all the sororities. This person was selected, but was not a member of Kimberly’s sorority. Instead of supporting Kimberly, the sorority supported the other candidate, who was white, from a rival sorority. Kimberly continued:

And a lot of that got twisted, me being one of the first African-American girls to pledge a sorority and people were saying, "Oh, X Panhellenic sorority is racist, X sorority is not supporting her black sister." And of course, I didn't believe that, but then it gets to your head. And then honestly, it's sad to say, it made me realize my blackness, you know what I'm saying? Kind of like the struggle I had to go through, because I bet you, one of my best friends ran, and she's literally so top of the line, from probably top of the elite and they would probably all support her if she did the same thing. So it was thinking about stuff like that, and how I'm not as privileged as most people in the sorority. This made me think and made me be more aware at how kind of uneducated they were on different social issues, and kind of arrogant they were...And then, with things happening
in Mizzou, I'm just sitting here like... [chuckle] Some of the things that people are saying like "Yo, free speech zone, and safe space for what? Like...If you're offended, then leave the university." It really was eye-opening…and so it definitely makes me realize how I'm held back being a part of this community, for not understanding at all what someone like me, being the only one in my sorority... No, there's six of us, but mainly we're the only ones to be with them every day, and for them to not understand my history, and appreciate my uniqueness and cultural differences, kind of makes me...They makes me feel crazy [chuckle].

Whether nervousness or fear, Kimberly’s revelation echoes the sentiments of many of the women in the study. Feeling comfortable within their own skin, feeling accepted in that skin, and feeling respect were all aspects of South University’s PWI environment that left some wanting for more. But does one have to trade in feeling comfortable, to achieve the ultimate American dream. Participants also shared stories of their aspirations of access and how the tension between their intersectionality and achieving an American dream sometimes cultivated tension.

**Agency in Academic Choice**

When one thinks of access, they are often reminded of a simple and pedestrian definition—a definition that calls on our ability to interpret one’s reach or means of obtaining, entering, or retrieving an object or idea. Access, as it seems, was a major theme in the narratives of the participants both in their formative educational years, as well as their latter time spent at South University. As they discuss issues and triumphs over access, a number of areas emerged such as their access in terms of resources, support, and educational aspirations. The types of access we will discuss through the experiences of the women in this study are not much different
from that simple, pedestrian definition, because they lean upon understanding of how these women entered the academic arena, obtained the gifts it had to offer, and if and how they would use those preparations to retrieve a piece of the “American dream”.

In addition to understanding access, this study looks at how and what steps the women took, including what perspective they had on these issues as it related to the context of the university, and their identities and black women. These stories call on the understanding of variance in environment and background to give a greater depiction of what it meant for them to exist in this realm of higher education. In particular, educational access, often described as an opportunity gap, has been correlated with differences in student academic achievements and ability to succeed at the college level (Tatum, 2007; Noguera, 2003). As we discussed access with these women, being black women who were aspiring to find professional and personal growth, led many of them to South University.

Of the women in this study, each had a unique educational story that would have impact on their experience at South University. Many discussed how those experiences impacted their access to education at South University and participants also spoke about their surroundings, socialization, and the support that they received that either helped open or close access to areas of their college experience at South University. In order to contextualize their experiences in the environment of South University, a PWI, we had to understand the context of their previous educational backgrounds. Lauryn was raised in an urban part of Alabama, but experienced a variety of educational styles during her upbringing:

And so growing up from literally being in Center Wood which is a “more black” side of town and then going from Homeday and being in an urban City school district, to then coming to Homeday City, like 6th grade year was one of the most difficult years for me.
Just for transition wise, because I was used to only having one white student in my class where we always made fun of him because all he did was read and didn’t want to talk to anybody…to going to Homeday, where I might be the only African American girl in my class. So it was just…it was a big culture shock.

It was because of Lauryn’s interactions at Homeday High School that she felt prepared for certain aspects of the environment at South University. However, through her comments, Lauryn explored a distinction in the preparation she felt that she received to be academically competitive at South, as compared to her exposure to diversity in social arenas. She stated, “So, I will say academic wise that Homeday prepared me more for College. But social wise, Homeday limited me.” Lauryn’s comments highlight a disturbing and ever present trend in literature as it relates to educational equity across racial lines in America. While Lauryn did get an opportunity to go to a better school which she feels gave her an academic edge, the conditions of social segregation within most public schools, brought her into the collegiate environment having little real experience of interacting with diverse populations (Bennett, 1998; Chickering & Reisser, 1987; McIntosh, 1998).

Even though Lauryn went to school with white students daily, she interacted largely with black students in her neighborhood and through her community involvement. Outside of the classroom, her path rarely crossed with her white peers, according to Lauryn. And this seemed to be of paramount concern. She needed and wanted to succeed and throughout the course of the interviews, she expressed concern over succeeding. More challenging was the idea that access to only certain forms of education would truly prepare her for future success. She stated, “And so because my parents struggled, they’ve made sure that I know what hard work and determination is. But also, that I am living in the overflow of their blessings where I don’t have to do as much
sacrifice that they’ve made”. Lauryn felt like she didn’t want to squander the gift that her parents had given her, but she acknowledged that it was much harder “being African American and being a woman” and “one of the lowest minorities that you can be”. Even at an early age and prior to attending college, Lauryn began navigating the political terrain of being black and woman in educational settings. She described her time at Homeday, while noticing some students being treated differently and also grappling with socioeconomic disparities. She stated:

If I had stayed in Buckingham City Schools, I probably would have never experienced some things. When I was in Homeday, one of my best friends, she went to Buckingham City School and graduated from Ramsett. And I remember being in high school reading some books that she never read throughout High School. I remember, like, telling her some stuff just about the schoolwork we’re doing and she took that to Ramsey and then everyone else was like kinda catching on based on what I was learning at Homewood.

Clearly recognizing her educational edge, she was grateful for that, but was keenly aware because of her she was only tapping into certain aspects of the Homeday experience, and was still lacking understanding from a cultural perspective. In one story she recounts:

Like, I remember at lunch my first week, like they had crispitos. I had never heard of a crispito, never seen a crispito, but everyone was like, “Oh...crispitos, crispitos, crispitos!”

Like everyone was going insane over crispitos! Like, they are these nasty little things...disgusting! But like everyone talked about me because it was like, ‘You don’t know what crispitos are? How can you not? What school did you go to before?’

Owning her place in an environment that was designed to give her a leg above her black peers was both rewarded and disheartening. She stated, “And so like, those kids from Homeday think
money, money, money. Like, they don’t have to think about, ‘Well maybe I can’t get that this
time’ or ‘Maybe I have to put this back this week,’ you know. And I still had to think about that
because my parents, they’ve never been in the position…they haven’t always been in their
position”.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) purports that the knowledge of Black women fully
understanding in their intersection offers an empowerment of experiences, but also enables Black
women to create reality on their own terms, rather than the terms of societal norms or majority.
Despite Lauryn’s realization that maybe the world of academia did not deal a fair hand to her,
coming to South University and leaving successfully was her main and primary focus. She
wanted to leave SU knowing that people would say, “This is all the stuff that Lauryn did when
she was on campus and this was the way she did it and she was always able to do this like this,
like that. And there will never be another one”. Wrapped within Lauryn’s narrative, one can
recognize her socialization to certain markers of success. As her parents felt that if she is going
to be success Brandy, another participant in the study who was a Senior at the time of our
interview, was born in Texas and spent most of her childhood in small town Alabama. Her
parents, who were also concerned about her academic access while they lived in Urban Alabama,
quickly decided to move out of that area to give Brandy an opportunity to attend better schools.
This similarity in primary school trajectory for many of the participants seemed to establish a
cultural ritual out of starting out in a predominately black school and then moving to a
predominately white environment in High School, which was always thought to have more
resources and opportunities. She stated:

My parents are both from urban Alabama, so we came back here and I spent some
time living in urban Alabama and everything. And then my parents kinda wanted to get
out of the city area, cause they didn’t want me in Buckingham City schools. So we
moved up to Chestler, which is actually like predominately white. So umm…That was in
6th grade. So I spent from 6th grad all the way up to my senior year at Chestler. It was
mostly white people, but there were still like a good number of black people at
everything.

While not all of the participants carried that particular experience, each student’s primary and
secondary background played a large role in their college choice. For the students that did, the
social mobility placed on escaping from a predominately black and transposed into a white
school with more opportunity, was the pinnacle of success and the goal for most of their parents.
Parents described it as, “they wanted the best”, “they wanted better”, and “there was no other
choice”. There was no other choice, if they were going to set up their children to be strong and
successful contributors. For all the study participants, they shared a common experience in that
their parents understood the significance of the learning environment and equitable resources on
the student experience (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Kozol, 1999; Noguera, 2003; Tatum, 2000,
2004; Levinson, et. al, 1996). This behavior illustrated the importance placed within upwardly
mobile communities of African-Americans on education, as all three of the participants
described themselves as being part of middle to upper-middle class homes. At the end of the
day, their parents felt that it was their charge and duty to create an environment by which their
children could be their most successful in an environment and society dominated by Eurocentric
ideas of success.

Researchers have spent considerable time linking educational access, attainment, and
socioeconomics as key factors in student success (Bowen et al., 2011; Boudon, 1974; Haveman
& Smeeding, 2006; Jerrim, Chmielewski, & Parker, 2015). This list of factors is certainly not
exhaustive. In addition, for Black women, interpersonal relationships and mentorship were found to be at the nexus of aspects of their success (Higginbotham, 2001; O’Conner, 2002; Ting & Robinson, 1998). Important to the experience of Black women at PWIs is ensuring their success within the institution. As research has shared, because relationships were such a critical aspect challenging Black women, ensuring their space to create and build those relationships was critical. The environment of the PWI, with its expectations of history, sometimes challenged participants. Many relied on the capital they had built to help them navigate the unfamiliar terrain of college. While Lauryn felt isolated and “culture shocked” upon arrival at SU, Brandy felt that her primary school experiences gave her an edge over some of the peers she encountered after she arrived at South University:

It was a really good experience for me [attending a predominately white high school]. If I could or if I end up having children, I always feel like that’s a good experience, because it’s like if you’re exposed to like other cultures and stuff. I think it’s just good to be exposed to other cultures and everything. Because it helps, you kind of learn more about other cultures, ‘cause in the real world, you’re not gonna be surrounded with people that look and have the same exact culture as you. So, I feel like when you’re raised with it, you kind of get used to it and you’re able to adjust to it and it’s not that much of a culture shock when you get into the world or when you get into college and you’re introduced to an environment where, I guess you’re outnumbered.

Brandy not only grasped the value of what her education provided, but she also took the opportunity to embrace a space for access at South University because of her experiences. While school systems across the nation often remain largely segregated and issues of access and equity continually stifle progress in communities of color (Condron, 2011; Brookfield, 2005; Kozol,
1992; Tatum, 2007; Vidgor and Ludwig, 2008; Yosso, 2005), the issue has become central to understanding how and why our racial inequalities exist (Reynolds & Johnson, 2011; Charles & Guryan, 2008). Lauryn’s and Brandy’s emphasis on their parents’ decisions to move them from the “more black side of town” and their emphasis on “education is the key” was a consistent theme among many of the research participants that played a tremendous role in each student’s perspective of South University.

Nikki, who grew up outside of a diverse part of Texas said her parents moved her around to a lot of different schools because “they wanted the best educational opportunities” for her. Of those things that Nikki described as essential in building her up with the greatest educational foundation were racial and socioeconomic diversity. In her final academic move during the secondary education years, Nikki enrolled in an international baccalaureate school, as her parents felt that would give her the best chance for experiencing the racial and socioeconomic blend of environments. International Baccalaureate programs have become popular in recent years as intense curriculum designed to provide students with intercultural understanding, enrichment, and to see themselves as members of a global society (Fox, 2001; Matthews, 2005). Through that program, students were given global perspectives on a variety of topics. Nikki shared, “We were taught more to engage the information, ask questions and really thoroughly and critically think about how the information we learned impacted other people and other communities. And so I really enjoyed that.” She went on to gain an interest in religions, as well as cultures which is something she says set her apart in her recruitment to South University and provided the catalyst for her subsequent acceptance into the Honors College and the elite South Fellows program. When comparing her experience to her peers at South, Nikki asserted, “But coming to the state of Alabama and seeing how segregated the public schools are, our school [in Texas] is…and
In recognizing her own privilege, having come from such a rigorous program in Texas, Nikki and a friend sought out to provide that same experience to students in Alabama. She shared:

My freshman year I had taken an African American literature course and was so surprised at how much I really didn’t know about my own culture and literature and history. And umm, I was really just shocked at that. And so that really influenced me to work with another fellow…So we worked together to create this curriculum…which looks at really kind of breaking down this myth that blacks weren’t a part of American history. And so we created that curriculum to teach to 8th grade students in Maryville and our freshman year we did that in the summer for two weeks. We taught them and just seeing how they reacted to the information, how it really impacted them, and made them feel better about themselves and better about education, it was just something that I knew that I would really love to dedicate my whole life to doing something like that.

Through her experience growing up a minority in a majority environment, Nikki recognized her own limitations, but embraced them as a challenge. Through her revelations at college, Nikki battled head on with the discursive contradiction of her place in academia as contrasted with lack of knowledge she brought with her about her own culture, even from a rigorous, global educational background. Nikki began to use “knowledge as cultural capital” which “works as a negotiation that leads to strategy” (Banks, 2009, pg. 46). Her acknowledgement of a system of unfairness fueled her experience into multiple forms of individual and community currency.
Ruth, a senior majoring in Sport Management, came to Alabama from a small town in Georgia. “I am probably one of the only people from back home to come to a major University,” she said. In addition, she discussed growing up in a predominately black school, but knowing at an early age that she did not want to stay in her hometown and that she wanted to go to college. Ruth said she was aware that she might have a disadvantage coming to South University, but she “knew what she wanted”. To be best equipped for South University, research about PWIs has shown that students of color may find adjustment and challenges that impact their persistence (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002; Allen, 1988; Hurtado & Harper, 2007; Harper, Patton, and Wood, 2007; Pope, Mueller, & Reynolds, 2009). Having little example about going to a PWI or a big college environment, Ruth knew that she had to come in and work that much harder to be successful.

Who you attended school with and where you attended school were also important aspects of educational mobility. Within that, many parents also exercised their right to resist the disparities that existed within schooling systems by opting to remove their children from underperforming schools and put them in more upwardly mobile and academically sound institutions. Alexander-Snow (1999) in a study about black women integrating into mainstream schooling environments found that many black parents sought to have their students attend more predominately white, Eurocentric schools because they believed them to have better resources, a larger option of programs, and newer facilities. These beliefs were often supported by facts and statistics in that many lower income school districts would consistently under perform on testing and have less resources. However, in this same study they found that while many students were more academically prepared after attending a better school, they were faced with the but taxing
obligation of negotiating their identities within the PWI context (Alexander-Snow, 1999; Coker, 2003; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004).

**Chasing Success**

Differences in the tools filled within the educational knapsacks of the participants provided a variety of different ways with which to engage with South University and perform the tasks necessary for them to be academically and socially successful. The dress rehearsal of primary and secondary education set the stage for their success and its subsequent chapters. In hearing the stories of women in this study, many stories of access as an agent of success came about. Access to success and opportunities would come in different ways, but participants saw those moments as very valuable teaching moments that they would need to hold onto for their future careers. Ruth, for example, was selected to be a part of the Homecoming Director team, which was a competitive selection process. At South University, positions on the Homecoming board were traditionally reserved for well-connected students, members of the Greek community, and the group rarely had much ethnic diversity. However, Ruth saw this opportunity as a way to gain success that would be useful to her later in her career. She stated:

“I'm always... I'm just a person who's always learning. I'm always trying to learn from people, from things, life, and I keep... People can see me, that haven't seen me from high school and see me now and say I haven't changed, and I feel like that's a good thing, but then I know in myself I've evolved. I know in myself I'm not the same girl I was my senior high school, and so just for as my identity, I'm strong and I can be independent, and I'm not afraid to make mistakes, or I'm not afraid to fail, 'cause I know that it will help me grow.
Through the opportunities available at South University, Ruth has been able to develop a sense of agency and has been given opportunities to succeed that she may not have gotten in other opportunities. While Ruth gains the opportunity to experience leadership and development opportunities, one aspect of her success was related to ensuring that she could share that same success with Black women who will come after her. Through accessing the spaces that other Black women like her have not been, Ruth believes that it gives her an opportunity to be an example. She stated,

You are the representative for you, especially if you're the only one there. If you're the only black person there, you're their representative; if you're the only girl there, you're their representative. So you just... I think the accountability and responsibility is what changes if you're the only person there. So you kind of... You're more like... I guess you think a little more and you think a little harder as far as like, "Okay, what is the topic at hand? What are we trying to get to? What are we trying to figure out, and how can I speak for the women or the black people effectively, and so that they're represented, and when this product comes out or this meeting's done and we go out and we put into effect whatever we discussed, they'll feel like, ‘Oh, I was represented.’” Like they thought about me when they constructed whatever it is.

As raced, classed, and gendered beings, Black women can find themselves at interesting locations of limited power and representation (Banks, 2007). The strategies that the women in this study developed as they found ways to succeed in the PWI environment, fueled their time at SU and their path to completion. Using their connections as agents for success was a useful tool in dismantling the challenges faced as a result of their intersection of being both Black and a woman. Some of the ways that they challenged their position was through assisting their peers
in broadening their leadership experience, calling their peers to take up common charges, and in ensuring that their own response to the environment was one situated in a place of growth and development. For example, Brandy discussed a peer being advised about involvement opportunities and stated, “One of my friends had let someone view her resume and she basically told her that her resume was “too black”. Like that’s kind of crazy in itself. But I guess you have to be mindful of being in more diverse organizations and stuff”. Though Brandy did not want to fully accept what her friend’s critique was saying, she too agreed that in the context of the PWI, the most successful Black students were adept at navigating the experience across lines of difference. And for that reason, Brandy herself, also subscribed to that concept.

In addition to accepting that there were limited avenues to success at South University, participants found that within the Black community, there were often barriers to success which made the terrain of South University more difficult to navigate. Some of those challenges were lack of internal support from their peers and lack of unification. In some ways, participants felt that pooling resources within the Black community could ensure that all Black students entered SU with a better opportunity for success. Ruth stated, “Year-in, year-out we say what needs to be done what needs to be changed, but we have so many minority organizations. If we were all to work together, the amount of force we would have to change all those things would be crazy. But some of these organizations want their name in the forefront, they want their time, their shine, instead of just, "Hey, let's just work together for the common purpose." We all know that at the end of the day we want a better environment for us on this campus so why not work together, regardless of whose name's on what flyer”. Ruth’s discussion highlights one of the major challenges that participants in the study explored. While success was in their grasp, it was in their grasp through different means.
Each participant came to the conversation with a specific set of support networks and these networks would ultimately challenge or support their experience at South University. In the next section, we will talk more closely about those challenges and highlight the stories of Black women in the nexus of survival and will discuss how and why their survival exhibited both actions of agency and modes of resistance.

Support at a PWI

In addition to the difference in level of comfort that some women faced being thrown into the homogeneous environment of South University, additional factors of access centered around institutional support structures found at South, but also through informal networks like “Black SU”, familial support, and the students and their own internal value systems. Vanessa, the only transfer student in the study started her collegiate journey at a Historically Black College in North Carolina:

I guess one of the big similarities is that they [HBCU vs. South University] have strong alumni bases. Um, I guess the difference is that one is more funded than the other. I don’t know…coming here [to South University] one of the big things that I tell people it there’s such great connections, you know. If you want to do something in this field, there is somebody that can help you. You know what I mean…that type of thing. So, I mean even though you can still kinda get to your goal in both directions, it’s just different I guess how many channels you go through.

Vanessa found this difference to be part of the “cultural capital” that she could access as a result of being associated with and attending South University, a PWI. Research about cultural capital points out that tied up with certain ideas, perhaps those present at a PWI, are a set of resources, as well as financial and intellectual acquisitions that are not readily available to all, but that are
inherited from social systems (Bourdieu, 1984; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). This idea explores how due to systems of oppression that are perpetuated by cultural capital, some students have access to more resources than others. South University by reputation and virtue was the site of many social systems that disadvantaged Black women. Vanessa felt that though she found “connections” at the HBCU in North Carolina, that those were more forced and harder to break through and did not seem to carry the same weight as those at South University. Ultimately, Vanessa’s parents had placed value on reputation, connections, and prestige, all of which they felt South University would offer. However, what personal price would Vanessa have to pay to have access to those connections?

When asked whether she herself had personally ever benefited from the connections at South University, Vanessa could not recall. She said, “You at least have the opportunity to be successful”. Even though she had more evidence of resistance within the system, she was still convinced that through association, she had been given agency to tap into the resources or any perceived benefits espoused through association with South University. Though she herself did not have a personal story of utilizing such agency, Vanessa was confident that its promise would come through and be available for her as well when she needed it. Vanessa also spent time being selective and attempting to connect her involvement to future goals just as she would be advised by her parents. She stated, “Well I’m on the student recruitment team, so that in that aspect they know that I want to be a sport broadcaster and that I am really involved in sports. And so any opportunity I get I can see and watch interviews…so also in my major they have a lot of internships and the have a lot of studies that you can be a part of. It’s kind of hands on”. Engaging in opportunities to build on her future career through supportive academic programs
was important. Vanessa describes coming to most of those experiences because she sought them out and did not wait for things to fall in her lap.

One participant, Nikki, initially found South University to be engaging and supportive to her academic and personal growth needs. Nikki was heavily recruited to an elite academic program. She said, “So I visited South University and umm, the University is really great at selling itself. And I went to Honors College and was able to talk to Dr. X and Dean Y and they took a personal interest in me and that was really, you know something that impacted me. And I was like, ok, I could see myself in this Honors College community”. That personal interest made all the difference for Nikki. Despite concerns about other aspects of South University that were not as appealing, the promise of community and support within the academically rigorous Honors College made all the difference. While Nikki had successful relationships with faculty,

Academic support systems are just as important as the social systems students engage with while at college. Mo kept up with her academics through the use of her family as a check and balance system. She shared, “I would probably have to say my family back at home…they support me a lot. I know it sounds like, well they’re not even here but they check on me often. They keep up with different news, things that are in the news, different athletes and whatever’s going on…all different types of things. They just call and let me know…but they keep up with my class schedule. It’s kind of cool. They know to call me after class or before class or in-between, and stuff like that”. It sounds as if just being aware and engaged in Mo’s life, though far away has made all the difference to her. Event when she has faced academic or social challenges, being able to rely on her familial support in those times of need was critical and important.
Aliyah when asked who her greatest support system was said, “My parents and my best friend. Really, it’s just my family and my best friend who is basically my family too. But they support me in ways, like keeping me grounded. I tell them the things that I wanna do and they encourage me”. That encouragement is the type of thing that provides students with the foundation and inner drive to keep moving when the community gives them all types of hands to steer them differently. While Aliyah and Mo might not see the inclusion and support of their families as major factors, research supports familial involvement as being a major factor in group success determinants (Freeman, 2004).

Amid the challenges of defining and carving out systems of support was navigating resistance within the system at South University. Aliyah, a junior participant in the study majoring in Telecommunications and Film wanted to go to Tuskegee, an HBCU in the state. While she dabbled with the idea, but ultimately chose South University because it had better resources, new facilities, and her parents felt like she would get a better education.

I was looking for something that would be close and I would feel like a homey feeling and when I went to Tuskegee, I visited there and they were just like, ‘Aww man…I love it”. Everybody seemed like them just got along…everybody’s around everybody. There’s no…umm…different groups everywhere. And that’s what I loved about it…But when I got here and visited here, it was just like…ok…Here’s this…here’s that…here’s this…get in line here and get in line there.’ And then when I was just looking around, I just didn’t’ have that feeling or interaction. Then also no one interacted with each other. Everybody was kind-of on their own.

Aliyah’s feelings about the campus environment took a back seat to her reinforced perspective from both her parents and the promise of new facilities and plentiful resources. However,
research supports that the social climate is a prevalent and consistent force in persistence of many students of color (Astin, 1982; Blackwell, 1981; Ogbu, 1978; Tinto, 1986; Thomas, 1984; Weidman, 1989). To make a decision to attend South University, Aliyah would have access to all the amenities and nice dorm rooms that she could ask for. But, something she did not content with is having difficulty navigating the social environment and its impact on her collectively and as an individual.

Regardless of educational background women in the study found themselves struggling with varying degrees of challenge as it related to finding support and resources at South University that were “for them” as interviewers coined it. In addition, unlike their white counterparts, women in the study like Mo, relied on informal methods of engagement and had to use a degree of social savvy among their peers to negotiate stereotypes about the types of activities that were acceptable for Black women at SU. She said,

“A lot of my involvement came from emails. I would just thoroughly read the emails…But yeah, the emails…they’re very informative. And so that’s how I got involvement and I chose to get involved with stuff that…if I texted someone about it I would get, “Uh-u, girl I’m not doing that.” They’ll be like, “that’s for the white people.” And I’m just like, if it was for them, then we wouldn’t have gotten the email too”.

For Mo, she discussed this conversation with her friend, because it disheartened her. She desperately wanted to take advantage of all of the opportunities available to her. However, her friend was trying to warn her…that’s not for you. Do not trespass. You are not welcome here, her friend said. Mo wanted to challenge those preconceived notions, so despite being prodded by peers to do specific activities, going outside of that grain was her way to find unique opportunities and experiences.
The challenge for Nikki, however, was that many of the aspects of South University that she might have sought to be a part of, seemed open to only a particular subset of the campus population. Even with the support she found in Honors College, Nikki felt that still aspects of SU were not as accessible to her. She stated:

Being in the PWI is like a microcosm of what’s going on in the U.S. You can tell who’s in power. You can tell who’s disenfranchised. You can tell who benefits from nepotism. You can tell who has allies and who has the support, who came in with knowledge and who came in without anything. You can just tell. You can really see.

And over time, I have seen friends come and go from the university, and I have seen what the demographics of those people coming and going are.

Exercising agency in navigating the environment at SU became a test of will. Still participants, like did not always want to use their tools to navigate properly or with the blessing of their fellow peers. Vanessa said that it would be difficult to exist at South University in two different worlds, as she described it:

So I guess it’s kind of hard to get involved if you want to get outside of just “Black South University”, she said with emphasis. “Because if you get like…say you join Panhellenic sororities…(pause)…One of my friends is in a Panhellenic sorority and she is African-American. People kind of look at her like, “Oh, you know…you are over there”. It’s that type of thing. And you know that’s kind of tough for her because it’s something she wanted to do. However, people look at her kind of funny on both sides. Again Vanessa is letting us in on a closed off cultural community that had emerged at South University. Black South University, the subset of the black community, where many students found information, connection, and comradery was both a solace and a crutch to students. Many
students wanted to embrace their community, but once there did not feel much agency in their ability to deviate from it. Despite the plight of her friend, Vanessa still remained optimistic that SU was “kinda progressing in that area”. Vanessa had pure optimism that South University would learn from its mistakes and move forward in a positive direction. What would in fact be deemed as progression to Vanessa? To her, reaching a milestone in an area of representation that had been closed off to black students for as long as anyone could remember, had to be a true sign of progression.

The questions would be how to identify step to and how to keep momentum behind progression. Alexander-Snow (1999) described young woman pledge of a Panhellenic sorority as being “caught between two worlds”. Her entrance into each of the communities that she had become a part of, both black SU and mainstream SU, would be on a limited trial basis. For any movement that she would try to make would be thwarted by the high level of expectation and understanding she would receive from each side and there is a fear that she just wouldn’t seem black enough or white enough to appease either crowd (p.113). Still other times, the environment would not render your difference invisible, but would highlight it as a means to exclude your experience. One element that Nikki’s vast educational experience gave her was a mechanism for activism and the day she was rendered visible in her honors college world. Villegas & Lucas (2007) point out that if campuses do not attempt to educate and create academic and social experiences for identities prevalent on their campus that they will draw upon their biographical and historical understandings that are obviously absent of broader viewpoints. In recent campus happenings, this include providing students of color or students at the margin, space to protest and to also create a campus culture that is primed for open dialogue (Aziz, et. al, 2012). Through that, Nikki found that the best way to activate against the outright racism, feelings of isolation,
and micro-aggression she had experienced was through action, she discussed this hypervisibility through her story:

I got my black card officially when I got called a nigger walking down frat row. And so, I was like, “Okay. So now I’m a nigger. So I guess I should be fighting for the black cause for real.” And so, those aspects of the university, I guess have really influenced me to be more prideful in my identity, and to be more intentional about what my identity is, the roles that I play, the way that people perceive me and ultimately the organizations that I affiliate myself with, and like how I brand myself.

When women in the study did find solace in South University, it was through the informal networks of the black community at SU. Participants talked of a community that they called “Black SU” on multiple occasions. For each person that mentioned it, Black SU had a different level of importance, but it existed as a microcosm where one could view the impacts of college life specifically on one isolated area of existence at South University. It had a name and persona and many students felt like it was a sacred place and essentially like its own university within the larger University. Brandy stated, “I mean ‘Black UA’ is just like…I mean that’s pretty much the black community like within SU. I mean, we have our own way of doing everything…There’s a lot of stuffy that we do separately that like the white community doesn’t know about…SU itself is a community, but there’s a whole different culture with the black community”. Vanessa who had initially struggled to find a thriving black community at SU said, “Honestly, I found out about “Black SU” at my first Onyx [a popular campus welcome event featuring black student organizations]. But, it’s almost like a community within its own and the interesting thing is, there are a lot of people that are like, “Ok, we need to stick together to be successful in this place”. And there’s also people that are like, don’t.” Vanessa said that she found support in
connecting with Black student organizations and being involved in the social scene of black students. When asked about the institution supporting her, she said, “The way they support me is more the people inside the organization rather than the institution supporting me, if that make sense”.

Despite, those challenges, many women in the study indicated that when the institution around them could not be their support, that their biggest supporter was either other members of the black community or themselves. Internal resilience seemed be a determining factor towards their navigation of the landscape wrought with historical perspectives. Lauryn said of success:

Like, when you get in your classrooms, you’re not gonna have a classroom full of people that’s the same color as you. So don’t let color intimidate you and make sure you study and that you do all of the things that you have to do. Because someone else might get it easier, which is not fair, but you have to make sure you get it the right way and not the easiest way.

Overall, stories of support and resources were the backdrop from which the women in the study were able to find resilience in themselves. They certainly faced opportunities for growth and came to the table with different levels of skill and expectation. Those insights provided a location for exploration as it related to the PWI context. The landscape provided was complicated by their particular placement within its history. All the while, they were learning more about themselves and reacting to the environment around them using the knapsack of tools that they had.

**Intersection of Identity at SU**

In the context of black women undergraduates attending PWIs, the performative is exhibited by looking at the historical context of South University and its impact. Mo recounted,
“Because when I talk to other people or tell people, ‘Oh, I go to South University,’ they’re just like, ‘Really?’ And I’m just like, ‘Yeah.’ I don’t know if it’s shocking really, like, ‘I didn’t think you would go there,’ or if it’s like, ‘That’s an amazing school, I’m happy that you’re going there’. Mo responded to the question, “What’s the value of the institution to you?” to which she explained that reputation was a huge part of why she valued the experience. However, in sharing her decision with others, she couldn’t shake that nagging sense that they weren’t excited because she was going to a great school, but shocked to see that she, as black woman, was going to a great school. Negotiations of stereotype were prevalent among stories of the women in this study. Inside the classroom and outside of the classroom, black women undergraduates must learn to negotiate their bodies and the stereotypes and assumptions that come along with them. Lauryn shared:

With me and my major being umm a math major, I see it a lot because them look at me like when I say I’m not engineering, but I’m just math. And they will say, “Oh really…you’re just a math major?” And then I’m like, yeah so what’s so different about it. And so it’s kind of like, “I just wouldn’t expect ‘you’ to be a math major.” And I think, “Me? What is me?” You don’t know anything about me. You just don’t expect the outer of me to be a math major.” And so like I have noticed that and definitely with classmates and umm, I haven’t had one professor to like knock my dreams or to just kinda say rude things. But I know friends who’ve had it. Like one of my friends…one of their engineering professors just told them that, “I don’t think your type does well in my course or in engineering period.

Collins (2000) in her research about black women purports that a generalized ideology of domination often seeks to empower stereotypes because then they can be used as instruments of
power to make the perpetuation of images presented through the lens of stereotype seem like normal and natural occurrences. Lauryn shared that she is challenged by the fact that when she looks around the classroom she doesn’t see many people that look like her, but she says, “it’s nothing new” and that “now in college [she] already expect[s] to be one of the few”.

Aliyah, who is currently a junior majoring in Telecommunications and Film was in her first semester at South University when she had a run-in with her roommate’s boyfriend, which she recounts:

I had a roommate. It was four of us. I got along with two of the girls, but it was this other girl. We got along at first…a sorority girl. And she’s from…she’s from the Keys…Miami Keys or something like that. At first I was like Mom, I don’t want to…I was iffy about that if I get a roommate that doesn’t like black people or something like that. My mom was like, “Oh I think she will be ok. Miami is kind of diverse”. I was like, I guess. But when I moved in, it was just like, wow she’s something. And she had this boyfriend who would come over a lot and he basically lived there and they would fight like cats and dogs.

And so, the other two of us, we would kind of stay out of the situation. They got to where he would be there every day and his stuff would just be laid around our dorm room. And then we kind of had a roommate sit-down and told her we just have a problem with him being there all of the time and y’all are loud and y’all fight. And I guess she told him about it and he had stopped coming over for a while and it kind of cooled down, you know. But, when he was there, he would make rude comments. And my other roommate was black too and he would say rude comments and plus she is dark skinned and he would say little things and she wouldn’t say anything.
And then there was one night when we came back from a football game and she had her friends over and he was there. They were fighting. We walked right back out. I was like, we don’t want to deal with that, but this is still our room and we’re coming home. So we come back and they’re fighting and being really loud and he comes up and looks at me and says, “What the F are you doing here, you “N-word?”” And I was like, “Huh?” And he said, “You heard…” and said it again. Now I’m on the phone with our other roommate and I said, “Did he just call me…?” And then my other roommate hit him!

Aliyah’s story ended with campus police intervention. When the campus officers came to their hall, Aliyah says she felt validated because the officers asked if she wanted to press charges, which she did and they also said that she would be assigned an investigator and due to that she said she was “thinking everything is going to go ok”. The next day, Aliyah meets with the investigator:

But then the investigator, she turned around and we were meeting and she was asking me, “Now are you lying?” And I said, “Lying about what?” And she said about what he said to me. I said, “No, why would I lie?” She said because it just didn’t add up. The investigator said, “Her friends [the white roommate] are saying you attacked him first.” I thought, of course her friends. So it’s like the person I thought would probably protect me or you know, if I’m telling to this and whatever, she’s not doing that. And then I just felt like, WOW…I can’t even depend on the police when I tell them something.

Ultimately Aliyah says the boyfriend got in trouble. However, Aliyah was assigned to do community service because she engaged in physical contact too and they issued her to counseling because they “thought she was really angry”. At the conclusion of her freshman
semester, Aliyah had all but given up. Banks (2009) describes this conflict between Aliyah and the police officer as an example of “cultural clash”. She coins these moments of cultural clash as “the negative ideologies, attitudes, and resulting exchanges black women undergraduates encounter in school related to their race, class, and gender” (pg. 66). Intermixed within this conflict was a level of distrust from both sides. While Aliyah defended her honesty, she couldn’t help but be dismayed by the ease with which the officer questioned her character and motives. In addition to dealing with the typical challenges of college adjustment, in her first semester, Aliyah was also faced with a challenge of defending her place and her character against institutionalized constructs and stereotypes of black women. Mo recounted when asked about being a black woman at South University. Mullings (1997) says that controlling images of black women are key to maintaining oppressions. It is through this oppression that white women are often centered as the example of normalcy. This very thought was exhibited in Aliyah’s interaction with her roommate. When a figure of authority was asked to investigate the story, they questioned Aliyah’s authenticity, while accepting the story of Aliyah’s white roommates and her friends as the prevailing narrative in that evening’s events.

Aliyah questioned the investigator of her case as an act of desperation. She desperately wanted to re-establish her faith in the university and wanted to reassure herself that her original doubts about SU and its predominately white environment, the roommate from Miami, and the general campus culture were unfounded. This was hard to do with her parents questioning what type of environment their money was now paying for. Universities sell college as a training ground and microcosm of the real world. In that, they emphasize that on-the-job training are an aspect of learning and that they want students to be equipped to enter into the world of work upon leaving South University. Ruth, who is majoring in Athletic Training and Sports
Management, during her interview was asked to reflect on her role as a black woman in the field of athletic training:

So for me…like me…I’m short. I’m curvy. I’m not on the ugly side. So it’s just like, going into that environment, there’s gonna be those guys that are trying to get at you and things like that. And just my personal opinion, I feel like those people that are accepting you, giving you the job, think about that first. This is a high-profile place, and they want to keep down the interaction as much as possible…But that’s just gonna be the perception that it is. If I wanna carry myself well, and if I wanna put on earrings that day or a little bit of makeup, I mean yeah I’m going to work, but I just felt like doing that, but that doesn’t mean I’m trying to get at somebody or I’m trying to draw someone in…if the day before that my hair was looking a mess and I didn’t do anything with my face and then the next day I do all of that, so what? So, it’s just hard.

Ruth was careful to point out that her “curves” posed a challenge, but that she does not plan to determine her style and personal appearance based on the stereotypes prevalent in the field. In addition, this is an important and poignant moment to point out how the intersection of race and gender impacted Ruth’s lived experience as it relates to career readiness and considerations for the world of work. Unfortunately for Ruth, there was no lesson in class on “How to work in the field of Sports while being black and a woman”. But the decisions that Ruth will have to make as a result of point of personal intersection are very real. Because of familial support and other black women in her life that can speak to issues surrounding Black women and their bodies, Ruth already has the knowledge she needs to be successful given this knowledge.

In particular, professional locations where women have been less prevalent, have traditionally been the breeding grounds of appearance policing for women, particularly black
women because of their inclination to being more “curvy” as Ruth described it, and also in perpetuating narratives of promiscuous, oversexed, angry, and loud (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004; West, 1995). An unfortunate by-product of these images has often been internalization of such stereotypes and reinforcement of erroneous norms. They are also often reinforced via media and through pop culture norms (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004). Ruth shared the following about being a black woman in the workplace:

If I’m the only woman in this room, I have to speak for women, and I have to speak up over all these men and make my opinion known or whatever I have to say. Especially, if it’s something that has to do with women, something that we’re discussing that could pertain to women or affect women…I have to speak up. And the same goes for African-Americans. Like, you are the representative for you, especially if you’re the only one there…I think the accountability and responsibility is what changes if you’re the only person there… so you kind of... You're more like... I guess you think a little more, you think a little harder as far as like, "Okay, what is the topic at hand? What are we trying to get to? What are we trying to figure out, and how can I speak for the women or the black people effectively, and so that they're represented, and when this product comes out or this meeting's done and we go out and we put into effect whatever we discussed, they'll feel like, "Oh, I was represented... "Like they thought about me when they constructed whatever it is.

While some black women would not relish the thought of being “the representative” for their race, Ruth saw it as “responsibility” or “sense of accountability”. When asked if she felt her academic courses had prepared her to understand the raced and gendered implications of herself within her field, she said no. Lindsay (2015) in a study about intersectional coalitions within the
workplace, theorized that black women share “an experience of being gendered and ethicized” in the labor force, in classrooms, and beyond formal settings. Ruth's main training ground in resisting these identities occurred within South University. It occurred in interactions with her peers, subtle experiences of micro aggressions, and other more memorable, in the field moments.

**Institutional Messages to Black Women**

Through the conversations with participants, they were asked to consider a space on campus where they felt they most belonged and they were asked to document those spaces via a photo. Several of the participants provided their pictures at interview opportunities. Mo shared, “So it’s basically a picture of pictures”. Mo shared that in her room above her bed she had a collage of various pictures from the different phases of her life. The pictures covered every square inch of the wall behind her bed and stood out to friends that came to visit her as a great conversation piece. She stated, “Like that is the place that kind of helps me get through whatever…okay…like my safe have type of deal”. She has the pictures of various boards and they are sectioned off into time themes like summer 2011 or fall 2013, etc. Through these boards, Mo felt connected to her past, present, and future and that was a major and defining aspect of who she was becoming at South University. Despite the changes, as well as opportunities she was gaining at South University, Mo still found real challenges with connecting to others sometimes. “Cause some of these people, I’m either not friends with anymore, or who knows?! I just kind of look around and I’m like, “Wow, I remember that”, she said. “And then I’m like, okay, back to reality. Let me go ahead and get this done, get that done”. For Mo, she could recount a physical outside of her walls surrounded by years of memories where she felt more comfortable.
Kimberly talked about the space that meant the most to her. It was the view walking up to her sorority house. What was interesting about Kimberly’s picture was that she situated that view at a very specific time and instance in her experience at South University. She stated, “So this view was when my friend and I were going to see about, you know, if we were interested”. This was a pivotal moment for Kimberly because all of the other times she had been invited to the sorority house were as guests of friends she already had who were members there. She had never been invited as a potential member. Kimberly would go on to share how pivotal that experience was to her. The nervousness she felt, the excitement, and the unknown were the most memorable parts of that photo. The door picture, not only symbolized her entrance into the sorority, but also meant opportunity. She stated, “It was definitely like a catalyst to all of my involvement, pretty much”.

A recurring theme among the locations and observations with the participants was their connection to support and also motivation. Lauryn invited me to attend a performance of the gospel choir. The room was packed with black men and women dressed nicely in their Sunday’s best. There were few minorities in the crowd of almost 400 or more people at their annual campus concert. I spotted Lauryn and she looked to be busy helping get people in the right place. When the music rang and the first syllable when out, I saw her flanked in the middle of the alto section. She was smiling and looked like she was having the time of her life. When we discussed gospel choir performances later, she described them as being almost cathartic and very comfortable. She always talked about the gospel choir as family. That was the atmosphere bred within anyone participating. The connection was important to them and to Lauryn it was not forced, like some of the other campus interactions that she described. “A norm within the black community is make-up, make-up…I’m not a make-up person”. Lauryn felt like the make-up
mentality was a greater symptom of the phoniness she says she came in contact with in general South University circles. But in the gospel choir, in her perspective, no one was fake and no one was artificial.

Overall, the observations and stories through photo provided an additional lens with which to understand the level of expectation felt by women in their difference experiences. Also, it highlighted the need for each of the women to carve out a space that was uniquely theirs and uniquely personal. The one size fits all method was just not attractive. Through learning about themselves, understanding the messages being sent through the various realms of South University and being comfortable to find their niche, many of the women learning to survive. Opportunities to go against popular in the interest of personal preservation became moments of triumph and defiance for many women in the study. Their act of upholding their deviance actually was an exercise in agency. Through rejecting the normative modes of performance presented through the prescribed script available at SU, Black women began to write their own scripts that accounted for all the things that they really needed to be successful and for them to feel good about themselves.

**Concluding Perspectives and Challenging the Future**

Researchers have provided us with a way to examine how existing on the line of intersection can be a way of understanding the impact that black women’s lives have on social, economic, and political spheres (Brewer, 1999; Banks, 2004; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984). As such, understanding how they engage transformation in those areas can provide us with a basic understanding of how and when to respond. Because of being both black and a woman, the position each role holds, often allows for a better close view at how those aspects really impact a situation. According to Banks (2009), “an intersectional analysis also grants that there are lived
consequences for those embodying the particular biological features” and that “these consequences stem from the ways socially constructed standards are played out in daily interactions” (p. 11). As such, it is important to understand that being black and woman at South University comes with it, a specific context related to the historical and systemic dimensions of that particular space.

It is important to note that in the space of South University, the experiences of participants must be located within the context of a southern, flagship institution with a long and storied history of race relations and discrimination, including blocking black students from entrance in the 60’s, barring black women for traditionally white sororities until just 2013, and a tradition of inequity and issues of access among a perceived set of haves and have nots within campus-based politics. While no one story of the women in this study can be narrowed to a majority, it will shed light on the interplay between their intersectional role and aspects of performativity and its ability to make identities fragile in their interpretation, but also their consistency and conformity to those same identities.

In sharing this context with the experiences of Black women, there is a similar reification in the way that Black women are shaped by the historical and present baggage, but at the same time continually get the chance to change and reinvent what people experience and there is no one way to do that. As such, chapter 4 allowed individuals to hear and understand the stories of resistance, support, and triumph of the participants at South University. The uniqueness of their perspective can no longer be overlooked, because time has been taken to document stories, share them, and learn from each unique story (Merriam, 2006; Siedman, 2006). In addition, the commonalities that were posed were important in helping understand the problems, opportunities, and obstacles prevalent at predominately white institutions of higher learning.
Overall, the students provided a framework for understanding their experiences on a larger arena and with a greater awareness of how their environment has shaped and perhaps formed who they have become and what they have offered to the universe.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

South University touts in their promotional messaging, “As the state’s flagship university, The South University family has always focused on being the best. After all, we are The Capstone of Higher Education…We provide a creative, nurturing campus environment where our students can become the best individuals possible” (Retrieved from https://www.ua.edu/about/). This poignant description referencing “family” and “nurturing” in the “About” section of the South University website points towards the very evidence and scope of this research study. For students of color interviewed within this study, they have not always felt nurtured or accepted by the South University community. Institutions must ensure that their actions align with sentiments of “family” and/or “nurturing”, and account for the multiple ways that various students are experiencing their campus environment. How do PWI institutions begin to recognize their past as potential barriers to students of color and how does one acknowledge and engage the discourse that history leaves in its wake when it does not support their current brand?

This qualitative narrative aimed to share the experiences of Black women at South University as they grappled with the complex intersection of their race and gender, in an environment entrenched in history, complex positioning, and a sometimes unfamiliar academic terrain. Attempting to be seen through a more nuanced lens, not chained to the perceptions and interpretations of that environment, the women exploring this southeastern predominately white institution presented brave narratives of discovery and reflection on their influences and personal
assertions of individuality under immense historicized pressure. In their narratives, the experiences introduced concepts of perseverance, explored engagement with support, and explored their agency and exercise of resistance. Through setting the stage of the material environment and context of the PWI institution, I was able to explore the challenges that exist for black women as it related to the culture and history of Black women, as well as the institution. In addition, through this research, I have been able to challenge and understand the ways that Black women at South University battled and overcame experiences of discrimination, daily micro aggressions, hypervisibility, and often invisibility.

**Intersections of Identity and Institutional Language**

In exploring the role of the predominately white institution, in particular, storytelling offered ways to understand the intersectional frame that made up the experiences of Black women at PWIs and to also think about how history constructs particular settings. Crenshaw’s (2009) analysis of structural intersectionality calls for an in-depth look at how intersecting oppressions can have an impact on lived experiences, specifically within organizations. Take for example Nikki’s story in the study, which recounts her being called the “N-word” while walking across campus. Though South University had mechanisms in place by which Nikki could report this incident, she chose not to. It was not until she was in what she deemed to be a supportive and safe environment of other Black women and her peers that she shared the ordeal of that day. The interesting part about her story was finding out that it was not unique. Other women also shared similar unreported stories with Nikki. In a lot of ways, Nikki left from the Quad that day feeling isolated and thinking that her story was an anomaly- one that no one would identify with or remember. CRF supports, counter-storytelling as “a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009). South
University had done considerable work to promote a narrative of “family” and “support” in a community of respect. However, Nikki’s story and those of others in the community spoke of a different experience. In particular, this story highlights the need for better understanding from South University as an institution regarding the experiences of their students. Structural intersectionality calls organizations to review its practices to ensure that its messages do not unintentionally silence individuals and through storytelling additional narratives can be brought to the table.

In the same year that Nikki shares her story, a campus social media based campaign had broken out called, “Not Another Isolated Incident”. In this campaign, Black students began sharing their incidents of injustice on campus. They used the marker “not another isolated incident” to both highlight the frequency of experiences with racism and discrimination, but to also highlight the institutions response to those issues. In addition, during that time, Black men would frequently be accused of robbery on or near campus, typically from white female accusers. These accusations would come out on at least three separate occasions in one semester, as Brandy, one of the participants recounted. After each incident the university police would send out an email description so vague that, as Brandy said, it could account for any average black guy on campus that she knew. Like clockwork, days after the initial accusation and description, a White woman would come out retract and deny that the situation ever happened. Brandy recalls that the institutions limited responses to situations in the past and lack of information around other instances became a bit of a joke among the “Black SU” community. Brandy said,

I guess I’m just so used to it that I really didn’t gather anything from it…. But I never say any news or anything about all of these girls who made false reports about
being attached or assaulted on campus. And it happened so many times. So, I guess in that, it kind of made me wonder like how fair SU was as far as like reporting things that happened and how fair University Police was towards the women who were probably white making the claims that a Black man assaulted them. So, but at the same time, it’s like I thought about it, but I didn’t put too much thought in it cause you’re just so used to hearing about that type of stuff.

Their faith in the institution’s ability to swiftly and decisively deal with discrimination and situations of racism was not well respected. This example explores political intersectionality in that these police reports unintentionally perpetuated the idea that Black women are not as vulnerable or in danger of predators like white women and created a false sense of security (Crenshaw, 2009; Banks, 2009; hooks, 2001). In addition, these ideas threatened to perpetuate stereotypes of violence in black and brown communities. The institution’s historical dealings with issues of race and sexism played into the present narrative of student’s expectations regarding dealing with their own issues of discrimination on the campus.

Crenshaw explained similarly in discussing political intersectionality, that it “highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas” (p. 217). In some ways, the women in the study were stuck between wanting to believe that their lives were in danger from some unknown predator, but were instead likely to disregard their own safety because false accusations were such a common plight within the Black community. In an environment like South University where they had a history of dealing with racially charged phrases and words being written in public locations across campus or other outright and visible acts of discrimination from members of their own community, one can understand more effectively how the stories of women like Nikki and
Brandy are important. As South University promotes an atmosphere of family and acceptance, they must ensure that their environment creates that experience for all of their students.

**Success and Agency at a PWI**

As a student affairs practitioner, my training has allowed me to have an understanding of student behavior and to take into consideration the intersectional facets of their background, which aided in influencing that behavior (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erickson, 1959; Forney, Evans, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). In addition, I began to question what degree of agency existed to allow them to act as agents in the creation of subject identity within the institution. What I found was a complex and intricate equation, factoring in elements of environmental culture at the institution, the background and experiences of the student, as well as their own expectations about how the college experience would impact them. In addition to the material aspects of pursuing academics and becoming viable educated members of society, as educational access increased, the quality of the education they received began to factor more heavily into academic choice.

As a result, in present day, agency and school preparedness were major themes in the stories of our women. Linked to this ideology of school choice, was success and cultural capital. Cultural capital is referred to in the literature as having possession of knowledge and resources that result in gains whether they be for academic, social, or career mobility efforts (Bourdieu, 1996; Hardaway & McLoyd, 2008; Larau & Horvat, 1999). For many participants and their families, a great amount of emphasis was placed on ensuring that they had an effective academic foundation that would make them more likely to attend and persist in college (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, and Oh, 2008; Astin, 1971, 1973, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As such, the choice to attend a PWI was an important status step and participants discussed moving schools as
they got older to more resourced and diverse educational opportunities, to make that dream more of a reality. The agency and cultural capital that was associated with attending a PWI was enough for students and their parents to abandon concerns about fit or climate for Black women attending South University. For those parents, the historical and longstanding agency associated with whiteness was a more lucrative gamble for their student’s academic history. Despite evidence of distrust between students of color and dominant group faculty and institutions (Campbell & Campbell, 2007; Dahlvig, 2010; Davis, et. al, 2004; Sue, Bingham, Porche-Burke, & Vasquez, 1999), parents of students set them up to be members of the minority among the majority and to endure the challenges that their race and gender might present at a PWI. In many ways, agreeing to experience the hypervisibility and invisibility experienced by many of our students was more of a gamble and opportunity.

To look at the experiences of black women outside of that intersectional frame “resists telling” and these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of feminism, gender, or social class (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw explains the concept of “resisting” and argues that the very existence within an intersectional space often prohibits women from sharing their experience and puts them in an uncomfortable space where they resist the urge to tell their story. She states, “Race, gender, and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or domination—that is, as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different,” (p. 1242). This idea supports the recurring theme from our women participants who struggled to truly feel like a part of the institutional culture at South University. Even for those who found a niche, the very real way in which the students who participated in the study navigated their individual experiences with dominant culture at the PWI, stood as narrative examples of agency
to reframe and expand the viewpoints of those around them. As this research supports, providing additional narratives and stories is a way to act upon agency in a way that can have a shift on present ideology. The more we are able to expand our understanding of Black women in the academy, the better for future Black women. Gwendolyn Pough (2004) argues that through the process of “wreck” (*intellectual destruction or deconstruction*) researchers can call for an interrogation of notions of the public sphere or universally held truths and stereotypes. St. Pierre (2000) supports this assertion in that “the category of the subject [can be] opened up to the possibility of continual reconstruction and reconfiguration” (p. 502). Therefore, the very experience of “being black” at a predominately white institution can be explored and called out for its tendency to serve the dominant power structure (Weedon, 1997). Within the predominately white institution construct, black women are challenged through powerful and evident institutional norms. Because of the limited explorations of marginal discourse and its power over the dominant PWI context, this territory is often unchartered and mitigated with hidden landmines, but can be reinvented as was the case for the women in this study.

**Discourse at the Intersection of Individual and Institution**

Discourse speaks to the spoken and written language and its use in our lives. It can be described as the essence through which individuals and institutions transform acts into meaning (Danaher, et. all, 2000; Hall, 1990; Weedon, 1997). It is important to recognize the discursive bodies present as we explore how the predominately white institution enacts itself among individuals. In the case of South University, an analysis of their mission, vision, and current ideology speaks to a strong emphasis on excellence and tradition. Because of the tangible soundbites that make-up the South University history, individual students are impacted by that history in more than one way. For example, as an institution which discusses tradition as a major
tool, Black women as individuals might find it difficult to fit whatever “traditional” ideology has been presented as normative. In that way, this speaks to the women like Lauryn, Aliyah, and Nikki who went through their first year at South University, feelings as was described like “South University was not for [them]”. The traditions that the institution choses to uphold, like a segregated sorority system, or a longstanding history of white man student government and university presidents, does not leave room for a Black woman to see herself as a part of that dialogue. Additionally, prevalent among the discussions of South University was an emphasis on excellence. According to Mo, one of her friends was told that her resume, a record of excellence, was “too black”. In the context of South University, this exchange communicated to individual students that in order to be successful and have a proper record of excellence, that your resume had to include diversity of engagement.

When participants were asked to share the vehicle of success for Black women at South University, most discussed being engaged in both mainstream and minority involvement as being a key factor. Collins (2000) argues that linking experiences and ideas presents an opportunity to engage in a deeper exploration of “challenges that result from living in a society that historically and routinely derogates women of African descent” (pg. 25). The specific historical, cultural, and material place that black women find themselves in, can challenge notions of femininity and normative discourse that is prevalent in institutions of higher education. Caudraz and Uttal (1999) call for, “simultaneity of oppressions and interlocking systems of oppression” when studying experiences of Black women in order to center the discourse to create opportunities for engagement of individual experiences rather that persecution of their difference.
Resisting Stereotypes

Crenshaw (2009) states, “Minority women suffer from the effects of multiple subordination, coupled with institutional expectations based on inappropriate non-intersectional contexts, [which] shapes and ultimately limits the opportunities for meaningful intervention on their behalf” (p. 216-217). In many ways, Crenshaw’s (2009) reading of representational intersectionality speaks to the historical representations and stereotypes experienced by Black women at South University while attempting to navigate their academic existence. Take for example the story recounted by Aliyah who had an altercation with her roommate. Despite her best efforts to diffuse and avoid conflict in the situation, at the end of the day the analysis of her involvement with the incident would label her an “angry Black woman” unable to resolve conflict in a civil manner. From Aliyah’s analysis of the incident, you could tell she was baffled by the response of the police in terms of believing her account of the story and in determining that her response was so out of line that she ordered to attend “Anger Management” with a certified campus counselor. Present day research about controlling images of Black women (Gilligan, 2006; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Pillow, 2006; Hill-Collins, 2002; Peterson, 1992; West, 1992) support that these images propagate dangerous assumptions and stereotypes for Black women that permeate our constructions of their identity. This act resists the opportunity for Black women to create their own positions and takes attributes that could be defined as assets, such as strength, and turns them into negatives due to the fact that womanhood has been historically and narrowly defined from the perspective of White women (Hill-Collins, 2002; Banks, 2009). Strength has certainly not been a characteristic attributed as positive for womanhood.
In other instances, lack of representation can be linked to how Black women are represented within cultural imagery. According to Crenshaw (2009),

When one discourse fails to acknowledge the significance of the other, the power relations that each attempts to challenge are strengthened. For example, when feminists fail to acknowledge the role played in the public response to the rape of the Central Park jogger, feminism contributes to the forces that produce disproportionate punishment for Black men who rape white women, and when antiracists represent the case solely in terms of domination, they belittle the fact that women particularly, and all people generally, should be outraged by the gender violence the case represented. (p. 236)

As such, ignoring the way in which policies or responses to Women of color are enacted within situations of power, it can be easy to devalue them on some level. In the instance of Aliyah, because of her race identity group was more salient to the police officer, they never sought to take into account how a woman would feel being attacked by a larger white male. Aliyah was never given the benefit of the doubt and the controlling images painting her as angry and unruly trumped any opportunity to view the incident from the perspective of her womanhood. In the same regard, Mo was challenged to have conversations with the white male members of her Air Force ROTC squad. Their limited depictions of what it is like to be Black women, often presented challenges in Mo attempting to dispel myths or outright deny stereotypes. The contact challenge of overcoming representational images occurred for participants on a regular basis.

**Respectability Politics and the PWI Environment**

Kimberly was keenly aware of what behavior and attitudes belonged within her majority white sorority house. The material evidence of present day expectations about appearance, attitude, and actions, coupled with the historical reality and discourse of respectability politics
shaped many interactions that Black women had with the PWI environment (Harris, 2005; Crenshaw, 1997, 2009; Ihle, 1992; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992; Tinto, 1993; White, 1980). Touted as a “emancipatory strategy”, in present day reality, respectability politics serves as a way to police the actions and attitudes of Black women at South University (Harris, 2014, p. 35). Ruth recounted choosing her hairstyles based on who she thought she might interact with over the course of the weeks. Additionally, Kimberly discussed “straightening” her hair for special events deeming it more appropriate, and “not straightening her hair in the (sorority) house” for fear that her white peers would not understand the cultural differences in hair maintenance that they might witness, should she have decided to prepare her hair at the house. Still other participants policed their resumes so they weren’t “too black” and other students policed their attitudes and opinions to seems less hostile or opinionated among white peers. When the tangible expectations of appearance met their cultural norms, along with the expectations that came along with their predominately white flagship institution culture, time and time again Black women were taught to assimilate or recreate the norm. Respectability politics in action on the PWI campus, became a vehicle for driving historical depictions and expectations. Higginbotham (1993) states that respectability politics was originally taught by Black Baptist women and emphasized manners, self-esteem, and morals. However, in the instances recounted by students, respectability became a vehicle for the standard of what was deemed normative behaviors for the majority and to many students in the study seemed restrictive to the development of their subject positions as individuals. In conjunction with the ideas of respectability politics historically created as a charge by Black Baptist women, the PWI institution further perpetuates the ideology of mainstream customs by rewarding students who more closely aligned with that the most premiere and sought after leadership opportunities.
Helping Higher Education: Implications for Academic & Student Affairs

The implications of understanding Black women in the context of a raced, gendered, and historicized environment like a predominately white institution of higher learning is very important. This study would fall short if it did not offer recommendations to those institutions, so that they might improve the experience of Black women undergraduates. Despite challenges and inequity experienced by Black women, by and large they are still being successful in the higher education environment (O’Conner, 2002; Howard-Vital, 1989; Hrabowski et. al, 2002; Sanders, 1997). However, because many of the challenges faced by Black women in this study centered around perceptions, stereotypes, and predetermined norms, it is important for Colleges and Universities, specifically PWIs with strong historical backgrounds, to recognize how their history can be a set-back to women of color. Upon identifying the potential set-backs, colleges and universities must work to create access in areas that have been traditionally closed off to minority students.

Though individual resilience is also a strong suit of Black women, Universities should not take that for granted. A common theme among the women in the study was the use of both internal and external systems of support. For this reason, predominately white institutions should ensure that Black women feel supported within the academic, as well as social environment. It is not enough to develop the same cookie cutter diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programming models seen across the nation. At a campus like South University, the institution’s response to systemic issues of racism and sexism should center on sustainable, culture shifting efforts. Firstly, at South University, the institution needs to publicly and systematically recognize their history, both structurally and philosophically (Constantine & Sue, 2006; Ridley, 2005; Watt, 2007). Recognizing the landmark areas of campus that are a part of
that Black history and making efforts to publicly rename or mark the history of buildings named after clan members, naming and acknowledging slave graves, and locations where Black people worked and labored (The President’s Mansion), would support a physical acknowledgement of a sordid past. Visible shifts in ideology are important because of the longstanding consistent racism on the campus. In addition, South University should aim to become a leader and pioneer in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts at the academic level. If South University committed substantial funds to the development of a cutting edge resource center, a center for research and policy development, and also the development of minority based programming, it would send a clear message regarding the direction of the institution and its relationship to its past. For students of color, they are not scared away from the institution because of their past. But, there is a general sense that the institution’s small efforts at DEI practices are not congruent with the grand narrative that exists regarding the institution. Large sweeping efforts to embrace their narrative of hate and discrimination could go a long way at changing and shifting the entire ideology of the institution.

Overall, it is still important to focus on South University and other institutions of higher learning in promoting the little wins. The social environment was challenging, so institutions can aid by ensuring that all student outlets for engagement are available. At the end of the day, students are only going to reach out to those resources that seem to be most accessible and of help to them. From the academic standpoint, predominately white institutions must work hard to shoulder the past of their history, but should be proactive in addressing issues of culture that prohibit mobility for Black women. This should be done through proper preparation of staff and faculty through examining their own raced and gendered spaces. Additionally, the voices of Black women must be utilized to provide valuable insight that formal or traditional approaches
might miss. It is also important for PWIs to understand agency and choices for Black women. Critiquing existing systems, exploring multiculturalism and diversity policies are critical. Institutions of higher education, and particularly PWIs must look to their policies from the lens of the stories shared by Black women. In doing so, often updates to policies and procedures can take place and obstacles not readily seen can be broken down.

Student Affairs, seen to be outside of the classroom force complimenting academic education at colleges and universities, is also implicated within the recommendations for support for Black women at predominately white institutions. In many ways, Student Affairs is tasked with closing the gap of student’s development through providing a practical and applicable understanding of society, their role in that society, and in becoming ethical, challenging, and engaging world citizens. Among recent areas of emphasis for Student Affairs practitioners is specifically diversity, equity, and inclusion. Student Affairs cannot treat diversity, equity, and inclusion as a hot button item, but must realize its importance in a world that has become more increasingly globalized. It is important that all students leave our institutions of higher education with a better understanding of their place within a global society. One can imagine just how challenging that might be at a southeastern institution steeped in historical and present issues of race and one that has certainly seen more men in positions of power than women.

In order to support Black women at PWIs, Student Affairs practitioners must continue to develop multicultural programming, emphasize specialized offices, and push for greater adoption of programs emphasizing diversity, equity, and inclusion that are required off all students. In addition, Student Affairs must work to make traditional roles of leadership on college campuses more accessible to minority students and must also work to break down gender barriers. Much of what must happen involves unique and nuanced cultural shifts, specifically in institutions like
South University, where traditional pipelines to leadership might often prevail. In addition to
more involvement from Black women and students of color, based on this research, I would
recommend that PWIs break down the stigmas surrounding multicultural involvement. As recent
critique has supported, safe spaces could prove beneficial in helping students “acquire the
dangerous knowledge they need” (Guterl, 2016, pg. 3). These concepts can offer students of
color a level of support that is necessary and useful in the micro aggressive environment often
prevalent at predominately white institutions.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Study**

While this study focused primarily on the historical impacts on race and gender for Black
women attending PWIs, it is important to note that a major limitation of the study was the
absence of an analysis related to class. Class, because of its interesting nuances, deserves a
much larger analysis as it relates to the historical, race, and gender aspects of Black women and
their experiences at PWIs. Will Barratt (2011) in his text, Social Class On Campus, discusses
the various facets of class as being multifaceted in it being an individual perception, a tool, an
intercultural experience, and as more than money. According to Barratt (2011), “your
experience of social class is yours” and “is not necessarily generalizable to the social class
experiences of others, even to those in the same social class” (p. 27). For this reason, it would
have been challenging to discuss class in the context of this study. Because class includes
perceptions, money, access, education, and other factors of influence, it would be necessary for
future studies to define aspects of class that would be addressed in additional research. Often
because of the complexity of what class brings to the table as well as the salience that race and
gender are afforded due to the region and location of this study, it is often overlooked.
Future research would need to address the fluidity that class conversations bring to the table due to individual interpretations of level of wealth, influence, and other areas that are engaged in conversations of class.

**Conclusion**

The recommendations shared are designed to spark interest in expanding the literature relevant to the experiences of black women attending PWIs. Particularly, these recommendations seek to encourage institutions to adopt practices and environments that allow black women to exist within their intersectional role, while embracing what they contribute from being in that unique space. Deeper research on the impact of the experiences of black women undergraduates and their interactions with environment and modes of agency is needed in the following areas: 1) Negotiating and facilitating conversations about race in academic settings; 2) exploring historical context and its influence on academic environment; 3) identifying how support networks can be an asset to academic success; and 4) challenging stereotypes and institutional campus norms. Through exploring these areas of emphasis, predominately white institutions can be trailblazers in the area of increased diversity, equity, and inclusion. What better training ground can be found, that would allow for emphasis on the challenges faced by Black women and other students of color?

Hosting conversations about race within institutions of higher education can aid in breaking down preconceived notions and stereotypes. In addition, the facilitation of conversation fits with the overall academic intent of higher education. Higher education is a place to expose students to new thoughts and differences of opinion. In addition, it is important to understand the implications of campus history on the lives of Black women. When you walk onto your campus and on your way to biology, you are faced with the graves of slaves or you
walk into your English building at its namesake is that of a Ku Klux Klan member, messages are communicated. It does not come across as strange or weird when later a student of color says she doesn’t “belong”. In order to create a sense of belonging for all students, PWIs have a responsibility to understand how the history of their finest hour might impact that of students who are not in the majority. They have a responsibility to challenge those messages and to rewrite them when possible.

As institutions of higher education, PWIs are charged with providing resources to students. Through this study, support was an evident and necessary component to success for the Black women interviewed. Ultimately, it is a necessary process to uproot and upend institutional norms. One of the themes of this research stemmed around normative roles for Black women. When they went outside of those roles, they were seen as deviant. That deviance projects a normative lens onto traditional roles, while in demonizes those that fall outside of those norms. Institutions must learn to support all their students in their various stages and must challenge norms that exclude Black women from involvement.

When interviewing Black women for this study, a recurring theme among their stories was their negotiation of day to day interaction. They talked about classroom experiences, experiences with other students, and recounted stories, that from their perspective could have only have been experienced by Black women. From these perspectives, we learned that Black women were negotiating their race and gender in very real ways and were being faced with lack of knowledge, stereotype, and misrepresentation from their peers, as well as those tasked with educating and guiding them. This harsh reality was challenging for some of the women. Ultimately for most women in the study, these challenges did not stop their progress at South University. However, it does not mean that other Black women have not been challenged. At
the end of the day, the goal and desire is to ensure that Black women can be as a part of their PWI experience as their peers. Through challenged, understanding, and support, that can be a reality.
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APENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL
April 10, 2015

Rosalind Moore
Student Affairs
Box 870292

Re: IRB#: 15-OR-111 “Black Women and the Contextual Performance in the PWI”

Dear Ms. Moore:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Your application will expire on April 9, 2016. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Carpanaldi J. Myles; MSM, CIP
Director & Research Compliance Officer
March 29, 2016

Rosalind Moore
Director of Undergraduate & Graduate Student Involvement
Department of Student Involvement
The University of Alabama
Box 870167

Re: IRB # 15-OR-111-R1 “Black Women and Contextual Performance in the PWT”

Dear Ms. Moore:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your renewal application.

Your renewal application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your application will expire on March 28, 2017. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Study Closure Form.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Carpent
Director of Research Co
Office of Research Co
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Interview Protocol

(1) Introductory Semi-Structured Context Interviews: Experiences of Performance at PWI

Introduction: To facilitate our discussions, I would like to digitally record our conversations at each interview. In order to officially confirm your participation in this study, I will also need to explain and discuss the Consent Form and have your signature. Just for clarification, I would like you to be aware that I will be the only one that will be privy to the recordings of our conversation. In addition, they will be destroyed after they are transcribed. In addition, you must sign a form to meet our human subject requirements. This document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm through having these conversations. Thank you for your agreeing to participate. Please let me know if you have any questions.

We have planned this interview to last no longer than 45-minutes. During this time, we have several questions where we will gather your feedback. We will do our best to run through every question listed as a part of this protocol to capture the full extent of your experience. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Introduction

You have been reached out to participate in this study because of your identification as an African American female between the ages of 19-23 attending a PWI. This research project focuses on understanding your experiences and interaction with the campus environment, in an attempt to offer a narrative and voice to Black women. In addition to understanding your experiences, this study seeks to compare that to your perceptions of environmental factors and politics surrounding your participation or lack of participation in the desired environment’s norms or behaviors. This study does not aim to offer solutions. Rather, we are trying to learn more about your perceptions and hopefully learn about environments that promote or would help that help improve Black women’s experiences on PWI campuses.

A. Interviewee Background

Tell me a little bit about yourself (i.e.- where you are from, major, career aspirations, upbringing)

How long have you been …

______ living in the south?

______ at this institution?

Interesting background information on interviewee:
What factors contributed to you choosing this institution?
___________________________________________

How did the region and/or type of institution impact your decision?
_______________________________________

Does that fact that this institution is predominately white impact you in any way?

1. Briefly describe your pathway to successful engagement (leadership positions, good gpa, involvement etc.) as it relates to academics and extracurricular involvement at this university (if appropriate).

   Probes: How are you involved in those activities? How often?

2. Has your involvement positively or negatively impacted your perception of the institution? Why or why not?

3. What motivates you to be successful in college?

4. How have you personally experienced growth as a result of attending college?

5. How would you define your personal growth? As it relates to being a Black woman?

   Probes: In what ways has that growth been impacted by the environment or perceptions of yourself or others?

**B. Institutional Perspective**

1. Has your perception of the institution prior to attending changed, remained the same, or other?

2. How do you assert your individuality within this institution? Is that important to you? Why or Why not?

3. Is the institution supportive of that? Why or why not?

3. Have you experienced any pressure to act a certain way or perform in a certain manner? Why or why not?

4. How does your race and/or gender impact the way to interact in the college environment at this institution?

6. Are there certain stereotypes or perceptions that exist about Black women at this institution? If so, what are they?

   Probes: Do those stereotypes fit your personal experience? Why or why not?
1. What is the strategy at this institution for improving the experiences of students like yourself?

   Probes: Is it working – why or why not?

C. Support Mechanisms

1. What resources are available to Black women to aid in their success at this institution?

2. What have you done personally to ensure that you have been successfully engaged in the student experience?

3. Have you encountered resistance in any way on campus? If so, what was that like?

4. Tell me about your experiences with respect. What does respect mean to you?

5. What does respect look like for a Black Women at this institution?

D. Discipline

1. What are some of the major challenges you face as a Black woman attending this institution?

   Probes: How can barriers be overcome?

   How can opportunities be maximized?

E. Demographics

Age, Major/Minor, Career Aspirations, Family Make-Up (only child, siblings, etc); Hometown…other demographic information that is either shared or requested.

(2) Semi-Structured Context Interviews: Photo Discussion

At our last discussion, I asked you to take photos of objects, locations, or scene that depicts or represents an experience or emotion related to their development as students on this campus.

Please share the photo(s) for discussion.
Tell me about your photos.
How did you decide what to take a photo of?
What is significant about the experience or emotion depicted in this photo?
Was that experience or emotion integral to your growth or engagement with campus?
What can we learn about your experience from this photo?

The interview will focus mainly on the photos, but will also include unstructured questions related to recap of themes from the previous interview.
(3) Semi-Structured Context Interviews: Observation Discussions

Thank you for meeting with me again. Today we are going to focus on discussing the observation and event that I attended with you.

Tell me about your experience at this particular event?

Was this interaction typical of most interactions at this type of event?

How has this type of event been integral to your involvement?

Are there expectations about how Black women are to act and participate in this event? Why or why not?

Do you have expectations for yourself about how you are to act/interact at these events?

Why did you choose this particular activity for me to observe?

How did my presence impact your interaction with others?
What did you gain out of this experience?
How does this experience fit into your broader perspective of the institution?
What motivates you to engage with events and programs on campus?
Are events and programs that appeal to your race/gender useful to your growth?
How does being a Black woman impact the types of events/programs you participate in?

After each interview has been transcribed, I will give the participant an opportunity to review and fact check/clarify any information. Because of the semi-structured nature of this interview, additional information and probe may occur depending on the individual’s response to questions.
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT
AAHRPP DOCUMENT #192

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM

Informed Consent for a Non-Medical Study

**Study title:** Black Women Undergraduates: *An Analysis of Contextual Performance in the PWI*

**Investigator's Name, Position, Faculty or Student Status:** Rosalind L. Moore, graduate student, College of Education, Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Technology Studies

You are being asked to take part in a research study.

This study is called *Black Women Undergraduates: An Analysis of Contextual Performance in the PWI*. The study is being conducted by Rosalind L. Moore, who is a graduate student at the University of Alabama. Ms. Moore is being supervised by Dr. Natalie G. Adams, who is a professor of Education at the University of Alabama.

**Does the investigator have any conflict of interest in this study?** The investigator is a professional staff member at The University of Alabama where the study is cited, which could create a conflict of interest. The investigator has identified participants from other academic and administrative areas at The University to accommodate for this. The conflict has been reviewed by the IRB and the University of Alabama Conflict of Interest Review Board. A Conflict of Interest Management Plan has been put in place to protect the interests of participants and/or to avoid other adverse impacts on this study.

**What is this study about? What is the investigator trying to learn?**

This study is being done to find out about the experiences of Black Women undergraduates attending a predominately white university. The investigator seeks to explore the institutional, relational, and personal dynamics of race, class, and gender
that are involved in molding and shaping ones experiences as undergraduate students who have successfully engaged with the campus experience. The study will seek to understand how the students in the samples experiences shape their growth. The goal of the study is to gain perspective of each participant's unique experience in the predominately white university and to analyze the experiences to draw specific themes from the stories. Outcomes of the study may be viewed as insight into the particular experiences of the participants involved in the study and may not be effectually generalized to depict, describe, or diagnose a broader audience or population.

Why is this study important or useful?

This knowledge is important/useful because literature on young black women's experiences in college often tells us little about the process they ensue to attain academic success or what they encounter in navigating the political climate of the institution. Also, research about black students is often viewed from the black male perspective and leaves little room to interpret what challenges or differences gender might have on the educational experience. The absence and/or limitation of analysis limits the diversity of research data collected. Because there has been little increase in the number of black women attending college, this type of study can provide opportunities to explore what would make them most successful. Understanding what social and environmental dynamics Black Women undergraduates experiences in predominately white college campuses, how these women develop and expand their social identities, and which institutional factors contribute most significantly to their success experience will help both faculty, staff, and administrators employed at universities understand and better serve, as well as support this population.

Why have I been asked to be in this study?

You have been asked to be in this study because you are an Black Woman undergraduate in good academic standing (2.7 gpa or higher), at least 19 to 23 years old, and involved in one or more traditional student organization/leadership positions at the research site. Your name was provided to me by the student organization that you are a part of at the research site. You responded to my outreach and expressed interest in this study. You have confirmed in an email exchange that you identify as a Black woman, pursuing an undergraduate degree, which constitutes the appropriate criterion for participants in this study.

How many people will be in this study?

About (10) other people will be in this study.
What will I be asked to do in this study?

If you meet the criteria and agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do these things:

- Identify a pseudonym to be used as a personal identifier (name) in the study.
- Meet in-person with the investigator on (3) occasions to discuss your experience as a black woman undergraduate student at the research site.
- Allow the investigator to observe your participation in at least 1-2 campus activities for the purpose of understanding the types of activities you have become involved in as a student.
- Take a photo(s) of representative places or objects that symbolize an aspect of your student experience.
- Review transcripts of the interviews and evaluate for accuracy and authenticity.
- Review the manuscript at the conclusion of the study to ensure accuracy in presentation of the information, construction of your thematic summary, and portrayal of your experiences.

How much time will I spend being in this study?

Each interview and/or observation should take about 45 minutes; the combined time for the minimum of (4) interviews and observations should be no more than 180 minutes. The entire study and review of the information will take about (6) hours of your time over (4) four weeks.

Will being in this study cost me anything?

The only cost to you from this study is your time and energy during the interview/observation exchanges.

Will I be compensated for being in this study?

You will not be compensated for being in this study.
Can the investigator take me out of this study?

The investigator may take you out of the study if she feels that the study is upsetting you or something happens that means you no longer meet the study requirements, etc.

What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?

Little or no risk is foreseen from your involvement. The primary risk is that you may get tired from the interviews, bored by the conversation, upset by thinking about your relationships, school experiences, etc. The investigator will work to minimize these risks by attending to the dynamics of the interview/observations by taking breaks, rescheduling interviews/observations when/if necessary. If the risks become too significant for you, the investigator will remove you from the study. You may also elect to remove yourself from the study at any time.

Risks to your privacy and confidentiality will be minimized by identifying a pseudonym and refraining from including overtly specific personal identifiers in the written analysis of the interviews/observations.

What are the benefits (good things) that may happen if I am in this study?

There may be no direct benefits to you. You may experience some positive experiences talking through and reflections on your personal experiences. Although you will not benefit directly from participating in the study, you may feel good knowing that you have helped enlighten university communities about your experience as a Black female undergraduate at the research location.

What are the benefits to science or society?

This study will help university faculty, staff, and administrators to be more attentive to the positive/negative effects of environment on the development and needs African American women in college.

Society will benefit from increasing the number of African American women successfully navigating the PWI because of the environmental, race, class, and gender ramifications associated with improving the diversity and quantity of persons completing college.
How will my privacy be protected?

Interviews will be conducted in a location in which you feel most comfortable. The location will be private and free interference from others. We will ensure that only the interviewer and interviewee will have access to what is being said. In addition, during the interviews, you have the right of refusal at any time. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to. As a participant, you may also voluntarily elect to remove yourself from the study at any time.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

The investigator will take solid measures to ensure the confidentiality of your contributions to the research. Each interview will be audio-recorded using a digital voice-recording device for transcription to text at a later time. These audio-recordings will be used exclusively as aids to the investigator in organizing the information for analysis. Audio files will be stored on the investigator’s computer and access will be protected by a password. No other persons will have access to the audio data received from you, nor the transcriptions compiled by the investigator. Photos requested will not include any human subjects or information that may identify your person. These files will also be stored via computer with password protection and photo files will NOT be used outside of the data analysis process. Observation notes will be written by hand and then transferred to computer files. Paper notes will be shredded. You will receive and be asked to review the transcriptions and final manuscript before any information is published for public consumption.

What are the alternatives to being in this study? Do I have other choices?

The alternative to being in this study is not to participate.

What are my rights as a participant in this study?

Taking part in this study is voluntary. It is your free choice. You can refuse to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. There will be no effect on your relations with the University of Alabama.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board ("the IRB") is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and
that the study is being carried out as planned.

Who do I call if I have questions or problems?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study right now, please ask them. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study later on, please call Rosalind L. Moore at (205) 310-1843.

If you have questions about your rights as a person in a research study, call Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer of the University, at 205-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066.

You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html or email the Research Compliance office at participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu.

After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online at the outreach website or you may ask the investigator for a copy of it and mail it to the University Office for Research Compliance, Box 870127, 358 Rose Administration Building, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127.

I have read this consent form. I have had a chance to ask questions. I agree to take part in it. I will receive a copy of this consent form to keep.

☐ I agree to be audiotaped.

☐ I do not agree to be audiotaped.
Signature of Research Participant  

Date

Signature of Investigator  

Date
APPENDIX D

ADVISOR CONSENT
February 4, 2015

Institutional Review Board
The University of Alabama
358 Rose Administration Building
Box 870127
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487

Dear Sir or Madam:

On behalf of The University of Alabama Chapter of \textit{(name of organization) Afro American Gospel Choir}, I express support for the study proposed by Rosalind L. Moore, doctoral candidate in the College of Education’s Department of Leadership, Policy, and Technology Studies. Ms. Moore approached our organization to solicit support for engaging a number of our members in a voluntary qualitative research study, and we support her efforts to work with students from within the organization.

We have authorized her to send an informational email to request voluntary participation in the study. Please contact me with any questions that you may have regarding myself, or our organization’s support for this study.

Best regards,

Advisor’s Signature (First & Last Name)

Assistant Director Rural Scholars Program and Advisor, Afro American Gospel Choir

Title

205-348-3116/C.moore@cchs.ua.edu

Contact Phone/Email
February 3, 2015

Institutional Review Board
The University of Alabama
350 Rose Administration Building
Box 870127
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487

Dear Sir or Madam:

On behalf of The University of Alabama Chapter of (name of organization)

Collegiate 100 Black Women, I express support for the study proposed by Rosalind L. Moore, doctoral candidate in the College of Education's Department of Leadership, Policy, and Technology Studies. Ms. Moore approached our organization to solicit support for engaging a number of our members in a voluntary qualitative research study, and we support her efforts to work with students from within the organization. We have authorized her to send an informational email to request voluntary participation in the study. Please contact me with any questions that you may have regarding myself, or our organization's support for this study.

Best regards,

[Advisor's Signature (First & Last Name)]

Area Coordinator
Title
January 30, 2015

Institutional Review Board
The University of Alabama
358 Rose Administration Building
Box 870127
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487

Dear Sir or Madam:

On behalf of The University of Alabama Chapter of (name of organization)
National Pan-Hellenic Council, I express support for
the study proposed by Rosalind L. Moore, doctoral candidate in the College of
Education's Department of Leadership, Policy, and Technology Studies. Ms.
Moore approached our organization to solicit support for engaging a number
of our members in a voluntary qualitative research study, and we support
her efforts to work with students from within the organization.

We have authorized her to send an informational email to request voluntary
participation in the study. Please contact me with any questions that you
may have regarding myself, or our organization's support for this study.

Best regards.

{name}

Title
January 30, 2015

Institutional Review Board
The University of Alabama
358 Rose Administration Building
Box 870127
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487

Dear Sir or Madam:

On behalf of The University of Alabama Chapter of [name of organization],
express support for the study proposed by Rosalind L. Moore, doctoral candidate in the College of Education's Department of Leadership, Policy, and Technology Studies. Ms. Moore approached our organization to solicit support for engaging a number of our members in a voluntary qualitative research study, and we support her efforts to work with students from within the organization. We have authorized her to send an informational email to request voluntary participation in the study. Please contact me with any questions that you may have regarding myself, or our organization's support for this study.

Best regards,


Contact Phone/Email