Unraveling a Lifetime of Racism and Sexism: An Autoethnography of the Educational Journey from Kindergarten to Doctoral Education for an African American Woman

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ABSTRACT

UNRAVELING A LIFETIME OF RACISM AND SEXISM: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF THE EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY FROM KINDERGARTEN TO DOCTORAL EDUCATION FOR AN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN

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Carrie Kortegast, Director

Audre Lorde’s (1984) essay titled “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” is suitable for describing the intent and rationale for this research. My purpose was to use my voice to interpret experiences that assisted in dismantling the master’s house (dominant group) by sharing insights and unraveling the layers (onion peels as a metaphor) of my experiences with race, gender, and age on my academic journey to complete my doctoral degree at a predominantly White university to report a truth that denies the context of power and race in our society.

Higher education continues to wrestle with addressing the successful retention and degree attainment of nontraditional African American women doctoral students. African American women occupy a unique social position as members of two socially marginalized groups—Black and female—in a country that privileges Whiteness (Dubois, 2003). There is limited research that explores implications of nontraditional African American women’s experiences in higher education. Therefore, the purpose of this autoethnographic study was to examine the role of race, gender, and age in mediating my educational journey and trajectory. To highlight my
experiences, the study was viewed through critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism as frameworks using vignettes, narratives, and counterstories.

Examining both pre-college and in-college experiences, this study closely looked at the impact of race, age, gender, persistence, strategies, barriers, and support of a nontraditional African American woman at a predominantly White university. Findings indicated that race, age, and gender were important in shaping experiences related to persistence in college. By using autoethnography as an interpretive story telling process, I owned my story. Black women can speak to the world about their culture if they are allowed to tell their cultural truths in their own language.

Implications for the study highlight the importance of double jeopardy, double consciousness, relationships, and classroom climate in the success of Black women in college as well as the role of counternarratives in coloring African American women’s experiences at predominantly White university campuses. This study explored the importance of the following factors for promoting Black women’s success in doctoral programs: advising; mentoring; faculty diversity; recognition of race, age, and gender; and counterspace development. More specifically, this study adds to the discourse on Black female students and can be used to make recommendations that guide institutional best practices and policy.
UNRAVELING A LIFETIME OF RACISM AND SEXISM: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY
OF THE EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY FROM KINDERGARTEN TO DOCTORAL
EDUCATION FOR AN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN

BY

SANDRA BARNEY-INNISS
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:
Carrie Kortegast
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Writing Myself into Existence

The history of the American Negro is the history of his strife, this longing to attain self-conscious [personhood], to merge his double self into a better and truer self.

(W. E. B. Du Bois, 1903, p. 1)

This passage was written over a 100 years ago, and yet the problem remains: the problem of longing to merge one’s double-self into a better and truer self. I am interested in my double-self, the double consciousness of my two-ness: an American and a Negro – two souls, two thoughts, two warring ideals in a White world in one dark body (DuBois, 1903); being a woman (gender) and being African American, while experiencing a predominantly White educational community.

The year 2013 marked the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation (Proclamation 95) issued by President Lincoln. This law changed the legal status of 3.5 million enslaved African Americans. Although it did not eradicate racism, nor did it offer restitutions to those in bondage, supposedly their human rights were honored through constitutional amendments and federal government intervention. However, institutions of higher education remain problematic (Leon, 2016). Work is needed in higher education to help African American female students when faced with institutional racism on predominantly White university campuses (Neklason, 2019). Historically, African Americans have been underrepresented at
institutions of higher education in the United States. In this research critical race theory, critical race feminism and Black feminist theory were explored as frameworks for understanding the paradigm at work within predominantly White university settings and their relationship to barriers to opportunities, persistence, strategies and support of African American female students using the methodology of autoethnography.

The exclusion and marginalization of African American women in the academy is well documented from historical and contemporary perspectives. African American women continue to face systemic racism in their determination toward education due to the atmosphere and the traditions embedded in the academic community (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). African American women have made consistent strides in gaining access to higher education; they have opened and at times broken through doors to be successful in academia since the Civil Rights Movements (Perkins, 2015). As Ladson-Billings (1998) stated:

The academy is shaped by many social forces. More [non-White] women…are defining and redefining their roles within it. New ways of thinking about teaching and research have provided spaces for women scholars to challenge old assumptions about what it means to be in the academy. While both the women’s movement and Black [ethnic] studies movement have helped increase the parameters of academic work, new paradigms emerging from Black women’s scholarship provide me with a liberatory lens through which to view and construct my scholarly life. The academy and my scholarly life need not be in conflict with the community and cultural work I do (and intend to do) (p. 66).

Ladson-Billings’ words speak to the daily battle Black women fight in the academy as they challenge, change, and disrupt the current power structure (as cited in Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). While increasingly earning doctorates, many African American women attending predominantly White universities share the feelings that, despite their letter of acceptance into their universities, they were not ever fully accepted, welcomed, accommodated, or honored (Swail, 2003).
The number of Black women returning to school has increased in the past 30 years (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). A nontraditional undergraduate student is typically defined as 25 years or older, married or divorced, with or without children, may attend classes part-time, and may or may not be working (Jinkens, 2009). They may be like me – retired. I am a nontraditional graduate student due to the timing of my birth. According to where I am, I carry multiple labels or identities. I am known as a mother, wife, aunt, sister, retiree, baby boomer, and an African American woman at my predominantly White university. As a nontraditional graduate student (part-time) pursuing a higher degree, I began this program while I was working as a full-time teacher before being forced to retire (due to an accident at the workplace while teaching) in 2010. I have had several significant interruptions during my journey to earn my graduate degree. After being accepted into the doctorate program, I became the primary caretaker for my mom among other familial responsibilities. Although my work and life responsibilities have changed, I still feel the need to keep up with the advances in education. Since I have been afforded this free time that I have never had before, I am using it to complete my doctorate degree.

However, African American women have a unique perspective of educational and social injustices due to their positioning in society. As a doctoral candidate, activist, scholar, and an older African American woman, I have seen multiple aspects of identity developed for African American women in their attempt to resolve their sociocultural identities (by using their double consciousness), particularly for those attending predominantly White universities (Stewart, 2008). One of the multiple aspects of my identity is the category of a nontraditional African American woman, which adds to my lack of fit into the culture of academia. This identity puts me in the unique position of living with the oppressive double jeopardy of race and gender and now triple jeopardy due to my race, gender, and age.
Many African Americans are still confronted with issues, such as racism and discrimination, as they pursue their educational goals in graduate school. When the additional double jeopardy status is attached, the issues are compounded. African American women are struggling to navigate discriminatory practices related to gender and sexism in higher education. The unique identity of nontraditional African American women has piqued my interest. Therefore, my research study addresses the determination, persistence, and unspokeness of a nontraditional African American woman who has experienced inequality and unfairness at a predominantly White university while pursuing a doctorate degree. Although the number of African American female students who are choosing to further their education at predominantly White universities is encouraging, the mission of the school’s administrators and staff should be to provide top quality educational opportunities to their African American women.

Problem Statement

African American women are unique in being two minorities at once—Black and female—giving them dual citizenship and thus peripheral treatment (Kaba, 2008). African American women have been subjected to isolation in the academy, placing them among the last group(s) to penetrate the walls of graduate education (Bartman, 2015; Collins, 1986). Johnson-Bailey (2001) discusses how African American female students report they are discouraged and stifled in higher educational environments in specific ways:

1. They were ignored when they raise their hands in class;
2. They were interrupted when they spoke;
3. Their comments were disregarded;
4. They voluntarily remained silent out of fear, habit, or necessity; and
5. They were intentionally excluded from the student network. (p. 137)
Therefore, nontraditional African American female students have a different collegiate experience than their counterparts due to their race and gender (Bartman, 2015; Collins, 1986). It seems that African American women, due to double jeopardy, are not included inside the box and seem to be invisible within the walls of academia or within the culture and climate of the university.

The literature reveals that nontraditional African American female students have a unidimensional experience as they engage in college, especially in classroom settings (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). Traditional students often experience the luxuries of being wrapped in services and support of residence life, the convenience of co-curricular activities as well as health and counseling services. Inconvenient hours and the demands of work and family conflict with the resources offered to traditional students, preventing nontraditional students from becoming a real thread in the fabric of college life (Jinkens, 2009).

Purpose and Research Questions

Autoethnographies allow the researcher to explore personal experiences within a larger cultural context (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The purpose of this autoethnography was to examine the role of race, gender, and age in mediating my educational journey as a nontraditional African American female student in my postsecondary educational experiences in the American Midwest. Using the methodological tradition of autoethnography, I reflected on my experiences as well as my determination, persistence, and unspokeness on my journey to degree completion as a nontraditional African American woman within the larger sociocultural context. My reflections are grounded in critical race theory, critical race feminism, and Black feminist theory, which will be used to enhance the unraveling of experiences in my educational
journey. This study contributes to understanding the barriers encountered and the support needed by nontraditional African American female students in pursuit of doctorate degrees. This study should help higher education professors and administrators develop better strategies for recruitment and support for this group of students. As noted by Goncalves (2014), the goal is to help nontraditional African American female students survive, thrive, and succeed toward degree completion.

Overarching Research Question

This autoethnography was guided by the following overarching research questions: How did my racialized and gendered experience mediate my educational journey and trajectory? The related sub research questions include

1. In what ways, did my K-12 experiences socialize me to the institution of education?
2. How did my persistence strategies change over time?
3. How did relationships with family and educators contribute to my educational journey?

African American Women in Higher Education

Women first entered institutions of higher education in the United States when Oberlin College admitted female students in 1837 (Chamberlain, 1991). The first African American woman to earn a literary degree was Lucy Sessions in 1850, and the first B.A. was earned by Mary Jane Patterson in 1862 (Littlefield, 1995). In the 1920s, several institutions and organizations were founded primarily for African American women in higher education. Bennett College was founded as a coeducational institution in 1873; it, however, became a college for
women in 1926 (Littlefield, 1997). After the Civil War opportunities were provided for African American women in Black leadership. Oberlin College had a reputation of producing female African American student alumni, including ex-slave Blanche Kelso Bruce, the first African American woman to serve six terms in the United States Senate, and Sarah Woodson Early, the first African American woman to serve on a college faculty. Those African American women set the bar for other African American women to follow. During the 1980s, there was a wave of African American women assuming leadership roles at different colleges and universities. Johnnetta Cole, president of Spelman University; Marian Wright Edelman, of Spelman College Board of Trustees; and Niara Sudarkasa, of Lincoln University, were some of the first African American women administrators. Similarly, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Lucy Diggs Slowe all played significant roles in the emergence of African American women in higher education. These African American women gained national prominence and are historically significant.

African American women have earned approximately 65.6% of doctoral degrees awarded to African Americans (CLASP, 2015). The National Science Foundation (2018) reported that from 2005 to 2015, the proportion of doctorates earned by Black students rose from 6.2% to 6.5%, while the proportion of doctorate degrees awarded to Hispanics or Latinos grew from 5.1% to 7.0% (National Science Foundation, 2018). Moreover, in 2014, of the 54,070 doctorate degrees earned, 24,857 (46%) were awarded to women, and of those 24,857, only 1,501 (2.7%) were awarded to women who identified as Black women. This number represented the smallest number of any other minority group recorded. Furthermore, Denecke, Okahana, Feaster, and Allum (2016) report that women earned almost 52% of all doctorate degrees in 2015; however, only 11% of those awarded degrees were for individuals who identified as Black
women. Although African American women are making progress in higher education, they are still underrepresented.

In the field of doctoral study, the National Science Foundation (2018) reported that for women, the field of education saw an 86% increase in enrollment over the last 10 years. Black women continued to be the largest minority group awarded doctorates in the field of education, at a rate of 15%; however, the proportion of doctorates earned by Black students was still lower than other minority groups (National Science Foundation, 2018). With that, the time to degree completion in the field of a doctorate remains one of the highest: 11.7 years for education versus 6.7 to 9.2 years in other fields (National Science Foundation, 2014). Although the enrollment of Black women in the field of education has increased in the last decade, the proportion of doctorates earned is still lower than any minority group.

Black feminists engaged in specific feminism rhetoric in the mid-nineteenth century, but it was not until the 1970s the term Black feminism was coined. These feminists made the case that socially and politically Black women have to deal with the concept of “double jeopardy,” which refers to being Black and being a female. More recently, Black feminists expanded the notion to include issues of class and sexuality in addition to race and gender. Each of these social identities place the Black woman in the position of fighting not just one status, but the intersectionality of all labels that lead to discrimination (Salzman, 2006). Racism and sexism have persisted for African American women, and their double jeopardy has compounded their oppression (Brown, White-Johnson, & Griffin-Fennell, 2013, Sanchez-Hucles & Davis 2010). Horsford (2012) stated that “such theories have not similarly explored the natural, inborn or divine gifts and traits associated with the ‘great woman,’ and certainly not women of disadvantage and color” (p. 13). African American women appear to be making progress based
on participation and degree attainment rates and have come a long way in having their stories
told. These stories are possible due to social justice issues and the development of Black Studies,
Black Women’s Studies, and Black Studies Movements.

There is very little research that focuses primarily on African American women in higher
education. However, as Davis and Maldonado (2015) concluded:

The current and developing body of research on African American women in higher
education needs to provide a basis for realizing our history, ousting myths relating to our
experiences, and formulating theoretical frameworks, and establishing our identity in
higher education and in the larger sociocultural structure. (Davis & Maldonado, 2015, p. 48).

African American women wear many hats as nontraditional students who happen to be African
American and female: retirees, employment (full or part time), parents, grandparents, caretakers,
heads of households, single or married. But the one commonality we come with is our
responsibility. While African American women are present in higher education today as students,
faculty, staff, and administrators, they have had to deal with many challenges to ensure their
participation.

Theoretical Frameworks

It is important to understand what Black women face because of their race and gender
while attending a predominantly White university (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Therefore, the
theoretical frameworks employed in this study were critical race theory (Bell, 2000), Black
feminist theory (Collins, 1986,) and critical race feminism (Delgado, 1995). The three theories
provided a multidimensional perspective of nontraditional African American female students in
higher education.
Critical race theory considers how laws and institutional structures can contribute to inequalities and considers race and racism to be ingrained in the fibers of United States society. Critical race theorists give prominence to the premise of racism, which is that one racial group (White) holds more power and privilege over another racial group (Black) people (Delgado & Stefanie, 2017). Understanding the stance of African American women from the perspective of race-based theory, such as critical race theory, helps to recognize and celebrate the unique voice of African Americans. These women are change agents in developing a new view of themselves and how the world views women of color who are rendered invisible in academic discourse of race and gender (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005, Collins, 2000; hooks, 1990; Thompson, 2011).

Critical race theory is an important theory in framing this study because everyday racism defines race, interprets it, and decrees how personal and institutional teachings affect behavior. However, while critical race theory purports an intersectional approach, it still privileges race, although some critique say it does not address gender well.

Black feminist theory as coined by Patricia Hill Collins (1986) is a theoretical approach that embraces the ideas of resistance, voice, and activism. Collins explains that Black feminist theory is the emergence of African American women’s power as agents of knowledge, portraying African American women as self-defined and self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression. This theory provides a voice to and rationale for African American women and their views of the world and how women are able to overcome oppression and stereotypes. According to Black feminist theory, the centrality of a changed self to personal empowerment can be used as a strategy of resistance against racism and sexism experienced by Black women graduate students in higher education (Collins, 2000). For Collins, the two most important and disadvantaging oppressions all African American women share are race and
gender, and it is these intersecting oppressions upon which my collective reflections and perspectives are built.

Critical race feminism is a theoretical concept that offers space for traditionally silenced and marginalized individuals to critique social institutions that perpetuate inequality. In particular, storytelling and personal narratives allow women of color to discuss their experiences within a racist and patriarchal society. One of the key challenges of “speaking up” involves the unwritten rule that control what can be said what remains unsaid and how we can say what we want to say, (Croom and Patton, 2011).

The rationale for combining critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism is that racial inequality is unique and different for African American women compared to any other racial group because of intersectionality (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Predominantly White universities are particularly difficult places for Black female graduate students (Edghill 2007; Henderson et. al. 2010, Sotello & Turner 2002; Spraggins, 1998), where they face a type of double minority status that negatively impacts perceptions of them as less than capable researchers and scholars (Wilson, 2012). Scholars utilizing critical race theory and Black feminist theory focus on the impact on African American female graduate students’ entrance into higher education and their subsequent experiences. These frameworks allowed me to understand the processes by which Black women graduate students experience academic marginalization and social isolation due to race and gender, particularly when entering predominantly White universities.

Attitudinal and institutional racism are dependent on each other and inseparable for Black female students in higher education as it is a social institution plagued with the same sexism and racism found within the larger society (Sommersell, 2003; Spraggins, 1998). Any literature that
examines Black women must also examine the unique experiences Black women face at the intersections of race and gender. Nontraditional African American female students and faculty in institutions of higher education inhabit those intersections. Intersectionality is an umbrella that houses Black feminist theory and aligns with critical race theory to illustrate how gender and race interact and is useful in better understanding the multidimensional facets of what nontraditional African American women face at predominantly White university (Hall, 2016; Lewis & Neville, 2015).

When qualitative analyses using autoethnographical research are coupled with critical race theory, Black feminist theory and critical race feminism (McCall, 2013 & Morales, 2014), trends for both race and gender materialize in the life of Black female graduate students and can be explored (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2003). Utilizing these theories to analyze these effects will provide a strong model by which future studies can incorporate all three theories into their research (Cotter et al.). Therefore, the tenets of critical race theory and the inequality of the laws and policies coupled with the tenets of Black feminist theory and critical race feminism gave me voice and were helpful for sharing my experiences as a nontraditional African American female graduate student attending a predominantly White university.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography, as described by Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013), is a unique and compelling method. Autoethnographies often incorporate the following:

1) disrupting norms of research practice and representation; 2) working from insider knowledge; 3) maneuvering through pain, confusion, anger, uncertainty and making life better; 4) making work accessible; and 5) breaking silence, reclaiming voice and ‘writing to right’. (Bolen, et al., 2012, p. 32)
Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that allows the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing on his or her experience to extend understanding about a societal phenomenon (Wall, 2008). Chang (2016) states, “Autoethnography is a method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing” (p. 43).

Autoethnography is not about focusing on self alone, but about searching for understanding of others (culture/society) through self (Chang, 2016). Autoethnographers consider normal to be special and worthy of study, as I do in this study. This critical scholarship requires me, as the researcher, to look at the ordinary and to deconstruct the agendas hidden below the surface that exert power and influence over those within the culture, including myself. Thus, the challenge for me as the autoethnographer was to connect my interpretations to a broader narrative (through storytelling) that adds credibility to the interpretations being made and that fuses these interpretations to underlying positions of power and social control (Chang, 2016).

I explored my experiences, as my double self. I thought of ways to exist within the dominant box while observing from outside of it. As the autoethnographer, I voiced my feelings and shared my thoughts on injustices by illuminating the omnipresence and insensitivities of being excluded from the dominant group. Nontraditional African American women/African American women are impacted by race, gender, and age on predominantly White college campuses.

This study described this nontraditional African American woman’s experiences related to the intersectionality of race, gender, and age. My intent was to make changes through awareness and educational equality within all academic environments, particularly
predominantly White university classrooms. Calafell and Moreman (2009) stated that “feminists of color have long argued for the importance of listening to the experiences of women of color attending to the politics that underlie these voices” (p. 124). I was enamored with the opportunity to use my voice as the primary participant in my own research and finally not have to bite my tongue as I shared my experiences. I was allowed through autoethnography to define and critique my cultural beliefs, practices, and involvements through my understanding of fairness and inequality as a feminist of color.

**Significance**

This study is significant because it can influence policy makers and administrators in practices in higher education. Its significance also extends to sharing critical frameworks to help others confront issues of race, gender, and age when Whites are reluctant to do so. Gender discrimination affects most women on personal and professional levels, but it is apparent that racial discrimination is an added obstacle for nontraditional African American women. Harries (2014) claims that people must use narratives in ways that reveal the embeddedness of race in everyday life to challenge racism. This study matters because silencing of race is currently endemic in society. The “use of voice or ‘naming your reality’ is a way that critical race theory links form and substance in scholarship” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 13), and Black feminist theory examines the sets of institutional practices that affect Black women. Critical race feminism frames all the theories in one. Critical race feminism accepts that Black women’s experiences are different from White men’s, White women’s and Black men’s. One of Black feminist theory’s key themes includes the importance of Black women’s stories and experiences (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Therefore, this study sought to close the gaps in information
regarding nontraditional African American women’s experiences at predominantly White universities as their experiences relate to race, and gender.

Historically, predominantly White universities tend to perpetuate traditions and practices mostly based on students who are more traditional in nature. Chung, Trumbull, and Chur-Hansen (2014) describe the traditional student as residing on campus, age 18 to 24 years old, and attending college full time. This leads to disregarding nontraditional older students’ experiences in policy formation and student services. Therefore, this study fills three gaps by providing qualitative data on how nontraditional African American female students can 1) benefit from their double jeopardy status and intersectionality, 2) use data to improve their journey to successfully complete their graduate degree, 3) and give credence to their experiences attending a predominantly White university. The study also contributes additional understanding about critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism theory as the three relate to nontraditional African American women’s pursuit of their degrees.

Overview of Educational Journey

My journey began with my awareness of a new concept I call separation. This separation occurred throughout my life on all levels: personal, professional, and educational. This concept of separation began on my first day of school: I entered the classroom, set my eyes on playmates that I had played with before, I attempted to sit with them, but the teacher wanted me to sit elsewhere. I was confused. Being five, I followed her directions. The entire year Miss Dove (my neighbor and teacher) encouraged us to play with only those students she said were going places and would do great things with their lives. I was part of the group she said was going places. She seemed to like us more. I wondered at the time how she knew who was going to do what when
they grew up, but I did what I was told (even though I thought she was crazy). I was introduced to race in the second grade, my teacher referred to us when he was disappointed in our behavior as Schwartz. This led me to see that he thought he was superior to us only because he was a White German. In third grade I was introduced to Black culture by an African American female teacher who led us to believe the positiveness of being Black and proud.

In fourth grade I transferred to a new school where many of the students were Asian or White. There I experience a new level/kind of separation based on race and culture. Would this be my new norm? The adults on all levels (administrators, teachers, staff and parents) kept us separated no matter where we were in school; Asians and Whites were on one side of the room, and on the opposite side of the room were the Blacks. This separation continued in all activities like gym, lining up, lunch and entering and leaving the building. When students who did not like the separation wanted to be social, they were reprimanded and sent to their corner of the classroom.

In my last year of elementary school, I transferred to a place where everyone (even the teachers) were African Americans. And yet once more there was separation, I believe it was due to aesthetics, color of skin (high yellow to dark), hair (length and texture), dress and mannerisms. These things could determine where you ranked in school/class with the teachers and staff. This made me yearn for high school where I thought it would be different for some reason.

In high school yet again another separation of sorts; there it was Black on Black and all within the extra-curricular departments/activities and mostly with women gym instructors. I can only vouch for girl activities; I am not sure if the guys went through the pettiness we did. But the cheerleaders, majorettes, modern dance or pompom squads all went through the brown paper bag test (if you were color of brown bag or lighter you had a chance). The gym teachers only
selected the light, cute, long-haired, good teeth, small or petite girls. You had to be exceptional if you were dark to be on any of those squads.

In classes that were normal or accelerated and academic teams, no one seemed to care about the color of one’s skin. Your intellectual performance placed/ranked you on an academic scale. I did see the repercussions of colorism, some positive and some negative, but it did not interfere with what I wanted to do, so, I took the I don’t care approach. I was accepted, and that’s all that mattered to me at that time of my life.

When I look back at the end of my sophomore year and attending summer school at an all-boys Catholic school, I believe it was my first critical racial experience without the protection of my parents. I experienced racism and genderism (alone) from the moment I entered what I believed to be a holy building (exempt from racial experiences) until the moment I left each and every school day. Neither Black (me) nor White (them) ever experienced an “aha” moment, where we saw our wrong ways and overcame our prejudices. They (the dominant group) hated me and I grew to hate them. I didn’t have to guess their feelings; there were blatant gestures to remind me constantly I wasn’t welcome – my race or my gender. My father said that it would have been just as hard on any female from any race.

Then in my senior year, I experienced colorism, and it didn’t feel good. I had worked hard to become captain of the majorettes and everyone knew I wanted that position. My fellow majorettes came to me to say I had their votes, even my competitor. But when the gym teacher counted the votes in the privacy of her office, she didn’t call my name. I lost! My high yellow (lighter shade of brown) competitor won. I couldn’t wait to get home; I didn’t want to cry at school.
All of us gathered later and everyone agreed our gym coach had cheated; Cynthia my competitor, was lighter than me and we felt that due to colorism she won. I was disappointed and it made me think of my friends who tried out every year who were better twirlers than I and why they were never chosen for the squad. It was probably due to the darkness of their skin. That opened my eyes and made me aware of colorism and my interpretation of prejudice.

As an undergraduate student, I attended a private Christian Reform predominantly White college, with only about 250 students total and less than 20 minority students. Because this was a religious college, we were overloaded with rules. Rules…rules…rules! I could have dropped out, but I wanted to earn my bachelor’s degree. I could hear my mother saying in the back of my head: “keep your eyes on the prize.”

I loved the sciences, and my botany teacher came to me asked if I wanted a part-time job working with his wife at a senior nursing facility (I don’t know why he chose me). I interviewed and got the job. I got there and had to train for a couple of days. Most of the patients were bed ridden and never really talked to or asked me for anything. Things were fine when I was accompanied by a senior nurse, but then came the day, I went unaccompanied. You would have thought the patients had not seen me before. The patients would not allow me to touch them. Every time I walked into their rooms, they would start screaming. They would try to fight or throw things and were verbally abusive. Every time I walked in the room, it was the “N” word, and if I tried to take them off the bed pan, there was a problem. I even had one throw feces at me. The supervisor told me to clean it and stop being so thin skinned. I couldn’t take it anymore. I went to the closet, got my purse and keys, and left. My botany teacher called me and told me he would never reach out to me or my kind ever again and that these were geriatric patients and weren’t aware of what they were doing or saying. He never spoke to me for the rest of the
semester in a class of less than 10 or 12 students. From then on, I felt even more isolated by my professors and peers. The years left there were more or less the same. But I graduated, thin skinned and all.

After graduation I worked in a laboratory in the inner city hospitals and later began teaching at a Catholic elementary school. I returned to graduate school years later to earn my first master’s degree. Graduate school was at a Black university minutes from my house. Most of my professors looked like me. I wasn’t sure if it was due to age, responsibilities, or my life’s experiences, but it felt good to study with those who looked like me. After graduation I felt that my mission was accomplished. I eventually returned to earn another master’s in education and administration. When that phase was over, I wanted more—time for a doctorate! I envisioned after obtaining a doctorate degree to become a professor at a HBCU in order to give back and nurture other nontraditional African American women doctoral students.

Summary

Chapter 1 describes the background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, the history of nontraditional African American women/traditional African American women in higher education, overview of researcher’s journey, the theoretical frameworks, autoethnography, and the significance of the study. Chapter 1 also presents the overall enrollment of students in graduate doctorate programs. Many of these students are nontraditional African American women over the age of 50 years of age who face challenges related to race and gender at predominantly White universities. Autoethnography was used to explore the challenges and needs faced by a nontraditional African American woman in pursuit of a doctorate degree at predominantly White universities. This research acknowledges the importance of documenting
the perceptions of a nontraditional African American female student as a primary lens to capture challenges that have influenced her academic journey.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review presents topics related to nontraditional African American woman in higher education at a predominantly White university. The topics are as follows: the influences of race and gender in higher education; nontraditional students; challenges of African American students in higher education; the strategies for success of nontraditional African American women; equal opportunity for nontraditional students and lastly, my theoretical frameworks. This literature review also focuses on nontraditional African American women’s matriculation needs and the feelings of not being included in the educational environment. An exploration of the literature has indicated the need to better understand the college experiences of nontraditional African American women and African American female students attending a predominantly White university (Dortch, 2016, O’Connor, 2002, Williams & Nichols, 2012).

I employed a combination of theoretical frameworks as a means to understand the significance of my academic experiences beginning as a traditional African American woman and ending as a nontraditional African American woman who is usually underrepresented at predominantly White university. The topic of nontraditional students has been studied in varying degrees, but very little literature can be found regarding nontraditional African American female students on predominantly White university campuses. However, because there is very little research specific to the challenges of African American female nontraditional students related to
race, age, and gender, this review examines literature that garners an understanding of the factors that contribute to the attrition rates of nontraditional students who attend a predominantly White university.

The review ends with a combination of the theoretical frameworks (critical race theory, Black feminist theory and critical race feminism) as a means to view and understand the significance of the researcher’s experiences while attending a predominantly White university.

Influence of Race and Gender in Higher Education

Understanding the plight of African American women in higher education requires a review of literature on the history of higher education in the United States (Giancola & Davison, 2015). The United States’ education system was originally intended to meet the developmental and training needs of White men and then White women. Black men were later included in educational settings prior to African American women. Before 1833, African American women did not have access to formal education until Oberlin college in Ohio was founded (Giancola & Davison, 2015).

White Men in Higher Education

Much of the early research on higher education, conducted by White male researchers, did not explore race and gender differences, particularly because African Americans and women were not allowed to attend these programs (Blakemore, 2017). College admission began with the first college, Harvard, in the 1600s and White men created a code of laws for admission into the school. This code suggested that “when any scholar is able to read Tully [Cicero] or such like the classical Latin Author ex tempore and spoke true Latin in verse along prose suo (ut aiunt)
Marte...and decline perfect the paradigms of nouns and verbs in the Greek tongue, then and only then may he be admitted into the college” (Broome, 1903, p.18). These Broom Law requirements were in place for the entire seventeenth century and remained until the eighteenth century. These requirements served as a way to limit and control admission from those considered undesirable (poor and African Americans). A small change to admission policies in 1734 was that Latin was no longer a requirement for admission (Dougherty, 1994). As Neklason (2019) notes:

At the very first Harvard College commencement ceremony, nearly 400 years ago, markers of exclusivity were front and center. The graduating class consisted of just nine students: no women, no people of color; only, young men of good hope. The order in which they received their degrees was determined, not according to age, or scholarship, or the alphabet [sic], but according to the rank their families held in society. (p. 1)

Elitist college admissions were built to protect the privileges of the wealthy White students (Neklason, 2019).

Privileged elite college admissions began in 1900 when elite members of society moved to other top colleges like Princeton and Yale that had different college requirements (Dougherty, 1994). Even with the early changes, college was meant only for middle and upper-class students. However, the elite members of society who attended college were more interested in climbing the social ladder than academics and set this tone at their prestigious universities. Dominant groups found ways of discriminating among themselves by using wealth as the prime factor to eliminate the oppressed from attending their prestigious colleges and universities. Kendall (2012), Leonardo (2007), and Manglitz (2003) suggested that racism is not just about the construction of racial meanings and identities, it is centrally about the creation, development, and maintenance of white privilege, material wealth, and institutional power and the expense of racialized “others.”
White Women in Higher Education

This section provides a brief history of the educational experiences of White girls and women from the colonial settlement years to present times. According to Madigan (2009), “From ‘dame schools’ in the 1700s to seminaries for teacher training, women and girls have historically been prepared for professions related to caretaking, such as nursing and teaching” (p. 1). In the early 19th century, White children (mostly boys) began their lessons with the Bible, boys and girls did not attend school together, and girls were fortunate if they could learn the basics in reading and writing. Public school systems only existed in the New England states (Axtell, 1974). When girls went to school, they usually attended at different times when the boys were not in attendance. Educational institutions beyond the dame schools and single gender schools were private, segregated by sex, and exclusive to wealthy families (Riordin, 1990).

Men were more likely than women to continue their education beyond their homes if they were middle or upper class. Some girls wanted to continue their academic journey beyond reading verses in the Bible and writing their names. When desired, they were allowed to use private tutors (in their homes) or at dame schools (Madigan, 2009). White girls who were allowed to attend schools during those times were privileged and were taught to be domesticated citizens rather than scholars (Axtell, 1974). Women still faced the traditional perspectives of housekeeping and raising the children.

Prior to the Civil War, few colleges admitted White women into their programs of study. Faulkner (2016) states that “the late 1700s saw the advent of women’s academies and seminaries, which aimed to give women the same education as men despite the fact they were not allowed into traditional institutions of higher education” (p. 1). This trend continued into the
19th century when “it was frowned upon, and at times, against policy to allow women to attend traditional colleges and universities” (p. 1). Oberlin College opened its doors in 1833 and admitted both White men and women. Mount Holyoke became the first women’s college in 1837. Women were only allowed to study from two fundamental sections: The Female or the Teachers Department. In 1837, four White women entered the college degree program at Oberlin: Mary Hosford, Mary Kellogg, Elizabeth Prall, and Mary Caroline Rudd. The first White women to earn a Bachelor of Arts from Oberlin was Mary Caroline Rudd Allen. The colleges that accepted White women following the trend of Oberlin were Hillside College, Antioch College, and Hollins University. In short, prior to the Civil War the academies admitted first White women while still withholding the entrance of Black men and Black women. This explains how racism and sexism enters the academic arena. White men were the first to be educated in higher education due to gender and White women were second due to gender, both were before Black men or Black women. Therefore, race and gender were established in higher education as excluding factors.

Black Men in Higher Education

There were no structured higher education systems for Black students before the Civil War. Public policy and certain statutory provisions prohibited the education of Black men and Black women (United States Department of Education, 1991). As American colleges and universities were established, Black men were not permitted to enroll due to White faculty’s and administrators’ perceptions of African Americans being intellectually substandard (Fleming, Lambert, & Welburn, 2012). According to DuBois (2001), despite the beliefs of the White faculty and administrators, it did not destroy African Americans’ persistence to reach their
desired goals of their completion of a degree. Many schools specifically for the education of African American men and African American women were established in former slave states. Among the educational institutions founded after the Civil War were the Atlanta University Center: Atlanta University in 1865, Clark College in 1869 (now Clark Atlanta University), Morehouse College in 1867, Morris Brown College in 1881, Spelman College in 1881, and seminaries that would later be the foundation for the Interdenominational Theological Center (DuBois, 1903). In any event, higher education was not structured for Black students, but African Americans persisted when schools were established especially for African American men and women.

After the Civil War, several private colleges were formed by White religious groups for the education of freedmen and institutions for higher education exclusively for Blacks began to appear (Butchart, 2016). The first was the Institute for Colored Youth in Pennsylvania in 1837, followed by Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1854, and Wilberforce University in Ohio in 1856, (United States Department of Education, 1991). Because African Americans had not been exposed to elementary and secondary basic skills, it was necessary for them to participate in catch-up classes to bring them up to the university standards before attending college (Wheatle, 2019). Public awareness gave some support for Black students in higher education, which was provided in the second Morrill Act in 1890. Wheatle (2019) concluded that “the Morrill Acts were major legislation, but they did not signify the entitlement of every citizen; their successes for Black students, communities, and colleges were meager” (p.1). Race was not discussed in the Morrill Act until the passing of the second Morrill Act of 1890. The Act required states with racially segregated public higher education systems to provide a land-grant institution for Black students (Wheatle, 2019). After the passage of the Act, public land-grant institutions specifically
for Blacks were established in each of the southern and border states. As a result, some new public Black institutions were founded, and a number of formerly private Black schools came under public control (Wheatle, 2019). Eventually 16 Black institutions were designated as land-grant colleges. These institutions offered courses in agricultural, mechanical, and industrial subjects, but few offered college-level courses and degrees (Wheatle, 2019).

During the late 1800s, some states sponsored institutions for African Americans (Allen, Jewel, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007). These institutions were only established so state universities would remain White. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, most African Americans enrolled in higher education attended segregated schools set up by the dominant culture. Some Blacks wanted a more rigorous education and schemed or managed to be admitted into a few of the nation’s most esteemed colleges and universities.

**Black Women in Higher Education**

Despite the barriers, African American women have been resilient and persistent in enrolling in higher education. African American women who attended the Seven Sister Colleges, Mount Holyoke, Wesleyan, Smith, Radcliffe, Bryn Mawr, and Barnard were involved in racial passing (Perkins, 1997) because they could pass for white. Then there were parents who applied for admission into those colleges without divulging their daughters were of African American descent. The institutions often had no idea the student was Black until their arrival. For example, shortly after the daughter’s arrival at Mount Holyoke in 1916, a mother received a letter from the college telling her that they did not think her daughter would be happy there. The mother replied that she did not send her daughter there to be happy, but to learn (Perkins, 1997). That daughter
graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1919. Parents did that to acquire quality education for their
daughters by any means necessary (Perkins, 1997).

Similarly, Anita Florence Hemmings, a student at Vassar, enrolled in 1893 and
graduated in 1897. The administration found out after graduation that she participated in racial
passing. It was thought at the time that if parents and students knew it would cause a scandal, so
the school kept her secret. Ironically, years later her daughter, Ellen Parker Love passed for
white at the same school and graduated in 1927 without anyone ever suspecting that she was an
African American woman. Another such incident took place at Princeton with a student who
looked white and was found to be an African American women soon after graduation; she was
fearful her degree would be withheld, but it was not (Perkins, 1997). Passing is one strategy used
by African American women to obtain a quality education in elitist colleges.

The first African American women to receive a literary degree in 1850 from Oberlin
College was Lucy Sessions (Lewis, 2019). In 1862, Mary Jane Patterson was the first African
American woman to earn a B.A. from Oberlin College (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007). Patterson graduated
21 years after the first White women and 18 years after the first Black male. The eras of slavery,
Emancipation, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow established a climate in which African American
women sought and obtained educational experiences as students, teachers, and leaders
(Littlefield, 1997). However, in a segregated society that once legalized the doctrine of separate
but equal, Black women were consistently more separate and less equal (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007). By
the turn of the 20th century and after suffering the setbacks of the premature end to
Reconstruction, Black women continued college attendance. By the 1930s, educated Black
women leaders made clear the differing expectations of the next generation of college-educated
Black women. The landscape changed dramatically in the 1950s and 1960s as the passage of
Brown vs. the Board of Education and the momentum of the Civil Rights Act of 1965 reignited the belief among African Americans that education was the key to a brighter future (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991).

African American women’s path to a college degree has been far from easy, but as Sealey-Ruiz (2007) points out, “Despite their struggle for higher education during the past century, Black women have made amazing strides” (p. 45). However, the combination of race and gender may provide a deeper understanding of current perceptions on the part of African Americans and other individuals within the field of education (Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009). Smulyan (2000) describes the impact of gender in a woman’s life by saying that the role of gender seems to imply an inability to function competently in higher education. Essentially, gender influences African American women, both personally and professionally, affecting the context in which they live, function, and exist. Because racism, sexism, and elitism are continually reflected and reinforced in the system of higher education, many Black women feel isolated and alienated. They feel largely ignored, misunderstood, and unable to identify with other students, staff, and professors. Consequently, their experiences are not merely influenced by gender issues, but racism and classism and, in my case, ageism play an important role as well.

Challenges of African American Students in Higher Education

The late 19th to the early 20th century afforded increased access to higher education for African American women. Changes as a result of the 1960’s initiatives, federal legislation, and Supreme Court cases allowed more African American women to enter institutions of higher learning, serving as students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Their entrance, however, did not
ensure fairness and equity. These women were faced with challenges related to racism, sexism, microaggressions, and isolation (Edwards & Camblin, 1998; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007).

**Racism**

Black women, particularly those who are older than 23 and considered nontraditional, indicated they have a unique lived experience due to their status as a minority, woman, and nontraditional student that impacts their educational experiences (Bonner et al., 2015). Black female college students confront a host of challenges, including the burden of navigating campus environments where racism and discrimination still exist (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Although some believe that the United States is post-racist, Gusa (2010) argues that the denial of racism is dangerous because it ignores the continued reality of racial hostility and discrimination. Gusa explains that “schools and colleges are the third most common setting for racial bias hate crimes” (p. 43) and are a major cause for the high attrition rate of Black students matriculating at predominantly White universities. For many Black women, college is their first major contact with personalized White racism, especially with White faculty.

One challenge Black doctoral students face at predominantly White universities is the pressure they feel to represent their entire race positively by succeeding at everything (Gusa, 2010). Black doctoral students feel this pressure, particularly when they are the only Black woman in their White environment (Robinson, 2013). Additionally, these pressures are impactful for Black women doctoral students when they feel that they must prove those who speak against them wrong. They also feel pressure to succeed in spite of any negative experiences or beliefs about their ability to succeed (Coleman-Hunter, 2014; Robinson, 2013; Shavers & Moore, 2014). Therefore, many African American women face racism for the first time in college. Despite the
pressure of success being imperative to nontraditional Black female graduate students, many have the feeling of being placed under a microscope for all to see and judge.

According to earlier studies, Cress (2008) found both students who had heard and those who never heard disparaging remarks about Blacks on campus; Booker’s (2016) study showed that Black students reported less contact with faculty and staff outside of the classroom than White students. Grant and Simmons (2008) found the faculty were “emotionally, socially, and academically unavailable to Black students. Black students felt the faculty had a difficult time relating to them because of race” (p. 501). Eddy and Gaston-Gayles (2008) reported that Black students frequently believed they were treated as representatives of their race rather than as individuals. Current studies show that the experiences of Black students attending predominantly White universities are still problematic (Felder et al., 2014). African-American students are more likely to be the target of direct and indirect discrimination (Suarez-Balcazar, et al., 2003). Research has shown that more African Americans students are not as often retained at predominantly White universities (Suarez-Balcazar). As a result of discrimination, minority students still experience significant racism during college.

For years, Black women have pursued their educational goals despite having to overcome institutional racism and a history of inferior beliefs about their ability to be successful (Collins, 2000; Lundy-Wagner, et al., 2014; Rockinson- Szapkiw et al., 2014; Rogers, 2006). Black women attending White universities have always had two identities. Vinzant’s (2009) findings utilized DuBois’ (1903) concept of “double consciousness” in which African Americans identify with the Black world but have to work within a White world and carefully balance the two worlds without creating an overt favoritism for either one. African Americans realize there are visible structures of power that contribute to inequality. In redefining double-consciousness into
a more reflexive paradigm as being a sociological double-consciousness that will help readers understand the effects of power, inequality, and unfairness.

**Isolation**

Students of color often face cultural, academic, societal, or lifestyle adversity the traditional college student most likely will not face (Brooks, Jones & Burt, 2012). Sandler (1986) found that “isolation is an especially pertinent issue for minority women, who often suffer extreme isolation because of their miniscule numbers in higher education” (p. 193). They are isolated, and their academic opportunities are limited by barriers that have nothing to do with their preparation, qualifications, or competency. African American women, as both women and racial minorities, may be confronted with challenges negotiating college experiences that can negatively impact their self-perception (Watt, 2008). One of those challenges is the feeling of isolation (Aryan et al., 2010; Shavers et al., 2014). Research has shown that African American women are often forced to look for support systems and networks in which they feel understood, supported, and successful (Aryan et al., 2010; Ellis, 2002; Grant et al., 2015; Hannon et al. 2016, 2009; Robinson, 2013). Pursuing a graduate degree can be stressful in its own merit and adding additional challenges due to race and gender further complicate the experience and can decrease retention (Grant et al., 2008).

Grant (2012) indicated that Black women encounter inequity, unfair treatment, misjudgment, isolation and marginality in predominantly White universities. Before they even entered a class, Black women have reported feelings of isolation and concerns about being excluded (CLASP, 2015). Nontraditional students often experience feelings of isolation and neglect when entering their respective doctoral programs. Nontraditional minority female
students often experience feelings of invisibility, isolation and being ignored (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies & Smith, 2004). One cause is that many Black women struggle to find relatable mentors at institutions where few people look like them. Grant (2012) found that if students saw other students like themselves succeeding, they were more likely to believe they could succeed. Having Black women mentors helps students feel more connected in their mentoring relationships instead of feeling uncomfortable due to a potential lack of understanding from white mentors (Grant 2012; Wallace, Moore & Curtis, 2014). Black women students at predominantly White universities need support from mentors to navigate their experiences on campuses where they many times face challenges relating to racism, sexism, and other isolating issues (Bartman, 2015).

Ali and Kohun (2006) and other researchers before them (e.g., Thoits, 1991) examined social isolation in doctoral programs and concluded that a resolution to doctoral students’ isolation is to create opportunities to cultivate social relationships and social support (Jimenez et al., 2011). Non-traditional students generally have less accessibility to other students and faculty because of part-time status, full-time employment, and other responsibilities, and limited time on campus can reduce access to the university culture and its overall services. Much of their doctoral work may be done when they cannot easily access faculty, peers, or university resources, thus creating feelings of isolation (O’Connor, 2002). Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011); Watts (2008); and Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) found that non-traditional students were less likely to perceive being involved and connected to the university when they always had to take the initiative to reach out to faculty. The ability to have quality interactions and communication with a caring, supportive, and accessible advisor is a key component of doctoral completion process (Felder, 2010). Isolation from such connections during this time can have
devastating effects on students’ advancement (Gardner, 2009, Holmes, Seay, & Wilson, 2009), including Black women. Ali and Kohun (2006) challenged doctoral programs to view social isolation as an institutional or administrative matter rather than an individual issue. In short, institutions could remedy this problem by enabling students to establish social networks with peers and other key figures in the program.

Sexism

Surviving in a system of oppression has left African American women confronted by matters of invisibility, sexual harassment, racial slurs, discriminatory practices, and stereotypes (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Despite their growing numbers on college campuses, Black women graduate students in higher education are still viewed as token Black women and are often one of the few students of color in predominantly White spaces (Robinson, 2013). Almost 100 years later, Black women doctoral students still endure arduous conditions in pursuit of doctoral degrees. They experience the pervasive double bind of racial and gender motivated marginalization in the form of microaggressions (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Huntt, 2016), including gendered-racial stereotyping from professors, classmates, and students (Henderson, Hunter & Hildreth, 2010). Today’s African American women students, specifically, still face the challenges of their predecessors regarding career opportunities due to societal racism and sexism (Williams & Nichols, 2012). However, the educational achievements of African American women have not alleviated them of the struggles produced from race, gender, and class (Chambers, Bush & Walpole, 2009). In fact, African American women have persisted and attained college degrees in spite of racism, sexism, and classism (Chambers et al.).
Open conversations and collaborative projects can serve as opportunities to foster a supportive educational environment for marginalized groups. In the case of African American women, a supportive environment regarding issues of race, gender, and class can contribute to their growth and development (Johnson, 2015). Black women can challenge their previously held understanding if their views are informed by dominant discourses. African American women doctoral students sharing narratives of their lives informed by Black feminist thought position themselves to provide counter-stories to existing dominant stereotypical notions of Black women. This becomes an invitation for cultural outsiders to engage in conversation with Black women to challenge their previously held understanding if informed by dominant discourses.

Nontraditional Students

In general, students are classified as either traditional or nontraditional according to age, particular life experiences, and enrollment status. The traditional undergraduate student category typically includes full-time students who enroll immediately after high school, are 18 to 24 years old, and who do not have other major responsibilities or roles that compete with their studies, such as full-time employment, parenting, and community responsibilities, (Bates, 2011). The nontraditional undergraduates are generally 25 years or older. They did not enroll immediately after high school, are not in their first cycle of education, attend part-time, are financially independent, have other major responsibilities and roles that compete with their studies (e.g., parenting, caregiving, employment, and community involvement), and/or lack the standard admission requirements of a program (CAEL, 2002, Choy, 2002; Kasworm, 2003).

Nontraditional students come to colleges and universities in a sense “pre-packaged,” possessing a greater sense of maturity, life experiences, values, learning goals, objectives,
learning patterns, interests, and responsibilities (Bye, Pushkar & Conway, 2007). Eppler and Harju (1997) found that nontraditional students are more inclined to want to improve their knowledge and abilities for the sake of their own desires. Younger traditional undergraduate students are often externally motivated to meet the expectations of others and form social relationships, which may relate to the differences in academic performance between the two populations. Additionally, nontraditional older students may be less familiar with computers than their traditional younger peers and, therefore, may bring a lower degree of technology knowledge (Ellis, 2013). Finally, nontraditional older students, being in a different developmental stage than their younger classmates, may respond to and benefit from a different style of instruction than their younger peers (Bye, Pushkar & Conway, 2007). These factors can introduce challenges for both the nontraditional student and the instructor.

Nontraditional Graduate Student

While terminology for classifying nontraditional undergraduate students varies in different studies and sources (Horn & Weko, 2009, Southerland, 2010, Torraco & Dirkx, 2008), nontraditional graduate students are not as clearly defined in the literature. Uyder (2008) defined nontraditional graduate students as age 30 and older. Hostetler (2004) used 35 to mark the bottom edge of the category for her dissertation research. The National Center for Education Statistics (2009) defines the nontraditional student as one who “delays enrollment after he or she finished high school, attends school part-time, works full time, is financially independent with dependents other than a spouse, and is a single parent or does not have a high school diploma” (p. 2). Characteristics of nontraditional graduate students include having dependents and/or aging parents, being less skilled with technology, lacking academic confidence, being concrete
learners, having greater emotional intelligence, and having an established career (Skopek & Schuhmann, 2008 & White, 2000). In their conceptual article, Pierce and Hawthorne (2011) based the term nontraditional not on age alone but also on the presence of a gap after the completion of the bachelor’s degree: in contrast to traditional graduate students “who move from undergraduate programs into graduate school” (p. 1). Pierce and Hawthorne define nontraditional as those students who have returned to school to pursue an advanced degree at 35 or older, after a gap of five years or more. Some researchers (e.g., Skopek & Schuhmann, 2008, White, 2000) describe the distinctions between traditional and nontraditional graduate students in terms of placement in their career. In other words, the characteristics of nontraditional graduate students and traditional graduate students are based on age, the gap of five years or more, or current employment status.

Previous studies indicated that academic support from fellow students was critical at the college level in that “students often view communication with fellow students as their primary source of academic support” (Thompson & Mazer, 2009, p. 434). Additional research suggests that peer and faculty relationships may also be important (Giancola et al., 2009). These findings become even more compelling when considering the fact that nontraditional students are generally less involved in campus activities and less likely to establish relationships with fellow students and faculty (Bye et al., 2007; Onolemhemhen et al., 2008). Not only do these older learners have to successfully navigate life as a student, but many also do so with the added pressure of full-fledged family responsibilities and work commitments (Giancola et al., 2009; Mottarella et al., 2009; Onolemhemhen et al., 2008).

One of the most prevalent characteristics used to differentiate traditional from nontraditional students is age (Chung, Turnbull & Chur-Hansen, 2014). The age range most
frequently associated with traditional students is 18 to 25 with 26 to 45 for non-traditional students. However, evidence suggests that a growing number of students are entering (or reentering) college after retirement (Chung et al., 2014). A variety of characteristics associated with older ages may benefit non-traditional college students. Research suggests that maturity with age is associated with greater confidence and satisfaction, especially when students are managing academic responsibilities with family and career (Carney-Compton & Tan, 2002, Quimby & O’Brien, 2006).

Age is also identified as a predictor for higher levels of motivation, emotional coping and successful goal attainment (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). Nontraditional students report higher levels of internalized motivation and goal achievement compared to traditional students (Lovell, 2014). Carney-Compton and Tan (2002) assessed the academic performance, psychological functioning, and support networks of full-time non-traditional students at a Canadian university. They discovered higher academic achievement among nontraditional female students, age 35 to 44, compared to traditional students, age 18 to 22.

Another aspect that impacts higher education today is older Baby Boomers’ and nontraditional African American women’s close approximation toward traditional retirement age. The reality is that nearly four out of five Baby Boomers want to continue working beyond typical retirement age due to financial and personal reasons (Freedman, 2005a). Many older Boomer students seek higher education opportunities to be retrained for semi-retirement and seek social purpose careers that afford them an opportunity to give back to society.

Higher education must respond to the psychosocial, cognitive, and spiritual tendencies of people this age to become more focused on serving others. By helping older adult students become prepared for careers about people, purpose, and community, “colleges will capture a new
population of students to serve, will help millions of people find greater significance and purpose in life, and will help sustain America’s economy” (Zeiss, 2006, p. 40). Additionally, the extended lifespan in the United States, age 77 today compared to age 47 in 1900 (Zeiss, 2006), provides an impetus for a new stage of adult development (second middle age) whereby those 55 to 70 years of age may “have already retired, but are still seeking purpose, and productivity” (Freedman, 2005a, p. 6).

Stop-Outs and Drop-Outs

The roadblocks to university graduation have been investigated, identified, and interrogated for decades, yet the mystery of retaining students to graduation continues to elude even the most prestigious universities (Spradlin, Burroughs, Rutkowski & Lang, 2010). Increasing graduation begins with the concession that students may leave school at some point due to one or more of the retention barriers: finances, illness, family problems, pregnancies, and/or other educational obstacles. However, leaving school does not mean there is no going back. Students’ dropout status changes when they re-enroll in school; they take on new identities as stop-out students who forge their own nontraditional path to graduation (Spradlin, Burroughs, Rutkowski, & Lang, 2010).

Clery and Topper (2009) identified stop-out patterns for students differed between older and younger groups in academic programs. They found that once nontraditional students continued in their educational programs for more than two years, they became determined to stay until completion. Many students who drop out of college have to work while enrolled in college. They often find it very difficult to support themselves and their families and go to college at the same time. Many have dependent children and enroll part-time. It was reported that nearly three-quarters (71%) of students who dropped out of college said that work contributed to the decision, with more than half (54%) identifying it as a major factor (Kantrowitz, 2009). About a third (35%) said that balancing work and school was too stressful. Other major reasons for leaving
school included affordability of tuition and fees (31%) and needing a break (21%; Kantrowitz, 2009). Discontinuous enrollment is highest for students with lower academic preparation and lower socioeconomic status (Ewert, 2010; Goldrick-Rab, 2006). Many students have stopped out of college due to finances, or feeling unprepared, while others claim they do not feel comfortable in the school environment or attribute decisions to work-related matters, family concerns, health concerns, and child-care needs (Alon, 2011).

Nontraditional African American female students who are stop outs have stated that making their decisions to return to college gave them feelings of accomplishment. However, based on Kantrowitz’s (2009) survey of 614 students aged 22 to 30 with some two-year or four-year college experience, students who did not graduate suggested a variety of solutions for increasing graduation rates as preventing drop-outs. The options included allowing part-time students to qualify for student aid (81%), providing more flexible weekend/evening classes (78%), cutting college costs by 25% (78%), providing more college loans (76%), providing child care (76%), promoting good study habits in high school (73%) and providing health insurance to students even if they are enrolled part-time (69%). Factors that increased graduation rates and prevented dropping out also included traditional enrollment immediately after high school graduation, enrolling on a full-time basis and working less while in school. It is obvious that not everyone who stops out of college becomes a dropout. Conversely, not everyone who returns to college after an absence persists to graduation. However, it is important that African American women understand that dropouts are guaranteed a 0% graduation rate, while stop-outs are still in the running (Schatzel, Scott, & Davis, 2011).

Nontraditional students’ biggest battle can be their anxieties. More than half of students surveyed in a study by the Lumina Foundation said fear kept them from even trying to return to
school (Erisman & Steele, 2012). For those who did return, many experienced anxieties related to the classroom like attending classes with younger students, guilt over missing events in their family’s lives, feelings of selfishness for returning to school, and low self-esteem (Erisman & Steele, 2012; Perna, 2016).

Barriers

In today’s complex environment, nontraditional students face more barriers completing their degree than traditional students. Barriers for nontraditional adult learners can be grouped under three categories: situational, institutional, and dispositional (Cross, 1981; Morgan, 2001; Spellman, 2007). The following explores these types of barriers for nontraditional students.

Situational barriers are those arising from one’s situation in life at any given time (Saar, Täht & Roosalu, 2014). Lack of time due to job and home responsibilities, for example, deters large numbers of potential learners in the 25 to 45-year-old age groups. Lack of money is a problem for young people and those from low-income backgrounds. Lack of childcare is a major problem for young parents, and transportation can cause situational barriers for geographically isolated and physically handicapped learners.

Institutional barriers, according to Saar et al. (2014), are those barriers erected by organizations that can impede the learning opportunities for nontraditional students. Fairchild (2003) found threats to academic persistence and degree completion caused by multiple role demands and institutional barriers. Institutional barriers consisting of practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities affected between 10% and 25% of potential learners. These barriers can be categorized into five distinct areas: inconvenient schedules and problems with locations or transportation; full-time fees for
part-time study; inappropriate courses of study; procedural problems and time requirements; and lack of information about programs and procedures. Another institutional barrier is a chilly environment created by instructors who are intimidated and may feel uncomfortable interacting with older students (Maranto & Griffin, 2011). Therefore, nontraditional students of color and women often experience the chilly environment.

Dispositional barriers relate to attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner (Phipps, Prieto & Ndinguri, 2013). Many adults, for example, feel they are too old to learn and frequently lack interest in learning or self-confidence in their ability to learn (Mitzner et al., 2010). Many of these types of barriers are psychologically self-imposed. Deggs (2011) found that the leading barrier was lack of interest, but fewer adults were reluctant to admit that lack of interest deterred their participation in returning to school. Howell (2004) conducted a study on women returning to institutions of higher education and found that women felt inadequate about their educational abilities and were afraid to compete with younger college students.

Financial barriers are pivotal in understanding the needs of nontraditional students. Lack of financial resources can create problems for returning students. Nontraditional students often are not aware of the financial vehicles they can use to attend college and are likely to be employed by companies that may not be supportive, especially financially, of their employees attending college classes (Lane et al., 2012). Bowl (2001) touched on the fact that many nontraditional students have financial difficulties attaining tuition and fees to support their higher education endeavors. Lane et al. supported the notion that financial difficulties have a direct correlation with African American women’s attainment of a postsecondary education when they stated that African American women who return to college in contrast to their white counterparts are more likely in midlife to be unmarried, single parents, and employed in low
paying jobs. Thus, paying high tuition costs makes the attainment of a postsecondary education seem like a daunting and unlikely task for this population of students. Purnell et al. (2004) identified a disparity between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students, with disadvantaged students being less likely to persist than their more advantaged counterparts. As a result, nontraditional students wanting to return to college but experiencing financial difficulties may be apprehensive.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2011), nontraditional students have significantly lower retention and graduation rates when compared to their traditional counterparts. Thus, identifying barriers to college completion is imperative to reversing this trend. Proactive intervention, the strategies that address challenges before they negatively impact an entity requires academic institutions to align their services with the needs of nontraditional students and prioritize prevention and intervention programs to alleviate barriers to academic success (Jeffreys, 2007).

Strategies for Success of Nontraditional African American Women

A few studies have examined practical and empirically-based support for nontraditional African American women in educational environments that could influence their academic adjustments and success. The factors that impact the academic success of nontraditional African American women in higher education include motivation, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, persistence, and retention (Thomas et al., 2009).
Motivation

Both traditional and nontraditional students learn best when they are motivated. Motivation is closely tied to participation and persistence and is perhaps the underpinning for both. Motivation plays an important role in the adult learning process (Mulenga & Liang, 2008; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Aslanian and Clinefelter (2013) found the factors of job advancement and employment opportunities remained key motivators for adult learners. Older adults’ participation in higher education appeared to be both a response to motivational needs toward personal development and a source and context for ongoing personal growth (Taylor & House, 2010). Older adults seeking a degree in higher education also included improvement of self-esteem and reduction of some adverse effects of aging, facilitating a sense of caring and providing a new focus while grieving for the passing of a spouse (Little, 1995). Higher education seemed to be a stimulus for a change in attitudes, values, and interests for older adults (Gray & Kabadaki, 2005).

Most studies indicate that motivation to pursue a degree for nontraditional adult learners was intrinsic (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). Although few studies have explored nontraditional adult learners in higher education, those studies suggest nontraditional adult learners show more intrinsic motivation compared to young adult learners in higher education (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). To ensure the success of students in higher education is first to know what motivates and sustains them in the learning process. Overall, university administrators and educators need to understand nontraditional adults’ motivation to learn and the age-related changes that affect their learning. Therefore, it is important to design various programs to meet their needs that may result in flexible scheduling and establishing an ageism-free environment for older adult learners.
Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are important for academic success and persistence among college students (Griffin, 2006; Hwang, Echols & Vrongistinos, 2002; Miserandino, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997; Walker, Greene & Mansell, 2006). Moreover, there is some evidence that suggests motivational attributions have been deemed central to understanding African American students in general and their academic achievements in particular (Allen, Jayakumar, Griffin, Korn, & Hurtado, 2006). Therefore, examining the extent to which motivational attributions predict academic adjustment may provide critical insight into the academic persistence of African American women.

Crucially, nontraditional adult students, the majority of whom are already working, have different motivations to engage with higher education than the 18-year-old entrant policy-makers assume is focused on a job at 21. If the argument is employability for nontraditional students for returning to higher education, then outreach needs to recognize that nontraditional students are often motivated by wanting to change to a better job (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015). Li-Kuang and Wang (2016) stated that “there are motivating factors for older adults entering degree programs: pursuing and updating knowledge and skills, fitting in with job-related needs and competitions, achieving a life goal, keeping abreast of social changes, and gaining a degree” (p.12). The researchers also identified retirement status and age as predictors for enrollment motivations. Morstain and Smart (1974) found six motivational factors central to adults continuing their education:

1. Social Relationships - this factor reflects participation to make new friends or meet members of the opposite sex.
2. External Expectations - participants in this category are complying with the directives of someone in authority.
3. Social Welfare - this factor reflects an altruistic orientation where learners are involved because they want to serve others or their community.

4. Professional Advancement - participants in this category are strongly interested in enhancing their professional opportunities, including career advancement.

5. Escape/Stimulation - this factor is indicative of learners who are involved because they want to alleviate boredom or escape home or work routine.

6. Cognitive Interest - nontraditional students who participate at this level are adults who engaged in learning for the sake of learning itself.

These six factors continue to be reasons adult learners are motivated to continue their education.

Motivation is a phenomenon that leads to a desired action of behavior that can be activated by either internal (intrinsic) or external (extrinsic) factors. When African American women find a way of increasing intrinsic motivation, they can stimulate academic adjustments (Martin, 2011, Shavers & Moore, 2014). When African American women are in a supportive environment that creates a sense of belonging (intrinsic), academics pose no difficulty (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, intrinsic motivation is the key factor for older adult learners when compared to young adult learners in higher education (Brahm & Gebhardt, 2011; Busse, 2013).

There are several ways of extrinsically motivating nontraditional African American women students. According to Cokley (2003), extrinsic motivations that create effective environments use these tactics: positive such as instructional interactions, accommodations for nontraditional busy schedules, be direct, encourage exploration, provide mentors who look like them, offer online-offline support, are respectful of students, create useful and relevant learning experiences based on age, and allow feedback. These tactics are relevant, memorable, and stimulating for adult learners by creating exciting learning arenas. While nontraditional students
are motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, more importantly, older adults may be motivated inwardly by their desire to reach their goals to persist to graduation.

Perspective

A number of studies address the issue of persistence among traditional students and provide institutions with the foundation to make informed decisions related to student orientation, campus involvement, first-year programs, and other strategies to engage traditional students (Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011; Southerland, 2010; Tweedell, 2005). However, these strategies are not always effective or appropriate for nontraditional students who are unlikely to participate in out-of-class activities due to competing obligations. In other words, it is clear that nontraditional student integration is different from that of traditional students. However, despite decades of research conducted on student departure or persistence, the question of how institutions can better retain students still remains and, in this case, how can higher education understand more about nontraditional students who have not always been included in the volumes of research (Quimby & O’Brien, 2006). Tinto (1993) contended that the students’ interactions with the institution are key in determining whether students drop out or persist to complete a degree. Tinto indicated that graduate persistence depended largely on the personal and intellectual interactions between students and faculty. These interactions help to build the academic and social communities at educational institutions. Tinto’s efforts in developing a graduate theory of persistence consist of three stages:

1. Stage 1 - Transition first year of study – establish membership
2. Stage 2 - Candidacy development of doctorate competencies
3. Stage 3- Completion of the doctorate- moves to completing research proposal to the dissertation.

In summary, to successfully persist to graduation, Tinto’s three stages are important for both traditional and nontraditional students.

Tinto (1993) contended that students’ interactions with the institution are key in determining whether students drop out or persist to complete a degree. The UPCEA (2012) urged communities to determine student success to increase persistence and retention of these students because previous studies indicated that out-of-class involvement was not effective for nontraditional students. Additional recent studies suggest that the most influential campus experiences for persistence of nontraditional students are related to classroom learning and faculty/peer relationships (Braxton et al., 2008; Deil-Amen, 2011; Price & Baker, 2012; Reason, 2009; Townsend & Wilson, 2009). To complete Stage 3 of Tinto’s Graduate Theory of Persistence, nontraditional students should establish positive personal and intellectual relationships with their faculty. Since research related to persistence has largely neglected, the one place in which nontraditional students and all students meet at one time or another is the classroom. Therefore, researchers are challenged to consider viewing social and academic integration in ways other than traditional ways.

Equal Opportunity for Nontraditional Students

Many universities claim they are objective, neutral, equal opportunity, color blind institutions of higher learning for all students; however, inequality in the United States is growing. It has never disappeared (Parker & Villalpando, 2007). In fact, students of color are disproportionately impacted to persist through the university by campus racial harassment and
profiling when compared to White students. Harper (2010) believes that nontraditional students have significantly lower retention and graduation rates when compared to their traditional counterparts. Thus, identifying barriers to college completion is imperative to reversing this trend. Proactive intervention, the strategies that address challenges before they negatively impact an entity, requires that academic institutions align their services with the needs of nontraditional students (Jeffreys, 2007). When considering the journey of Black female doctoral students, it is likely their experiences are influenced by the culture of the institution they attend through both direct and indirect racism (Smith, Yosso & Solorzano, 2007).

Diversity action plans are a primary means by which institutions articulate their professed commitment to an inclusive and equitable climate for all members of the university and advance strategies to meet the challenges of a diverse society (Iverson, 2007). According to Lightner (2001), nontraditional students’ needs include information about services such as the library, registration, bookstore, counseling, peer mentoring, skills, tutors to assist in remedial coursework, and a diverse campus and diversity policies. Compton et al. (2006) identified other nontraditional student support, including support in communication skills, individualized instruction, and practical learning experiences. Additionally, Compton et al. identified the need for flexible curriculum and a registration process that is simple and efficient. Additionally, faculty and administrators needed to view nontraditional students as highly motivated individuals who bring a great deal of experience to their education career.

African American women continue to struggle with racism in and out of the classroom as well as overall feelings of isolation and alienation in academia (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Examples of overt and covert racism include being ignored by faculty and classmates and being shut out of or not informed of research opportunities. Equity in education requires putting
systems in place to ensure every child has an equal chance for success. That requires understanding the unique challenges and barriers faced by individual students or by populations of students and providing additional support to help them overcome those barriers. While this in itself may not ensure equal outcomes, we all should strive to ensure that every student has an equal opportunity for success. This issue of inequality can be addressed through requiring all graduate faculty to participate in diversity training that would help them understand the student populations they serve (Williams, Brewley, Reed, White & Davis-Haley, 2005).

Hu and Ma (2010) found that students who are connected with a mentor are more likely to persist, particularly nontraditional African American students. They argue that allowing a student to have a mentor eases some of the tension of being a nontraditional student. They offer a historical context for mentorship and stated that mentoring is grounded in African American culture.

June (2015) explained that the increased rate of Black student enrollment in higher education puts an added pressure on faculty of color, as Black students often seek out faculty of color for mentorship and advising. Due to the lack of faculty of color nationwide, many faculty and staff are taking on multiple jobs to support the marginalized students who often seek their help. Graduate school mentors may come from many different roles and backgrounds, which include professors, academic advisors, alumni, and peers. Although these different mentoring roles serve a variety of purposes for the graduate mentee, graduate programs tend to rely on peer mentoring for a main benefit: to create an inclusive environment of social support in addition to academic support (Holley & Caldwell, 2012). Grant-Vallone and Ensher (2000) found that mentees in high-contact mentorship relationships were more likely to be satisfied with their graduate program overall.
Peer Relationships

Peer relationships are another important aspect of the doctoral experience (Terrell et al., 2012). The ability to share personal stories, commensurate over challenges, and receive assistance with difficult assignments was found to be particularly beneficial for nontraditional students enrolled in doctoral programs (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Doctoral students also appear to depend on the program for forming work groups with other doctoral students. These peer relationships are what Tinto (1997, 2006, 2012) has suggested as social integration. Non-existing peer relations are often a reason students give for dropping out of doctoral programs (Wyman, 2012).

Common characteristics of peer relationships that benefit nontraditional students may range from the practical (e.g., flexibility and communication) to the emotional (e.g., empathy and trustworthiness) to the social (e.g., personality match with nontraditional students and supportiveness). While academic support is often an area in which peer relationships can assist nontraditional students (Christie, 2014, Colvin & Ashman, 2010), one of the most profound ways peer relationships impact nontraditional students through social support. This is because peer to peer relationships often offer a more casual relationship than faculty to student (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Nevertheless, peer relationships offer a more relaxed comfort zone for nontraditional students, in the areas of emotional and social support.

Belcastro and Purslow (2006) suggest that peer relationships are at the forefront of collegiate success for the nontraditional student. Unquestionably, there appears to be consensus that institutions that foster positive relationships among their students are more likely to see persistence to graduation (Tinto, 2006). Thus, the relationships that nontraditional students foster
with their peers are very important for ensuring their collegiate success. According to the researchers, relationships comprise the main pillar around which everything else is established. The process of integrating nontraditional students with their peers, as stated by Tinto (1993), is intricate for trying to ensure these students will persist to successful matriculation. Tinto states that it is imperative to have the students feel as if they are the center of their collegiate lives.

Professor Relationships

Students in doctoral programs indicate that a relationship with their professors is important to their persistence to graduation (Terrell et al., 2012). Nontraditional students identify the importance of having open communication with faculty members. This communication includes timely feedback on submitted papers and proposals. Other research also indicates that having a strong connection with instructors is vital for nontraditional students’ success (Erisman & Steele, 2012). Studies on nontraditional students show that positive and frequent involvement from instructors increase students’ self-efficacy, perception, satisfaction, motivation, and retention (Burt, Young-Jones, Yadon & Carr, 2013). Instructors knowing their students’ names, remembering personal details about their students, taking an active role in caring for their students’ success and relating to them personally enhanced student satisfaction in the classroom (Burt et al., 2013). Other studies (e.g., Gray & Kabadaki, 2005; Townsend & Wilson, 2009) provided additional support that the most influential campus experiences for nontraditional students are related to classroom learning and faculty/peer relationships. In particular, for Black women, not only are faculty relationships important, but it is also important that faculty members support their research agenda (Collins, 2001). Lack of diversity of university faculty makes it difficult for Black women to find faculty members who are interested in or can validate their
research interests. Faculty not only serve in the role of advisors and dissertation chairs, but they also help Black students feel included and understand the academic environment (Jones et al., 2013).

Instructors’ effectiveness can impact students’ performance, contributing to their success. A qualitative study by Samuels, Beach and Palmer (2011) found that students who were pursuing a four-year degree at a traditional university cited faculty support as pertinent to persistence and belonging. Students in Kasworm’s (2003) study cited faculty relationships as important for developing a “sense of place” (p. 89). Students in Deil-Amen’s (2011) study cited faculty as critical to the development of social capital within the organization that contributes to persistence through obstacles. Consistent with Tinto’s (1975) original concept of integration, students’ sense of alienation also decreased as they experienced faculty support in the classroom. Lastly, Hoffman et al. (2003) commented that perceived faculty understanding occurs when the student believes that faculty place value on them as individuals and they are not just a number. Halawah, (2006) all agree that faculty relations is important to student success.

Students are the products of their learning environments and a critical role of teachers is to foster a positive learning environment that helps adults feel accepted as part of their academic experience (Brown, 2005). Nontraditional students need to be in learning environments structured for adult learners (Kenner & Weinman, 2011). For instance, instructional delivery is very important when lecturing to nontraditional students. Bakken and Simpson (2016) stated that when high frequency or more common words are used, learning is faster and retention is longer, which is important for the success adult learners. Another suggestion to improve instruction is the use of a faculty consultant (Nilson, 2016). Having peer feedback for faculty is an excellent way of ensuring more efficient instruction and subsequently better student outcomes.
Nontraditional adult students are typically subjected to unpleasant college experiences; however, if interactions with faculty and staff are positive, transitioning into college life is generally successful (Wyatt, 2011). Many adult learners leave college after perceiving their professors as having a negative attitude toward nontraditional adult students (Andom, 2007). Reason, Terenzini and Domingo (2007) reported that positive faculty and student interactions enhance social and personal competence among students. Faculty-student relationships had positive effects on grades and persistence for students, even after considering variables such as race or ethnicity (McGlynn, 2008). College students who obtained individualized attention from their faculty were often more successful (Hagedorn, Perrakis & Maxwell, 2002) and expressed greater levels of satisfaction with their overall college experience (Reason et al., 2007).

Classroom interactions are at the core of nontraditional students’ overall experience, and faculty are at the center of those classroom interactions (Chao, 2009). Professors and faculty members also serve as mentors to students and impact their sense of connection and desire to persist in their doctoral studies (Strayhorn, 2012). When students do not have support or do not have a positive relationship with their advisors or dissertation chair, they are more likely to dropout (Lovitts, 2001; Wyman, 2012). Strayhorn’s study concludes that the classroom is a small complex world, which has its unique culture and context. The ability to share personal stories, talk over challenges, and receive personal assistance with difficult assignments was found to be particularly beneficial for nontraditional students enrolled in doctoral programs (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). A relationship with their professor is an important aspect of an older student (Terrell et al., 2012). Therefore, faculty need to understand the complexity of the classroom and involve their learners in understanding and constructing this mini-societal context for a better learning environment.
Lack of diversity among university faculty makes it difficult for Black women to find faculty members who are interested in, or at the very least, can validate their research interests. The ability to establish relationships with faculty members is important to the Black doctoral student. Faculty not only serve in the role of advisors and dissertation Chairs who help validate the student’s area of interest and also serve as the student’s advocate help the student navigate and understand the academic environment (Jones, et al., 2013).

Theoretical Framework

This autoethnography draws on the theoretical framework of critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism. These theories provided analytical guidance to explore my academic experiences with race, gender and age (Singleton, 2015) in my journey from kindergarten to a doctoral degree.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory is one of the theoretical frameworks as I sought to understand the paradigm at work within the predominantly White university I now attend. Critical race theory is a worldview created by law scholars who saw a need for race to be intentionally observed and researched via American laws (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The fathers of critical race theory, Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, began discussing the importance of critical race issues in the 1970s. With the help of other scholars, they were able to develop a theory that encompassed the ever-changing face of racism and discrimination in America (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Initially, critical race theory was primarily used to defend Black people within the judicial system by providing a voice through individual narratives and stories. Bell and Freeman argued
Critical race theory has been the foundation for marginalized groups seeking justice through the shifting of pre-existing laws (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). There are five basic tenets of critical race theory:

1. **Ordinariness**: Racism is ordinary and difficult to address because it is not acknowledged.

2. **Interest Convergence**: Because racism advances the interests of White elites (materially) and working-class Caucasians (physically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it.

3. **Social Construction**: Race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; instead races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient.

4. **Unique Voice of Color**: Coexisting in somewhat uneasy tension with anti-essentialism, the voice-of-color thesis holds that because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, Black, American Indian, Asian, and Latino/a writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their White counterparts matters the White people are unlikely to know.

5. **Notions that Whites have been recipients of Civil Rights legislation.** (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pp. 7-10)

The first tenet of critical race theory, ordinariness, explains that racism is ordinary and under-acknowledged because it is associated with normalcy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The lack of conversations surrounding race and race theory remain because many do not believe there
is a race problem. In other words, if racism is ordinary or normal, then there is no need to change normativity.

The second tenet, interest-convergence, explains that racism supports the interests of White people; therefore, there is no need to eradicate racism unless interests of White people are being jeopardized (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Interest convergence often refers to any policy or practice change that can support white interests in conjunction with a racially marginalized group interest. An example of interest convergence is the Brown v. Board of Education ruling that legalized access to education to students of color, while the control of the curriculum, state funding, and property taxes remained in the interest of White people (Banks, 2009).

The third tenet of critical race theory, social construction of race, explains that race is not something that can be understood as a biological construct (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Instead race is socially constructed, leading to inequalities for certain groups of people and justification of said inequities. This social construction can be manipulated in favor of White people but can also be eradicated by White people when it is convenient.

The fourth tenet of critical race theory focuses on the ways to approach understanding voices of women of color. However, such understanding comes with complicacies and tension. On one hand, there is some need to highlight certain shared oppressive agendas that play out uniquely in the lives of people of color when compared to their White counterparts. On the other hand, there is a need to not oversimplify how oppression plays out in the lives of people of color since social structures of oppressions operate within an ever-morphing power network. The power of networking is more blatant with the intersectional identity as a woman of color. Yet people of color, especially intellectuals, are in a position to discuss their complex lived realities that could be helpful for White allies to engage with and understand. It should be noted that the
argument forwarded here is to not imply that it is the responsibility of people of color to teach White people about their oppression. Instead, a desire to understand and learn about the lived realities of oppression should come from allies in the dominant group, otherwise the labor of people of color would be tied up in the interest of the dominant group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Fifth, whites have actually been the primary benefactors of civil rights and affirmative action legislation. It is worth citing Taylor (2009) at length:

Fifty years post Brown, de jure separation has been replaced by de facto segregation, as White flight from public schools has created a two-tiered system in many cities and student assignments have shifted from mandatory busing to neighborhood preferences. Most children of color currently attend schools with relatively few Whites; very few White children attend schools where they are the minority. Clarenton, South Carolina, one of the case schools used by civil rights lawyers Thurgood Marshall and Charles Houston, remains as segregated as it was before 1954. The educational progress of African Americans that has occurred has thus been allowed only if it is perceived by the majority as cost-free, or nearly so. Preferably, these changes have come incrementally, and without social disruptions such as marches, boycotts, and riots. Importantly, for most Whites, advances must come without affirmative action. (pp. 6-7)

The irony is that, although whites have undeniably been the recipients of civil rights legislation, it has also been verified that affirmative action also best serves Whites (Delgado, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Delgado explicitly requests that “we should demystify, interrogate, and destabilize affirmative action. The program was designed by others to promote their purposes, not ours” (p. 111). Critical race theory, in a similar vein, the historical *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) was inadvertently an eventual victory for whites—or the status quo. What Brown ultimately did was the opposite of what it sought to do: it restricted equality for African Americans, not expanding it. Tate, Ladson-Billings and Grant (as cited in Dixson & Rousseau, 2006), state the following:
Brown failed to substantively improve the education of African American students because it represented a restrictive rather than expansive view of equality. What was needed was a vision of education that challenged the fundamental structure of schools that reproduced the same inequitable social hierarchies that existed in society. That the Brown decision failed to disrupt these structures is evidenced in the enduring inequities in the educational system. (p. 45)

Delgado poignantly states why critical race theory’s five major tenets are vitally important given the current state of affairs of U.S. education.

Critical race theory was created within a legal context but due to the intersecting power structures that oppress Black people, the ideals of critical race theory can be easily transferred to education (Petteruti, 2011). A few examples include the over-policing of urban schools, the disproportionate materials provided to predominantly Black schools, and the lack of resources in the form of administration and counseling provided in urban school settings (Petteruti, 2011). The following section explains how critical race theory can be used to think about issues of injustice in education, especially as they relate to the lived experiences of Black students.

The impact critical race theory has on education is prevalent from kindergarten to post-secondary education (Banks, 2009). Literature and research connecting critical race theory to education has been explored by scholars within the academy as well as by legal scholars (Bell, 1990; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Lynn & Parker, 2006).

One of the most notable scholars surrounding critical race studies in education, Ladson-Billings (1998, 2012) has written explicitly about the implications of race in conjunction with school policy, affirmative action, hierarchy, and curriculum. Ladson-Billings (2012) stated, “The first roadblock I encountered was that almost all of the education research literature on African American students was organized around failure” (p. 117). This prompted the next 20 years of Ladson-Billings’ intellectual labor and scholarly activism focusing on the problems of deficit
narrative and a need for more successful counter-narratives (Goings, Smith, Harris, Wilson & Lancaster, 2015).

To understand the Black deficit narrative, it is important to examine the laws that have created inequity in education is necessary. A major legal contribution to education was the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (Banks, 2009). Banks noted that the Brown v. Board of Education ruling served to create an idea of equality for all students, ensuring desegregation across the states. Segregation was illegal, but the funding was not evenly divided among communities. The disproportionate funding resulted in the loss of many teacher positions in the Black community. Although desegregation was positive in terms of attempting to provide equitable education, it was not supported with cultural competency training for teachers, administrators, staff, or students to ensure a successful transition. Banks contended that cultural competency training would have given teachers the tools necessary to help Black students succeed. Instead, Black children were subject to administrators and teachers who misunderstood how Black students best learned.

This lack of information and understanding perpetuated the idea that Black people are unequal and uneducated compared to White people (Banks, 2009). A version of this ideology persists today and is one of the reasons why Black children are often over-policed in schools and assumed to be performing at lower rates than their White counterparts are, which disproportionately places Black students in special education programs (Goings et al., 2015). To situate the current and historical context of race issues, a critical race theory-driven reading of education is helpful, as forwarded by Ladson-Billings (1998). However, upon review of the literature and critical race theory, very little studies address critical race theory and institutions of higher education.
Ledesma and Calderon (2015) point out that the majoritarian framework that has historically shaped educational access and opportunity for marginalized students has been exposed by critical race theory. Historically, White America set the norms that define what is right and wrong and expect other groups to conform (Murray, 2012). Ledesma and Calderon further explain that exposure to the prevalence of White supremacy continues to shape the culture on many predominantly White universities. Critical race theory scholars posit that the concepts of race and racism in higher education are rarely the focal point of analysis of academic success and achievement of students of color (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015), particularly, little research has focused primarily on the intersection of the two identities: being African American and a woman. African American women are unique, based on both their race and gender as well as other marginalized identities they may hold (Griffin, 2012; Lloyd-Jones, 2009).

A color-blind perspective suggests that all people are the same and therefore have the potential to live the same life with the same opportunities (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2006). This perspective avoids addressing direct issues of structural inequities that play out in the lives of people of color. Within education, a color blindness perspective is forwarded to imply all students have the same opportunity, and yet often opportunities are more easily accessible for White students than for students of color. Access to programs is through a standardized testing (Quinton, 2014) mentality, supporting the idea that advanced curriculum is used to limit the number of students of color (Valencia, 2015). Assessment has historically been used to aid in the argument of White superiority; however, a counter argument has recently been used to debunk that myth.

In higher education, racism can be analyzed through a lens that examines the structural impact, and when higher education ignores the existence of systematic racism, diversity action
plans become ineffective (Iverson, 2007). Instead, these initiatives work to propel and reinforce structural and institutional racism (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Therefore, it is important to consider how well-intended institutional processes and procedures can potentially promote racism when working toward improving an institution’s plan for diversity and inclusion.

In summary, critical race theory and education pair well to highlight the ways in which oppression works in the schooling of African Americans and in creating a deficit narrative. Further, in discussion of critical race theory in education, various interlocking systems of oppression can be highlighted such as class, gentrification, race, age, etc. While African Americans suffer from these structures of oppression, African American women, including nontraditional African American women, experience further suffering due to gender-based oppression that can prevent them from assuming leadership-oriented identities outside of their homes.

**Black Feminist Theory**

This study is also grounded in Collins’ (1989) Black feminist theory as part of the epistemological orientation along with critical race theory. The three themes that support Black feminist theory are self-definition and self-valuation, the interlocking nature of oppression, and the importance of African American women’s culture. Self-definition involves challenging the political knowledge-validation process that has resulted in externally defined, stereotypical images of African American female students discussed later in this chapter. The political climate of many higher education settings are subjugated by cultures that have not been socialized to account for the uniqueness of African American women in higher education. In contrast, self-valuation stresses the importance of Black woman’s self-definitions and authenticity, which
challenges the dominant and oppressive images of Black woman offered in mainstream discourse.

Black feminist thought developed because research failed to acknowledge the work African American women perform, the types of communities in which they live, and the kinds of relationships they have with others. Given that African American women, as a group, experience a different world than those who are not Black and/or female (Hill-Collins, 1989), Black feminist thought accounts for the matrix of domination and intersectional perspectives by encouraging these women to identify, redefine, explain, and share experiences of racism and sexism that may be unique (Baxley, 2012; Hill-Collins, 2000).

Black feminist theory acknowledges the intersectionality of African American women that originates from a legacy of struggle in society and addresses their experiences of marginality in higher education (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Hill-Collins, 2000). In other words, African American women still do not receive the same rights as their White women and men counterparts resulting from a history of being denied the right to vote, to hold political office, or to attend particular institutions of education.

Feminists such as Alice Walker stressed the importance of understanding that African American women experience more intense types of oppression in comparison to White women (Hill-Collins, 2000). Walker (2006) notes that although African American women faced the same struggles as Caucasian women, African American women experience issues of diversity in addition to inequality. Other African American feminists such as Angela Davis believe the liberation of African American women involves freedom for all people of all races because it would end racism, sexism, and class oppression (Hill-Collins, 2000). The experiences of African American women in higher education were directly influenced by their racialized and gendered
experience, hence the need for research to explore these complexities. By understanding the nature of navigating multiplicities of consciousness, institutions of higher learning can become a source of leadership training by employing interventions that promote psychological strength, purpose, comfort, and social capital for African American women graduate students. Black feminist theory is intended to empower social change by presenting the experiences of African American women and identifying the race, gender, and class oppression (hooks, 2001a). Through re-evaluating traditionally held beliefs, analyzing practices that are both procedural and theoretical, and realizing subjectivity is indistinguishably associated with agency and approaches to social change, practices and policies that suppressed those who were for so long disadvantaged can now receive a revised sense of attention in accordance with equitable standards that benefit everyone despite their race, gender, ethnicity, or culture (Bensimon & Marshall, 1997).

Hill-Collins (2000) offered some assumptions informed by Black feminists. The first principle explains that Black women’s outlook on their own lives has value because they are generated from their own axes of sociocultural differences as Black women. However, these perspectives are not monolithic and cannot be reduced to easily understandable and consumable commodities. Thus, it is imperative that more scholarly efforts are invested in creating spaces and the ways in which Black women lives are understood, authored, and narrated.

The second principle explains that Black women are deeply invested in Black women’s issues regardless of the challenge being too great or costly (Hill-Collins, 2000). In other words, it seems that Black women would be willing to invest intellectual, emotional, and perhaps even spiritual labor to support other Black women in academia regardless of the return on such investment. Thus, it could be argued that Black women intellectuals bear a greater burden in
seeing their Black women colleagues succeed in ways that perhaps their white counterparts do not invest their efforts.

The third principle encourages self-definition for Black women as part of an empowerment agenda and emphasizes its critical nature (Hill-Collins, 2000). Self-definition challenges established or expected paths or positions in which Black women are expected to situate themselves. Instead, self-definition opens up uncharted paths and positions, thereby cultivating conditions for change through the epistemic orientation of Black feminist theory.

The final principle explains that Black women intellectuals are essential to Black feminist theory because they can create connections to further the research and understanding of Black women both within and outside their cultural groups (Hill-Collins, 2000). Collaboration among Black women and other allies could help expand Black feminist ideals, but it can also be used to educate allies and supporters of the development of Black feminist scholarship, activism, and progress.

Hill-Collins’s (2009) four principles describe the importance of Black female intellectuals to move Black feminist theory forward with self-definition, scholarly research, and empowering efforts. Additionally, fostering relationships is especially important to Black feminist theory to share the issues of Black women with others, build support, and come together in solidarity to eradicate issues of injustice. First, according to Hill-Collins, Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift in how we think about oppression, an interlocking system or matrix. By embracing a paradigm of race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression, it reconceptualizes the social relations of domination and resistance. Second, Black feminist thought addresses ongoing epistemological discussions in feminist theory and in the sociology of knowledge concerning ways of assessing truth. Truth in
this context is the experiential reality of African American women that empowers them to define and interpret their own experiences.

Black feminist thought is a culturally and experientially sensitive theoretical framework that assists in seeing women of African descent in their true light (Hill-Collins, 2009). Use of Black feminist thought addresses the gap in the body of knowledge where the unique challenges and experiences are heard when African American women share in their own words. Black feminist thought is a lens that allows the experiences of African American women (e.g., race, gender, social status, age, ability, sexuality) to be viewed in their fullness and the interdependence of experience and consciousness continues to shape the understanding of African American women in higher education. It is through the Black feminist theoretical lens that this study will give an undiminished voice to the lived realities of nontraditional African American female graduate student at a predominantly White institution.

Last, Black feminist theory encourages African American women to identify, redefine, explain, and share practices of racism and sexism that may be unique to their experiences (Hill-Collins, 2000; Smith, 2008; Taylor, 2004). The relevance of the Black feminist theory is to also give the African American women a voice and allow her to discuss her needs without society’s skewed lens. As a result, it is essential that this researcher share her unique experiences as an invisible student as it relates to race and gender.

In the construction of Black feminist thought, the two most important and disadvantaging oppressions that all African American women share are race and gender and it is based in these intersecting oppressions that I share a collection of my perspectives. Collins (2000) emphasizes that Black feminist thought serves to reshape knowledge by valuing experience and the subjective, while broadening the identity of the knower, making the location of African
American women a legitimate platform from which to create a lens to view new knowledge. Furthermore, differential racism brings attention to the ways in which society racializes different minority groups at different times, depending on the changing needs of the majority (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Collins (2000) emphasizes that Black feminist thought serves to reshape knowledge by valuing experience and the subjective, while broadening the identity of the knower, making the location of African American women a legitimate platform from which they can create knowledge.

**Critical Race Feminism**

Critical race feminism builds on critical race theory, yet it centers the ‘‘roles, experiences, and narratives of women of color’’ in analyzing systems, structures, and institutions (Pratt-Clarke, 2010, p. 24). Critical race feminism is defined as

a framework with which African American female students attending predominantly White universities might begin to reconceptualize the meanings of change in school settings to deflect the deficit-based ideology found in many contemporary iterations of reform and to reflect a commitment to social justice. Critical race feminism closely related to critical race theory, initially emerged as a way to address legal issues of ‘‘a significant group of people—those who are both women and members of today’s racial/ethnic minorities, as well as disproportionately poor. (Wing 1997, p. 1)

Croom and Patton (2011) reiterated that the academy was not built for Black women nor was the academy built for White women nor Women of Color (Turner, 2002). Accepting the endemic nature of racism, sexism, and classism in the U.S., Women of Color in the U.S. experience higher education as a raced, gendered, and classed environment (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Yosso, 2005).

Critical legal theory, one of the first foundational theories from which critical race feminism developed, sets out to critique the societal and ideological structures that inform the
American legal system. Critical race feminism promises to afford “legal and academic stratagems for studying and eradicating race, class, and gender oppression in educational institutions” (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p. 19). Critical race feminist theory, if used in an educational context, can potentially center educational discourse on the lives of young female students of color just as it has done within in law. Specifically, as is illustrated in the research of Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010), critical race feminism can impact Black women by maintaining that the perspectives and experiences of African American women vary from those of White and Black males and White females.

Both critical race theory and critical race feminism were initiated in the field of legal studies and redesigned by educators to be reviewed by schools that have reproduced marginalization and inequality despite their promise of equality. Both critical race feminism and critical race theory share the same assumptions about the permanence of racism in our society. Both agree that a way of understanding is through narratives, storytelling, and counter-narratives. Those vehicles aim to disrupt taken-for-granted and normative views about racism in colleges and universities throughout the world.

Critical race feminism inspired educational reform efforts that center the experiences of African American women have the potential to genuinely transform their lives in powerful and sustained ways. Critical race feminism offers an anecdote to the commonsense rhetoric of educational reform and illustrates some concrete possibilities as a framework.

Summary

Chapter 2 presents studies that have explored the history of White men, White women, Black men, and Black women as well as challenges they endured in educational settings. The
review includes strategies regarding professor, faculty, mentor, and peer relationships as well as the impact of classroom activities. The literature suggests that as nontraditional students enter and adjust to traditional academic environments, they face a number of challenges managing multiple roles and maintaining a balance among work, course loads and affordability.

This chapter includes a review of research on the influence of race, gender and perspectives of situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. The review includes studies on microaggressions and marginalization of nontraditional African American female students at predominantly White universities. The methodology for the study using autoethnography is explained, stating the criteria for its inclusion. More importantly, this review highlights researchers who believe the classroom is the most important influence in the persistence of nontraditional African American women persisting to graduation. Lastly, Chapter 2 explored research on the frameworks of critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism as it relates to race and gender for African American women and nontraditional African American female students in higher education.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter presents the research methodology that guided the study and describes the methods used to collect, organize and analyze the data. This chapter also covers the research purpose and questions; autoethnography as the methodology through the lenses of critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism; data collection through autoethnographic writing, documents and photos; data analysis; and limitations as well as the validity and ethical implications. The study used a qualitative method of research that allowed me to fully capture my perceptions of my experiences and conduct an open forum with myself to reflect on pertinent information as it related to my educational challenges. The primary goal of this study was to examine my experiences as a older African American woman student within the constructs of race and gender and my perspectives of challenges and inequality from Kindergarten to my pursuit of a doctoral education. To discovering my triple jeopardy self and double consciousness, I employed a method that allowed me to reflect on my educational journey.

This study is presented in the tradition of autoethnography, which involves the author’s analyses of specific aspects or incidents of her personal experiences as a way of gaining a broader understanding and interpretation of the socio-cultural context studied. As I am a member of the culture I am studying, I am using autoethnography as the process and product for research
Because autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of research and writing that has many layers of consciousness, it allowed me to connect myself to the surrounding culture (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Additionally, I wanted to take into account the importance of the macro-level forces that shape the lives of administrators, professors, policymakers, and students while dealing with day-to-day sociopolitical challenges related to student matriculation through higher education.

I was my own subject and only participant. I collected data using vignettes, reflexive narratives and relied on my memory as I recalled interactions with those outside of my culture. I focused on my feelings, my reactions, and my thoughts as a Black person and as a nontraditional African American woman. More specifically, my autoethnography was written in narrative format as I used critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism to ground my counter-stories and to share the struggles of being an older Black female student on a predominantly White university campus. Autoethnography allows the readers to gain an understanding of the problems faced by the participant, me, and to hear my voice through the sharing of my stories (Creswell, 2009). Robinson, Esquibel, and Rich (2013) argue that “drawing on Black feminist theory allows us to place Black women’s voices at the center of research to rearticulate subjugated knowledge into specialized knowledge, as well as support epistemologies and theories about Black women” (p. 58). Therefore, the use of autoethnography coupled with critical race theory, Black feminist thought, and critical race feminism was an ideal approach for this study. I merged epistemology and methodology as a way to tell my story in my own words.

Using autoethnography as a research method, I learned about my experiences as a nontraditional African American female student while maintaining my cultural identity (Chang, 2008). As suggested by Patton (2015), I used my own experiences to garner insights into the
larger culture or subculture of which I am a participant in telling my story. I examined race inequality in higher education, which resulted in the adoption of autoethnography as a theoretical tradition. The vignette entries should not be seen as simply a documentation of a personal story but as a reflective work. The work became reflexive by comparing the narrative to the culture itself. Authors of autoethnography “focus on a group or culture and use their own experiences in the culture reflexively to bend back on themselves and look more deeply at interactions between self and other” (Ellis, 2004, p. 37). This qualitative study was conducted using autoethnography, a burgeoning form of research and writing about myself (Ellis 2004).

Research Purpose and Questions

DuBois (1903) said an African American has a “double consciousness,” a “two-ness” of being “an American, A Negro: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (p. 5). Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the educational persistence of a nontraditional African American female student in pursuit of a doctorate at a predominantly White university in the Midwest United States, as the experiences relate to race and gender.

This study contributed to understanding the barriers I encountered and the support needed by nontraditional African American female students in pursuit of doctorate degrees. This study should help higher education professors and administrators develop better strategies for recruitment and support for this group of students. As noted by Culpepper (2004), the goal is to help currently enrolled nontraditional African American female students to survive and succeed.
The primary overarching question is: How did my racialized and gendered experience mediate my educational journey and trajectory? The sub-questions include:

1. In what ways, did my K-12 experiences socialize me to the institution of education?
2. How did my persistence strategies change over time?
3. How did relationships with family and educators contribute by educational journey?

Autoethnography as Methodology

Autoethnography is a qualitative inquiry approach that is growing in popularity among researchers (Ellis, 2004). Ellis asserts that ethnography is a research approach that describes the people and their cultures. In autoethnography, the researcher is the subject, and the researcher’s interpretation of the experience provide the data (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). My choice to use autoethnography stemmed from a personal belief that there is much knowledge to be gained from my lived experiences with race and gender from Kindergarten through my doctoral education.

Although autoethnography continues to evolve, at its core is the existence of personal narratives, narratives of the self, personal experience narratives and self-stories, first person accounts and personal essays (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Culture includes the self and others. Therefore, autoethnography cannot merely focus on self; instead, it is a study of self as the principal focus within the context of culture (Chang, 2008). This study resides within a posture of viewing the relationship that exists between self and culture as symbiotic; each requires the other and meaning comes from the inextricable link between them (DeMunck, 2000).

The storytelling nature of autoethnography includes a narrative approach to documenting research and analyzing data. Adams, Jones and Ellis (2015) asserted that narrative provides an approach to discovering more about one’s self and the topic under investigation: a way of
knowing and discovering new aspects of the topic and one’s relationship to it. By using narratives to reflect on social encounters, I gained insight into my racial experience, and I hope that my approach will engage readers. Using narrative enabled me to tell my story as well as meet an objective of compelling emotional responses and, hopefully, promote changes in the future (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, Lewis, 2007).

Wall (2008) asserted that autoethnography not only involves positioning oneself in contrast to positivist research, it is the methodology that can promote change because of “the sharing of unique, subjective, and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned” (p. 3). As I evaluated myself in the context of the culture in which I lived and continue to live, my hope is that my study will not only transform my understanding of an nontraditional African American woman’s experiences as related to race and gender but also impact society and culture as well. By sharing personal and interpersonal experiences, the resulting narratives may reach a wider audience because autoethnography generates texts that are emotional in nature. I used critical autoethnography to understand my race and gender, but this autoethnography possesses an added critical dimension in that my goal was to evoke change related not only to how to view and understand African American women but how to view and understand nontraditional African American women as individuals as well.

Autoethnography in particular allowed me to utilize data from my personal narrative accounts to describe my observations (experiences) while dealing with challenges faced at predominantly White universities as well as utilize other data sources I have accumulated over the years. The narrative inquiry provoked feelings, emotions, and dialogue regarding peers, professors, and the general culture of the university. This was important because the research
allowed me to closely examine and critique my actions as a nontraditional African American woman student in handling strategies, microaggressions, frustrations, and challenges from the time I entered Kindergarten to graduate school.

According to Ngunjiri, Hernandez and Chang (2010), there is a continuum upon which autoethnographies reside between approaches of ethnography and autobiography in which “they mix scientific inquiry and self-exploration and express the mixture in descriptive-realistic, analytical interpretive, confessional-emotive, or imaginative-creative writing” (p. 11). My study is a critical autoethnography because my hope is that sharing my identity development as a nontraditional African American woman may impact how nontraditional African American women are viewed and treated by society. This critical autoethnographic study hinges on analyzing the social encounters that have molded and continue to shape my nontraditional African American female identity. When readers interact with personal text rather than traditional research, the result may invoke compassion that compels change (Ellis, 2002). Therefore, I want the readers to situate themselves in the story, whereby it evokes the readers to look within themselves for connections to their lived experiences and how the story can help to shape their future.

The use of autoethnography allowed me to combine autobiography and ethnography to describe my experiences as well as my emotional, physical, and psychological responses to those experiences. Then I utilized ethnography to explain how the experience transforms the culture of those who are directly/indirectly affected by the shared phenomenon (Chang, 2008). First, autoethnography inquiry seeks to holistically capture the complexity of a social phenomenon in its richness. Second, the use of a more embodied form of writing such as reflexive essays and vignettes will, hopefully, give readers a better, more accessible understanding and notion of the
ongoing equalities experienced by nontraditional students attending predominantly White universities—an apparent gap in the literature to which I hope to make some contribution (Berg, 2008).

Autoethnography is a form of a critical reflective narrative that, according to Chang (2008), “enhance[s] cultural understanding of self and others” and motivates the self and others “to work toward cross-culture coalition building” (p. 52). This methodology was chosen because of its alignment with critical race theory’s emphasis on race, Black feminist theory’s emphasis on Black females, and critical race feminism emphasis on both race and Black females and additionally counter-story telling narratives. In this study, autoethnography was used as a tool to empower the experiences and make loud the voice of a nontraditional African American woman in academia.

Critical Race Theory, Black Feminist Theory, Critical Race Feminism and Autoethnography

Understanding the stance of African American women from the perspective of race-based theories and using frameworks such as critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism help to recognize and celebrate the unique voice of African American women as they define themselves rather than accepting mainstream images of who they are. African American women are active in changing how the world views them and other women of color rendered invisible in academic discourse (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005, Collins, 1999, hooks, 1990; Thompson, 1998). Since critical race theory, Black feminist theory and critical race feminism all promote storytelling and counter-stories, autoethnography is a perfect platform to present my voice. Critical race theory, Black feminist theory and critical race feminism helped clarify my stance on inequality based on race and gender because of my double jeopardy and
dual consciousness: I am both Black and female. Counter-storytelling, a fundamental tenet of critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism is an essential component of autoethnography (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Matsuda, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Data Collection

In this autoethnographic study, I am the primary data source. The experiences for this study of a nontraditional African American woman student at a predominantly White university are recounted memories, vignettes and archived data (Chang 2008). Data collection began promptly after I received notice that I could begin my proposal. I have started collecting old photos, awards, report card and letters. I constructed the narratives, reviewed the archived data and wrote the vignettes. I wanted to be assured that what was in my memory was actually what I wanted to share.

Feldman (2003) related that data collection tools vary greatly in self-narrative research and autobiographical studies. To ensure research quality in an autoethnographic study, Feldman has developed criteria for data collection: 1) provide clear and detailed description of how we collect data and make explicit what counts as data in our work; 2) provide clear and detailed descriptions of how we constructed the representation from our data and what specifics about the data led us to make this assumption; 3) extend triangulation beyond multiple sources of data to include explorations of multiple ways to represent the same self-study; 4) provide evidence of how the research changed the educator; and 5) summarize its value to the profession. This can convince readers of the study’s significance and quality. I used critical race theory, Black feminist theory and critical race feminism to develop the protocol, which helped to ensure the protocol questions demonstrate linkages to the key concepts within the theories.
I approached this critical autoethnography by visualizing myself peeling back layers and layers of my life (as if it were an onion). The layers represented race, sex, culture, class, and barriers, all glued together in a fixed ball of memory. The ball of memory (the onion) gave shape to my experiences as I storied the meaningfulness of personal events in a cultural context (Denzin, 2018). I addressed the intersectional nature of my identity as I explored the limitations of what I am supposed to be based on: the presumed idea of sex and gender or the historical points of culture I have been assigned.

Data analysis began as soon as I started to write myself into existence in my notebook through the past and present memories. From the narratives in the notebook, I audio taped the written text and retold the audios “into stories” typed into a Word document on computer (Schram, 2006, p.105). Various techniques, as outlined by Chang (2008), facilitated recall and organization of the memories and events as data, including, but not limited to, a) personal memorabilia, letters, documents, photographs, artifacts; b) visual charts; c) familial and societal values and cross-cultural experiences; and d) chronicling the autoethnographers educational history. As Chang suggested, I chronicled the events of the past and created their time-line from Kindergarten to attending a predominantly White university. I found it important that each time-line was not misconstrued by its significance as the related essence might be affected by social, personal, or professional changes in the researcher’s life. From the retold stories, I constructed 12 vignettes and settled on four to include and exclude data through a process that was important for arranging the data in a meaningful way. Each vignette contained a critical incident of each time period from Kindergarten to higher education and was written in first-person. This allowed
the vignettes to be the center of the study, while providing a window into “cultural and social meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 116) of my individual experience.

My experiences and life events were compiled and presented using hindsight because of their relevance to the overall themes of race and gender inequalities for women of color and the connection of these experiences to the questions that informed this study (Denzin, 2010; Merriam, 2009). The retold narratives were analyzed by rereading and rereading multiple times. Specifically, the analysis sought to unravel how incidents of racism and sexism were navigated and impacted the researcher. As I used self-analysis and self-reflection to identify specific examples of social inequalities, I realized I had experienced more daily lived experience of the intersectionality of race and gender than I had thought (Leonardo & Boas, 2013). Therefore, I focused on critical race theory’s race, Black feminist theory’s gender, and critical race feminism’s counter-storytelling, all positioned within the narrative inquiry to “examine race and gender from all three perspectives” (Huber & Solórzano, 2014, p. 2). I demonstrated how racism and sexism were manifested in the experiences of my educational journey from Kindergarten to higher education, as told in my own voice (Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). To accomplish this, I went through a process of organizing and reflecting while data sorting, which started with my vignettes, audio taping, narratives and artifacts specifically seeking to uncover how race and gender were experienced and navigated.

**Researcher as Nontraditional**

This counter-story is a collection of memories of incidents that occurred within my lifetime. These incidences have jarred me emotionally and influenced my thinking toward the
system of higher education. This study positions itself as a first person, autobiographical account of my academic journey from Kindergarten to high school, to undergraduate school, to attending a predominantly White university as a doctoral student.

In terms of practice, critical researchers acknowledge that all research is an ethical and political act (D’Cruz & Jones, 2004). Therefore, as a nontraditional critical researcher I sought not only to name the injustice(s) found in the research site, but also to help establish a framework for the empowerment and social action for policy makers, administrators and professors. This dissertation seeks not only to help advance theoretical knowledge on gender, race, and social injustice issues related to educational experiences of nontraditional African American female students but also to put forth a support model that can benefit nontraditional and traditional African American female students on White campuses. The goal of this autoethnographic study is to develop an understanding of how gender and racial stereotypes and education-related beliefs can shape the social injustice practices at a predominantly White university.

Again, I am the only participant in this study. I am acting in the role of participant and researcher. The stories used in this study are reflections and memories of events that have happened to me. Adam, Ellis and Bochner (2011) write:

> When researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity. However, in addition to telling about experiences, autoethnographers often are required by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences. (p. 276)

Therefore, autoethnography as a research method permitted me to take part in my own research.
Autoethnographers offer accounts of personal experience to complement, or fill gaps in, existing research. These accounts may show how the desire for, and practice of, generalization in research can mask important nuances of cultural issues, marginalization/isolation (Jago, 2002) or social class and appearance (Hodges, 2014). As I was involved in two capacities, I focused on my personal experiences as I spoke against or provided alternatives to dominant, taken-for-granted, and harmful cultural scripts, stories, and stereotypes (Boylorn, 2014).

Two, the purpose of me as the autoethnographer was to articulate insider knowledge of my cultural experience. This assumption suggests that the writer (I) can inform readers about aspects of cultural life other researchers may not be able to know. A person who has directly experienced institutional oppressions and/or cultural problems, such as racism, loss, or illness, can talk about these issues in ways different from others who have limited experiences with these topics. Insider knowledge does not suggest that an autoethnographer can articulate more truthful or more accurate knowledge as compared to outsiders, but instead as authors, we can tell our stories in novel ways when compared to how others may be able to tell them.

Writing an autoethnography allowed me to analyze my experiences and make sense of them as I compared them to how I interacted with others. Chang (2008) posited that “understanding the relationship between self and others is one of the tasks autoethnographers may undertake” (p. 29). Using autoethnography as a research method, I learned more about my experience as an African American woman student while maintaining my cultural identity as I inserted myself into potentially harmful memories while making those memories clearer for me. My autoethnography included personal stories as my primary data (Chang, 2008). I also claimed the space of critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism as a reflective mirror for making meaning of my experiences. A narrative format allowed me to tell my story.
through my vulnerable self (Muncey, 2010), a self that has become fragile living within the boundaries of race.

Reflecting on a chosen topic, however, required deep insight, making auto-ethnic writing difficult. Storytelling was used to explore race and racism. I opened up about my thoughts and emotions and painted a true picture of my history, personality, and individual traits. I included a vivid summary and description of the experience so that when the reader reads my vignettes and reflective narratives, they can feel they have also experienced it. I also included an explanation of my thoughts, feelings, and reactions (Kearney, 2002). Examining the self through an autobiographical lens continued my own learning and provided additional insight and data regarding the role of a nontraditional student. Stories of the dominant culture are illuminated, while the stories of the marginalized are often muted (Bell, 2009), but according to Bell (2009), as a form of social justice, stories offer people who are oppressed creative ways of expression.

My story is derived from personal experiences in Midwestern American schools and later in elite institutions of higher education (predominantly White universities). These distinct locations present a unique opportunity to problematize the internalized forms class and racial structures that permeate educational institutions. Rodriguez and Ryave (2002) state that “reflections of self are a useful tool for autoethnographers because they open the reader to covert, elusive, and/or personal experiences like cognitive processes, emotions, motives, concealed actions, omitted actions, and socially restricted activities” (p. 3). Observations of self-allow the researcher to record her/his cognitive thoughts and behaviors within a specific context relative to the research topic. I focused on my feelings, my reactions, and my ability to convey my experiences as they actually happened. More specifically, my autoethnography is written in narrative format to shine light on the struggles of being a nontraditional African American
woman student in a White environment. Taylor (2009) says, “One purpose of a narrative is to redirect the dominant gaze, to make it seen from a new point of view that has been there all along” (p. 8). These stories are a collection of memories of incidents that have occurred within my White environment that have impacted me so deeply they have caused a great shift in my thinking about the educational system.

I set aside one hour each day in which to write a narrative about my past memories. This time was set aside to allow myself quiet time for reflecting. I also wanted to be able to write in a setting that would allow me to look over any of my resources and materials that I might find useful, including pictures from my albums and yearbooks. The narratives became a running dialog and reflections of memories triggered from the pictures or other artifacts that have affected me as an African American woman.

The goal was to write these narratives with as much thick description as possible, retaining smaller details to recognize patterns as more entries were developed. Sanders and Bradley (2005) suggest that scholars and practitioners need to “examine how [in this case one African American woman] use personal agency, that is, the ability to effectively change and intervene in one’s own circumstance” (p.302). I expected to be amazed by the depth of thought as I gained a deeper understanding of my identity as a nontraditional African American woman and my newly-identified triple jeopardy self.

Documents and Photos

My identity as a nontraditional African American female graduate student attending a predominantly White university is lodged in my photographs. The images were cropped to
protect the identities of the other individuals and avoid photo elicitation. I analyzed the photographs based on my visual memory of persons, places, and things along with memories of my lived experiences. I laid the photographs out according to how they made me feel when I looked at them. I then grouped the photographs through visual analysis to trigger critical incidents to be included in the narratives. As the stories emerged, I made a collage for each vignette.

To ensure a high degree of quality, as the researcher, I sought to categorize the relationships between the narratives and the photographs to support the theories of critical race theory, Black feminist theory and critical race feminism (Jorgensen, 1989). Each data source was subjected to an in depth analysis to create rich descriptions of narratives. I explored the complexities of the memories triggered by the photos to create my narrative writings that explained my own vulnerability in the events that unfolded. The photos and documents helped make sure that I moved beyond my experiences and analyzed in significant ways that showed the reader the challenges experienced on my journey. This meant striking a balance between storytelling and analysis while adopting an objective stance as I analyzed the materials.

**Presentation of Data: Autoethnographic Vignettes**

For the purposes of this study, I utilized autoethnographic vignettes to present findings. Autoethnographic vignettes are fragmented prose or texts that blend analytical and representational strategies to increase self-reflexivity (Humphreys, 2005). They also draw on the traditions of narrative vignettes to provide short stories that elicit emotional identification and
understanding from the reader with respect to culture and context (Humphreys, 2005). Autoethnographic vignettes are useful for sharing my life events, providing a clear view through which the reader can understand, engage in and/or experience what it is like to be a nontraditional African American woman at a predominantly White university.

While varied, the vignettes are intrinsically united by the journey of my own personal perception of what makes an effective student of research due to the dual role of the researcher as the investigator and the one being investigated. Loughran et al. (2007) claim the importance of analysis and interpretation to understand better the phenomena taking place in the researcher’s life. Those phenomena can be comprehended through theoretical frameworks of self-study in regard to a nontraditional African American woman’s education and self-identity in a predominantly White university.

Researchers do not act in isolation and do not live in a vacuum. Describing the events the researchers witnessed or participated in themselves does not make them the owners of the story just because they told it to the world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Researchers’ stories are equally related to other people’s lives. Berry (2006) claims that autoethnography has the power to transform both researchers and readers alike. This approach makes the whole meaning of the inquiry transparent and comprehensible to its readers. Thus, readers get a chance to make their own inferences and conclusions based on the presented vignettes and reflective narratives. Involving readers in thinking and inferring adds value to autoethnography. Just as life itself, autoethnographic vignettes and reflective narratives are not one-dimensional. Some described events are close and understandable, and some are distant and not coherent to others. The researcher may discover that an underestimated powerful event from long ago has conjured up and triggered unexpected new developments in the present. Autoethnography is a method that is
different from other kinds of methods. In my case, those people are my peers, colleagues, friends, parents, teachers, professors, and administrators (my sociocultural community). Writing autoethnography does not waive my obligation to protect my subjects’ confidentiality. The participants in my autoethnographic vignettes and narratives will be described under assumed names or pseudonyms, including the names of schools and other educational institutions. Researchers have the inalienable responsibility to be genuinely empathetic toward their subjects in their attempt to understand the others. Ellis (2009) reminds autoethnographers how significant it is to acknowledge connections to other people through supporting relationship ethics. I always kept in mind that it is impossible to trespass on ethical boundaries without ruining the fabric of both the research and the bond it creates with others.

**Storytelling**

Storytelling was a venue for reflecting on positionality and silencing that occurred for a nontraditional African American women at a White institution (Delgado, 1989). McKay (1997) suggests that storytelling is used in two ways: to challenge dominant culture’s notions about a group “by providing a context to understand and transform an established belief system” and “authentically represent marginalized people by showing them ‘the shared aims of their struggle’” (p. 27). Robinson, Esquibel, and Rich (2013) argue that “drawing on Black feminist theory allows us to place Black women’s voices at the center of research to rearticulate subjugated knowledge into specialized knowledge, as well as support epistemologies and theories about Black women” (p. 58).

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) introduced storytelling for education research to challenge current researchers to find a more effective way to better understand those at the margins of
society (Anzaldúa, 1990; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Harper (2009) points out that the goal of
storytelling is not to focus on convincing the White mainstream that racism exists but to reflect
on the lived experiences of racially and socially marginalized people of color. It is a means to
give voice, perspective, and consciousness to those previously suppressed, devalued, and
abnormalized (Delgado, 1999).

Some stories take on a life of their own. Sometimes you just must fight to be heard. As an
African American woman, narratives provided a stage for me to name my reality and to tell my
story. The argument of counter-narratives is not to replace one narrative for another, but to give
voice to the experiences and ways of knowing, regarding groups who are othered (Ladson-
Billings, 2009). According to Delgado (1989), counter-narratives can build a sense of
community among marginalized groups by offering a voice to one another and a space to be
understood by others. The counter-narratives can then be offered as an alternative to the
dominant perspective and used to counter hegemonic perspectives that combat destructive
stereotypes (Harper et al, 2009), to gain a deeper understanding of racial dynamics (Solórzano &
Yosso, 2009), and to serve as a source of empowerment for the narrator and an audience that is
othered (Denzin, 2013).

Criteria for Quality

Generalizability should not become an issue in the area of autoethnographic research
because the research has internal validity. My experiences at a predominantly White university
can enhance understanding of the challenges of a nontraditional African American female
undergraduate student. The study provides opportunities for the reader to connect with the
experiences of the researcher. The focus of generalizability moves from the researcher to the
reader to determine if a story speaks to them about their experience and whether unfamiliar processes are illuminated (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). There is much debate on the autoethnographic methodology, questioning whether a personal narrative can be credible, dependable, and trustworthy. Ellis and Bochner (2000) posited that to be valid, the readers have to be able to identify with the experiences of the author. To enhance the validity of my research, I used data collected from my Kindergarten experiences extending through my experiences as a doctoral student. I recorded the chronology of events based on the narratives and artifacts I have saved over the years. Additionally, I repeated the process over and over to determine authenticity.

According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), questions of reliability refer to the narrator’s credibility and whether the evidence presented is factual. For this reason, public data such as class year books and class reunion photos data were used to corroborate the narrative.

Ethics

As the researcher, I am concerned with the ethics in “practice or situational which are unpredictable, often subtle, yet ethically important moments that come up in the field” (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). A consideration in critical autoethnography ethics is voice. In autoethnography, voice can mean having a real researcher—and a researcher’s voice—in the text (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). There is also a concern with expressing oneself that goes beyond understanding one’s expressed self. Ethical implications for me, as the researcher, involved how I reflect on my journey, use my voice, and interrogate my multiple selves as I engaged in the research. I did not employ a strategy to protect my identity because I am conducting a critical autoethnography, so I am being faithful to the research process and the problem I have chosen to investigate. My
research will define my perspectives of race, gender, and age as well as my ability to have courageous conversations about these perspectives with myself.

**Conclusion**

The theoretical framework seeks to show there is some interplay between the outside forces that face nontraditional students and their contributions to the graduation rates in higher education. Critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism are relative because they show alignment between being an African American and being a female nontraditional graduate student (double consciousness) and the feelings of inclusion and level of involvement in the activities at the predominantly White university. However, Collins (1999) emphasizes a relationship between the demographic makeup and the social makeup of a nontraditional African American woman’s academic life. The writer argues that the interplay of the two affects nontraditional African American women’s ability or inability to continue postsecondary education.

**Summary**

Chapter 3 provides the research design, information about the participant-(me), the data collection method as related to the research questions, and the theoretical framework: critical race theory, Black feminist theory and critical race feminism Theory. The data analysis method includes information about ethical considerations. Autoethnography allowed me, as the participant and researcher, to tell my story in my own words while allowing the readers to feel as though they are active participants in my experiences. To find my own voice I constructed
narrative writings and vignettes and used artifacts in the form of photos, albums, report cards, grade books, letters, awards and certifications to trigger my memory.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to explore race, age, and gender of an African American woman’s educational experiences from Kindergarten to a doctoral program at a predominantly White university. This chapter provides an account of vignettes, narratives, artifacts, and research questions that reflect my self-reflection and self-analysis within the social context of the research in the areas of racism, ageism, and sexism. Where applicable and available I include visual representations of the vignettes discussed in the narratives. Then I present an analytic summary of the findings from the narratives with pertinent data from the study as illustrative support. I have also included a timeline at the beginning of the chapter to help the reader understand the timeframes in which events occurred.

Time-line 1954-2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutions</th>
<th>Grade level/Dates</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Schools K-12</td>
<td>1954-1967</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douglas Elementary</td>
<td>K – 3rd</td>
<td>Chicago, IL (South Side)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Hale Williams Elementary</td>
<td>4-7th</td>
<td>Chicago, IL (South Side)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCosh Elementary School</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>Chicago, IL (South Side)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Englewood High School</td>
<td>9th-12th</td>
<td>Chicago, IL (South Side)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Rita Catholic School</td>
<td>Summer, 10th</td>
<td>Chicago, IL (South Side)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Institutions</td>
<td>1968-1979</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern University</td>
<td>Freshman (less 2 months)</td>
<td>Carbondale, IL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Midwest Podiatry Institute 1968 Chicago, IL (South Side)
Wilson Junior College 1969 Chicago, IL (South Side)
Loop Junior College 1970 Chicago, IL (Downtown)
South Loop Junior College 1970 Chicago, IL (Downtown)
Olive Harvey Junior College 1972-1975 Chicago, IL (South Side)
Trinity Christian College 1975-1979 Chicago, IL (South-West Side)

Graduate Institutions 1995-2020
Chicago State University (Masters) 1995-1997 Chicago, IL (South Side)
Northern Illinois University (Doctorate) 2000-2020 DeKalb, IL (branch campuses)
Downtown Chicago and Naperville

Part One: Unraveling Coming into Consciousness Regarding Race, Age and Gender

Vignette 1: Kindergarten (1954) “Cry Babies”

The population of the first school I attended was 100% Black. Douglas Elementary School was located in the heart of the city’s south side in an African American neighborhood. My first teacher, Miss Dove, happened to be my neighbor, but I had no idea she was White until the first day of school. Before attending school, I had very few encounters with White folks, as my grandfather called them. In the summer during baseball, White men would
drive around our block looking for parking spaces. They would see us sitting on the porch and
tell (not ask) my grandfather to watch their cars while waving two dollars, as though that was a
huge amount of money, while they attended the game. My grandfather always replied firmly,
“No, if you are afraid of parking your car in our neighborhood, then you should park it
somewhere where you feel more comfortable for its safety.” And then my grandfather would get
up and go into the house.

I also saw White boys around the house who attended a parochial high school that was
exclusively for them (that’s all I would see coming from there) on our side of the viaduct,
named Browning Catholic High School. Occasionally, the White boys would make a mistake
while being inattentive and pass the viaduct the wrong way, going too far into our neighborhood.
The hunt began when the Black guys chased them, fought them, and sometimes took their
transistor radios (valued like our iPhones today). Usually, the White boys were rescued by a
Black parent, who made them stop fighting and returned the radios. The parent(s) then made sure
the White boys returned to safety on the other side of the viaduct. My grandfather said, “If that
happened on the opposite side of the viaduct (where they lived), their White parents would never
protect you” (meaning Negro/colored kids), they would let us get beat up and sometimes join
in.” He warned us to never be so careless.

Getting back to life in Kindergarten, on the first day of school, Kindergarteners lined up
by their assigned classroom. Their teachers greeted them before entering the rooms. My teacher
was Miss Dove, my neighbor from across the street. When she opened the door, she directed us
to a large red and Black circle and said, “Sit there until I call your names.” Immediately I thought
floor, my Mother would not approve of me sitting on the floor in my pretty dress or any dress for
that matter. Although I was not a complete novice at obeying rules, sitting on the floor in my
pretty ruffled yellow dress was a definite punishable offense enforceable by my mother. Before taking attendance, Miss Dove explained her rules and expectations and informed us that she was a White woman in case we didn’t know.

While verifying enrollment, Miss Dove used our whole names from her attendance book. She further said, “There will be no Pookies, Little Man, Meat Balls, Little Mommas or Cookies in my classroom, do you understand? I will only call the names on your birth certificates.” After a few minutes, she split the circle into two groups. When she did that, the crying began and that annoyed her. She got up and pulled the crybabies from the circle (that’s what she called them in
her ‘cry baby voice’) saying, “Cry Baby Cry, Wipe Your Weeping Eyes and Put Your Hands on Your Hips and Let Your Backbone Slip!” She made ‘the cry babies’ face the back wall, separating them from everyone. We loved singing “Cry Baby Cry” while playing outside, before she mocked them in the classroom. When we were working at our tables, Miss Dove would constantly shush ‘the cry babies’ on the floor, while putting her hand across her mouth with the look of disgust. She would turn and say to us, “They don’t really want to learn or they wouldn’t behave in such a manner.” My side of the circle sat at tables on the opposite side of the room, we were given tablets and pencils, and we were formally taught. She gave the remaining students on the floor crayons, paper to draw and told them to be quiet and if they wanted to learn, watch us. I wanted to be with my friends, ‘the crybabies,’ on the floor, but Miss Dove said, “You don’t want to go down there with them.”

One of ‘the cry babies’ was my friend. Her mother came to school one day for a parent-teacher conference to question why her daughter said she didn’t do anything in school but color and nap. Her mom said, “I ask my daughter every day after school, ‘How was your day and what did you learn, and why no homework?’ The daughters’ response was always the same, ‘Color and nap.’ I heard Miss Dove tell an untruth about the cry babies’ behavior. Miss Dove said, “Your daughter does not stay focused while I’m struggling to teach her. Your child is not mature enough for Kindergarten and I suggest she repeat Kindergarten next year.” Miss Dove didn’t tell the truth!

Vignette 2: 1st-2nd grade “Lil Schwartze”

I had the same teacher for first and second grades. Mr. Erhardt was from a different country where everyone spoke German. I thought he was very interesting. I was intrigued with
his stories of where he was born and the explorations he had when he was young. He told us he learned to ski when he was a baby and everyone in his family could ski. I loved his deep raspy voice, including his rather thick accent. I can’t remember him really teaching us anything, or me learning anything. We had workbooks and a lot of handouts, which he used to keep us busy when he had something else to do. When someone couldn’t follow the assignments, he got really annoyed. Whenever students behaved terribly, he called them, little Schwartze and gave them a knuckle sandwich to their heads. I didn’t want the knuckle sandwich to my head because it hurt and I didn’t want to be called little Schwartze. I didn’t know exactly what little Schwartze meant, but I had a feeling he shouldn’t say it. I did notice he never said it around our parents, while we were in the corridors, cafeteria or when other adults were around. I liked him. I liked him a lot, so I never complained. I just wanted him to read stories to us like, *Uncle Toms’ Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe or any of the books he had about Black children. That man could change his voice in the matter of a second to the characters in the book that made it even more interesting. He would shuffle his feet, scratch his head and make the ugliest faces, saying that’s what Black people look like when they talk together.

My parents always asked about school and whether I had homework. My eyes got big with a smile on my face as I responded, “School was great, Mr. Erhardt read a story about Little Black Sambo and we laughed so hard.” I can’t remember him ever giving us homework, but I could be wrong. One day after school I was bragging to let my family see how much I paid attention to the happenings in my classroom. I told them about *Uncle Toms’ Cabin* and how interesting it was, and I mimicked how Mr. Erhardt would act while reading. My little brother rushed into the room screaming and jumped into our conversation. Immediately, I turned around and pointed to him and screamed, “shut up you little Schwartze.” My grandfather almost fell out
the rocker. He asked me, “Where did you hear that?” I answered, “Oh my teacher says that when
the kids disgust him or they misbehave.”

My mom, grandmother, and dad rushed in and told us to go outside. They didn’t want us
to hear what my grandfather was going to say, and frankly I didn’t either. I knew I had talked too
much and that my teacher was going to be in big trouble. The next day my grandfather, dad, and
mother took me to school because of their concern with the teacher calling the kids little
Schwartz. My grandfather had been in the army and knew exactly what the word meant. He said
to me, “Little Schwartz is not such a good word. You should never, ever allow anyone to
disrespect you by calling you anything other than your real name. If anyone calls you little
Schwartz or another disrespectful name ignore them, don’t acknowledge them, walk away.”

I couldn’t help it, I loved, loved, loved, Mr. Erhardt anyway. All I knew was when he
read Little Black Sambo in his best Negro voice, I felt as if I was actually there, experiencing it
all. After that visit, Mr. Erhardt only boasted of his race being superior and the first race of
people on earth (we didn’t know what he was talking about but would shake our heads in
agreement). Again, the uneasy feelings returned but were soon dismissed as soon as he started
telling stories of his childhood – that voice! Mr. Erhardt, all throughout first and second grades,
ever called us, lil Schwartz again. He did continue to tell us that his people were of a superior
race because they all had blue eyes and blonde hair and that Germans were the original people. It
didn’t matter that we didn’t know what original meant, we just knew that he said they were the
smartest people ever and that he read stories the best (don’t tell my mom).
My third-grade teacher, Miss Geneva Tall, became Dr. Tall and principal of my school, Douglas Elementary. She later became principal of Wendell Phillips High School until her untimely death. She was my Super Shero. I met Geneva as Geneva because all the girls on my block were addressed by their first names. She and her family, mom, dad, and sister moved to the inner city from a southern state. They said everything is bigger in the south! Their entire family graduated from something called a HBCU in the south, all of them. I didn’t know what that meant but it had to be special because they said it with pride on their faces and in their voices.
Dr. Tall’s mom was a teacher before meeting her dad, who she convinced to become a teacher. They both became principals before they retired. During conversations while visiting my home, they often stressed the importance of education because education could lead to a much better life. Further they emphasized that only with a good education could you make something special of yourself. I supposed this was why they said that education “will set you free” (but we were free; we weren’t slaves anymore). I can remember Geneva always telling me about how hard our ancestors had worked for us. That there was more to history than White history, and how important it is to know the history of our people and what it took from them to allow us the privilege of being able to learn without being fearful like the slaves. In class she would tell us about famous Black women and men. Mrs. Tall always ended class with telling us how great we were, that we had the potential to be even greater, and how she expected to read about our extraordinary accomplishments in a history book someday.

The Talls relocated to the Midwest due to job opportunities for both of their daughters. Her dad said he was fearful of his daughters living alone in this city. He had heard how dangerous our city could be and he didn’t want either of them living here without him knowing what was going on. I felt lucky to have the Talls’ living next door to me and my family. It was easy for me to access their house because I could climb over the post from the back of my house to their back porch and step right into their kitchen if I decided to not use the front door. Her parents and sister only stayed a couple of years before deciding to move back to their home because her mom couldn’t take the brutal winters (her health, something about arthritis).

Geneva opted to stay (I think she had fallen in love) because she met handsome Mr. Mason Christopher, whom she later married. Like her mom, she convinced her husband to become a teacher and he even became a principal. When they married, I was their flower girl and
my little brother the ring barrier. Three years later, I became their first official babysitter for both
their daughters. I don’t think Geneva liked my grandfather’s philosophies on women being
educated and working. My grandfather believed it was taboo for women to work and that school
was a waste of time. He believed women should learn how to take care of their husbands by
cooking, cleaning, washing, sewing, and having dinner ready when the husband came in from
work. Also, women needed to tend to their children and their families and never, I mean never,
should a man come home and the house not be clean (Geneva said that was old fashion). My
grandfather made my mom drop out of high school her freshman year when she was only twelve
to take care of her baby brother, my Uncle Dolphus (my favorite uncle on my maternal side of
the family), as my grandmother was very ill.

Geneva said, “Your grandfather’s ideas are outdated and women need to think differently
about staying home, and not getting a good education makes them dependent on their husbands.”
My grandfather would say behind her back, “That’s probably why teachers have the dirtiest
houses; they are always caring for other people’s kids and not their own homes and families.” I
must admit her house wasn’t too tidy, so I thought there was some truth to what he said. Geneva,
as my neighbor, and Dr. Christopher, as my teacher, exposed me to a new world of activities.
She registered me in the 4-H Club and took me to visit libraries, art centers, museums, and the
Midwest State Fair. She played piano and the organ at Daniels Baptist Church and directed the
choir, one of the oldest and most prominent Black Churches in the Midwest. She also played at
funerals and weddings and taught piano and organ lessons (I didn’t like playing piano). Once a
month on Saturdays, she was one of the leaders in Young Democrats Club, established for
youngsters to learn about politics. Some of the kids had parents and grandparents who were
politicians and who inspired and sparked our interest in politics. My mom and Aunt Sharon
worked the polls every opportunity because they said it was important and their civic duty to know what’s going on in politics.

Dr. Christopher (not Geneva in school) was phenomenal and having her as my teacher was a favorable and positive learning experience. She always challenged us to do better in class. It didn’t matter if you were from a home of means or you were a pauper. She treated each student with dignity and respect. Boy, girl, light, dark, learning for her did not depend on your looks or clothes (tell that to Miss Dove). She made home visits if you fell behind or if you were in trouble. She tutored her students (and their parents if necessary) after school and on the weekends. She informed us before testing that our test scores were actually her grades. If our test scores were low, it meant she had not done the work of a good teacher (she failed as a teacher). We all wanted high scores just for her because she deserved it because she worked so hard in all our subjects. I can’t remember ever hearing a single student complain about her. I would go to school happy and come home happy and eager to learn more tomorrow. Homework was never a problem; we worked on it together, while I waited for her to clean the classroom and prepare for tomorrow’s lessons. That year was definitely the best year of all of my entire grammar school experiences.

Vignette 4: 4th-7th Grade (1958-62) “A Combination of Cultures”

In the fourth grade, I transferred to Daniel Hale Williams Elementary School. It was near an Asian community, and many of the students who were Asian and White transferred to our Black school because the schools in their neighborhood were overcrowded. This was my first-time seeing students in my classroom that didn’t look like me. I was intrigued, curious, and excited all at once. This was a whole new and strange experience that I was enthusiastic about. I
sat in homeroom near a girl named Lacy Dee; this was the only time during the day we sat next
to each other (they always called her by her whole name). I introduced myself and she only
smiled. I wondered if she spoke English or could she even understand me. The teacher screamed
out before I could say another word, “Leave her alone!” Wow, I wondered if she thought I was
troubling her or something. Later that afternoon, Lacy left a note in my folder saying her name
and that we would get in trouble if we talked to each other. That was a new kind of lockup for
me.

When it was time for lunch, we lined-up. It looked as if the teachers lined us up
according to our races: Whites first, Asians, then Blacks, and boys before the girls. We never
ever interacted with the Asians or Whites; we were separated the entire school day (every day).
Our teachers never encouraged us to intermingle nor did they encourage us to share our
differences in our cultures. From time to time, Lacy and another Asian girl would exchange
notes with me in secret. Lacy even called me at home a few times. However, one time when we
were in the grocery store at the same time, she pointed me out to her mother. Her mother pulled
her by the arm and practically ran out of the store. We would still sneak and talk until the end of
the year. That summer Lacy visited her grandparents in China, I received a couple of post cards
from her. She took a picture of her grandparents’ house, and it was strange (very different from
ours). When I wrote back, I never heard from her again.

When we jumped rope during recess, the Asian girls were curious and wanted to learn.
That’s the only time they were brave enough to approach us and ask if we would show them, but
the teachers would scurry over to tell them to get away and go back to their side of the park. In
class, we (Blacks) sat on the far side of the room, and Asians and Whites sat on the opposite side.
An Asian girl named May Ling invited me to her birthday party. She slipped the invitation in my
coat pocket. I went to the party reluctantly; I didn’t want to because I knew no other Black kids from our class would be there. My Mom convinced me to try it. She said, “If you get there and you feel too uncomfortable, I could leave early.” When we rang the bell to her house, both her parents opened the door and a look of surprise crossed both their faces (I thought they were going to faint), but they still invited us in. My Mom knew not to leave me, and she and my dad waited in the car until the party was over. It was a little awkward, but it was okay (no one was rude). I was surprised we liked the same music. We danced and ate food that was much better than food from the Asian restaurants. Somehow that Monday morning my teachers knew I had gone to the party. I was sent to the principal who warned me against ever doing that again because that could cause problems.

Every year was always the same, I got used to it being like it was. I was okay being with my own Black friends. We talked, played together, and had fun. It was their loss I thought. They missed out on having really nice kids as friends. It wasn’t their fault; it was their parents, our teachers, and administrators. It was like this until they finished building their school and they could no longer come under the viaduct to our neighborhood. I always thought to myself that the viaduct was a permanent wall that separated two different sets of people.

Vignette 5: 8th Grade (1963) “The Fashion Show”

In eighth grade, my family moved to a better neighborhood and I attended McCosh Elementary School. My Mom brought me to school on the first day. After leaving the office and getting directions to the room, we walked down the hall and opened the door to my eighth grade classroom. The noise, it was complete pandemonium, it was like walking into the craziest of houses (better than an amusement park). Kids were running around the room with brooms,
singing, and banging loudly on the piano. One tall boy was running behind a girl, while others were turned around in their seats talking loudly to each other or yelling across the room. That scene took my Mom by surprise (her face was priceless); she grabbed my shoulders and pulled me back as if she was saving me from stepping in front of a train. The door slammed and we both jumped; she looked down at the paper in her hand and said, “This must be a mistake, I cannot leave you here in this mayhem.” She took me back to the office and told the assistant principal what just happened. He got on the intercom and screamed (because they didn’t hear him at first), “Be quiet!” The sounds instantly stopped. He told them he was leaving the intercom on and he better not hear a peep out of them.

When we walked back, everyone was sitting quietly in their seats. Not one sound, nothing. My Mom handed the teacher the slip from the office and explained why we were there. The teacher just pointed to an empty desk directly in front of her. My Mom turned to me and asked, “Do you want to really stay here?” as if she was afraid to leave me. I assured her I would be okay and that I could make it home alone after school. My Mom left reluctantly. I then remembered she didn’t leave me the keys to get in the house.

I asked the girl sitting next to me quickly, “What is the teacher’s name?” I wanted permission to catch up with my Mom. She said, “Mrs. Trilobite!” I raised my hand anxiously and repeated the name I was told. The teacher screamed, sat back down in her chair, and then jumped back up and screamed as loud as she could. She scared me; what was happening? The kids were all laughing and making noise. Maybe I should have left with my Mom? In a second Mr. Fears, the assistant principal, ran into the room! The students were now running into the hall and falling on the floors. Ms. Trilobite, whose name was actually Ms. Shustler, had sat in glue and tacks, completely covering the back of her dress. Lo and behold she blamed everything on me. I let Mr.
Fears know that Jessica told me the teachers name was Miss Trilobite and that I had raised my hand as I was taught to do in school.

Thank God, he transferred me to Mrs. Smith’s room that same day. Now that room was completely the opposite from the other class. This teacher put fear into everyone’s heart, including mine. I didn’t mind because it was the opposite of what was going on across the hall. I was happy because here the teacher had the class under control and would be able to teach. As soon as I was introduced to her, she began to smile for some strange reason. She walked me toward the front of the classroom by her desk. I felt lucky because she seemed to like me. I sat in my seat for a moment. She then instructed me to step up on a chair and stand on a desk she had the boys pull together in fours to make a table. Every day from the first day, she made me stand on top of the desk as she pointed to my dress and the cleanliness of my underskirt, socks, shoes and neatness of my hair. Of course, this made most of my classmates hate me.

I pretended not to care. I only had a few months until graduation and on to high school. Besides I still had friends from my old school community, so I didn’t need their attitudes. I prayed that most of them wouldn’t be in the same high school with me and that I wouldn’t have to see them after graduation. The funny part of this story, I later dated and married Jessica’s uncle, the girl who gave me the wrong name for the teacher, and now she is my niece.
Vignette 6: 9th Grade (1964) “Beginning of My Best Years and I Didn’t Know it!”

I couldn’t wait to officially enter high school. I was excited for this new adventure. My Mom had been telling me about high school, and it seemed as if it took forever for me to get there. This high school thing she said was going to change my life. I think I was expecting something spectacular to happen from the onset. All I was concerned with was having fun. I
shopped for something special to wear, made sure my hair was perfect, got up early, ate breakfast, and headed for my first ride to school alone. My Mom and I made a pre-trial run the day before. I arrived at a massive building with more kids in one space than I have ever seen before. I reported to the auditorium and was given a sheet of paper telling me my division room and class schedule. I notice first that all my classes had “basic” on them, basic reading, basic math (two periods each) along with social studies and gym. Everyone seemed excited except me. I asked a friend about her classes, and we compared our slips just to see if we had any classes together. No, because she was in all accelerated classes. I think, what? This has to be a mistake, basic, no way this is happening to me. This wasn’t my proudest moment.

How could they mix up a perfect straight A students’ record for a special education student classes? I turned around and went directly to the principal’s office to find out for myself. There were dozens of other students there, maybe with the same problem as mine. The clerks were so rude, I thought to myself, they must be rude across the board. The clerk pretended to listen to my problem, then she snatched my paper and said, “It is what it is, and it’s in Black and white.” Then she pointed to the clock and the door. Then I decided to address my division teacher, who said hurriedly he would check and sent me downstairs to the basement to my classes. There were no cell phones then, so I had to wait to tell my mother about this when I got home. And the next day my Mother came with my records to show the principal and division teacher there had been a dreadful mistake. Thank God for Moms like mine. That day I was assigned to all honors classes!

At Englewood High school, I wanted to start out on the same footing as everyone else. We begin as freshmen and finish as seniors. Being popular meant a lot to me (in a positive way). I wanted to fit in and have fun. I became a majorette and made lots of friends. I also wanted to
join some extra-curricular activities, and because I was interested in medicine, I looked forward to becoming a member of Young Doctors Club but was rejected. When I interviewed and gave my credentials, I was flatly denied. The club, as it turned out, was exclusive to males. This time it was me being a female that blocked me from joining and not because I was Black. I was angry. The leader of the club directed me to the nursing club for girls only.

Due to my persistence, the principal was willing to hear my case. After listening attentively (or so I thought), he said, “Why worry your cute little head? You’ll never be in school long enough to become a doctor. The cuties usually get married and have children long before qualifying for medical school. So, stop squawking and enjoy being young!” I was beyond angry. I was denied because I was a girl! I wanted to ask, “How many male doctors successfully came out of your male club?” Being Black and a girl was becoming more difficult than I had ever imagined. I know medicine and twirling a baton were not on the same level, but after that I put my all into being on the majorette squad with the goal of becoming the captain for my senior year. Then at the end of my junior year, it didn’t happen. That was a big disappointment for me, and I became depressed, the unfairness, betrayal, and lies.

Figure 5. Pep assembly picture welcoming 9th grade students.
In my sophomore year I enjoyed being a majorette and was invited to initiate into the Lambda Omega Tri-High Y Club. It was like being in a sorority, only I was in high school. We followed the Roberts Rules of Order, held initiations, and had special secret ceremonies. We stuck together like sisters, having each other’s backs. I held two offices before I graduated. At our last ceremony, I was given a white Bible with my name printed in gold (I still have it).

Before sophomore semester ended, a couple of my girlfriends from church convinced me that we should attend St. Rita an all-boys White Catholic school during the summer. As it turned
out, I was the only girl to register. My friends’ parents had told them No, and no one told me before the first day of school. They thought their parents would change their minds and let them register up until the first day of school.

My first day at summer school and I couldn’t believe it. None of my friends were there. I was the only girl and the only Black person. The bell rang, and the name calling began, starting with the ‘N’ word along with being referred to as “Lil Black Sambo.” In the bathrooms meant for me to use, I saw nasty names and pictures that included the “B” word. Once I was walking up the stairs a boy spit right in the middle of my head. I almost pushed him over the railing, I was angry. And I was punished by Father. I had to hold my books over my head while kneeling on concrete in the cafeteria for a week.

If they thought they hated me, I hated them more! Each night I mentally prepared myself for the next day. I actually feared for my life; I never knew what they had planned. I felt I had no protection that could keep me safe. Those guys never let up – the name calling, cursing, spitting, putting glue and chalk in my seat, piling on top of each other at the door frames so it would be difficult for me to enter or leave. I was called the “N” word every time someone walked past me. I was constantly referred to as Aunt Jemima, and they would yell as I walked by, “Ain’t Yo momma on the pancake box?” They asked, “Why is it that you people always want to live, go to school, shop and now you want to worship in our neighborhoods? You want to be just like us, don’t you?”

When they (the White boys) did something to me, I always got caught “acting out,” and my punishment always the same, detention. Didn’t they expect me to defend myself? At the end of the summer, I couldn’t wait to return to being treated in a humane manner with sane people in a place where I belonged.
My junior year was more than exciting! I had a lot on my bucket list to accomplish. Returning to my regular school in the fall was somewhat of a treat; I felt safe being with people who looked like me. My closest friend Darlene, who was captain of the majorettes, was graduating and had groomed me for the captain’s position since we met. We entered twirling competitions and joined a drum and bugle core. We even won a few competitions. Everyone knew I could twirl as well as Darlene and agreed to vote for me, even Jennifer, my opponent. I was beyond excited! My Mom made me a new uniform for the announcement. I could not wait for last period to vote! I visualized the next day’s pep assembly when everyone would see me in my white vest. Only that didn’t happen.

Ms. Pleigler, our coach, for some reason counted the ballots in the privacy of her office – something she had not done before. When she returned, she said Jennifer won, the lighter skinned girl. Everyone looked surprised, including Jennifer. I couldn’t play that off, one would think she stabbed me with a knife. When Ms. Pleigler left, everyone looked at one another and said, “What just happened?” in unison. Holding back my tears, I left for home. I felt betrayed, how could she? We all knew she had lied, but why? I should have held that position, but the fairer (lighter) skinned girl won. That night I cried until I fell asleep.

When the announcements were made for all sports teams who would be the captain and co-captain at the assembly, Ms. Pleigler didn’t even call my name as co-captain. I was somewhat vindicated when Jennifer came onto the stage and everyone stood up in the assembly hall and began to boo her. She was always nervous and that took her over the edge (no one expected that). When Jennifer walked out, she stumbled and dropped her baton. I really felt bad for her because
it wasn’t her fault; it was evil Pleigler’s fault, but Jennifer was the one being punished. Because she thought I had planned that fiasco we were never friendly again.

During my junior year, my Mother prepared me for my/her Cotillion. This event was really for her. I think it was something she had always wanted as a girl. She called it, “My introduction into society.” The memory stands out as being one of the highlights of my high school years. I did not want to do any of the things a young debutant was expected to do but with a little strong arm convincing from my mom and grandmother I conceded. I went to all the practices, the parties, the dinners, and the teas along with going to operas. On the night of the cotillion, all of participants were beyond excited. Our dresses, the hall, the music and our dates were so handsome. My date told me not to get my hopes up for becoming Miss Congeniality, but to our surprise (including me), I heard my name being called! I was Miss Congeniality, what an honor. The girls and their dates had voted for me. That one night changed me as well as my resentful attitude toward school and Miss Pflieger.

At the end of the year I began modeling for Johnson Publishing Company. When my story and pictures appeared in their magazine, some of the students from school bought it and passed it around school. They were shocked to see the storyline and pictures. We were not notified of the story that would go along with the pictures before it had been released. These were extra pictures of my mom and me posed in their kitchen, pretending to be talking. That day I wondered why I was getting all of the second glances and odd looks and whispers in the hallways and in the lunchroom. A friend pulled me aside to share the story and pictures. It said I was a teenage single mother who disrespected her parents. We immediately broke out into laughter. She knew my Mom and she knew that could never happen in a million years. I liked modeling and wished for truer stories, but those stories wouldn’t be exciting, nor would they sell
any magazines. The end of my junior year in high school was the best; it made up for all of the negatives I had experienced!

Vignette 9: 12th Grade (1967) “Free at Last”

My senior year was uneventful and I could not wait to graduate. My disappointment with the majorette coach caused me to withdraw. I had so much respect for Ms. Pleigler before that incident. I actually thought she liked me. We lived in the same court, and I had friends who lived in the same building. I dreamed about getting out of the very place that once brought me joy. After graduation, I wanted to be on my own, at my parents expense of course. I couldn’t wait to get out of the house, away from my nosey little brother, go to college, and live in a dorm room. There I thought I would be able to come and go as I wished (or so I thought). I didn’t know there would be logs and curfews and room checks.

Nothing exciting happened until the end of my senior year. Everyone was yelling and looking out the windows of the school. Police cars were everywhere, and they were arresting one of the male teachers. The teacher had been passing himself off as a teacher, doctor, pilot, engineer, fireman, policeman, and a surgeon at two of the largest most prestigious hospitals here in this city and at others in the United States. He was so weird and everyone cheered! They should have caught him early in the semester; he gave too much homework and his tests were extra hard, and for some reason, he was harder on the girls. He said it would make us better women later in life. The guys really liked him because he really didn’t care if they did their work or came to class. When he was arrested, they were worried because they hoped the next teacher would be as lenient. By the time they found another competent instructor, it was time for graduation.
I did enjoy the last weeks of school only because we had so many activities to participate in: senior week when we dressed according to themes, senior luncheon, award assemblies, a senior Sadie Hawkins dance, and the ultimate prom. I planned to go with my boyfriend who was in the Navy, but Uncle Sam had other plans for him (Viet Nam). So, I went to prom, with a boy I really didn’t like. Graduation night I realized that most of the people I was trying to get away from, I probably would never see again. We would never, ever be in the same place at the same time. Goodbye high school, goodbye good and bad memories.

Summary of Part One

Part One focused on the ways I unraveled critical educational experiences that were recognized as developing my race, age, and gender conscious awareness. The transitions from lower school, to middle school, and to high school reflect my story of how an African American female internalized damaging messages. As I aged I gained a gradual consciousness of pride as being a Black girl with dual identity of race and gender (Steven, 2002). Scott, Jones and Clark (1986) explained that the school environment mirrors the values and norms of the greater society that privilege males over females and Whites over non-Whites. The findings from this study support the notion that Black girls develop a particular sense of self and identity from their experiences of race, age, and gender. My lived experiences as an African-American female in this research study serve as evidence.

In these vignettes, I experienced stereotypes in school as a regular occurrence in my lived experiences. The first vignette indicated that I was an excellent observer but had no experience with understanding differences in races. Neither of my parents nor my grandparents ever said I was Black. Although my grandfather said the men who wanted their cars parked were White, he
was wrong. I knew my colors. The confusion about race could have been avoided if diversity education was discussed in Kindergarten, starting with Miss Dove. Had she simply said, “Class, today we are going to talk about color and race. My color is considered as White in our society and my race is White.” It is confusing to me because this crayon is white and this piece of paper is white. I’m called White even though I don’t look like the real color of white. I’m pink. It’s the same with you. You are called Black and your Race is Black. This crayon is Black and this sheet of paper is Black. Your skin color is Brown but people with your skin color are called Black. If I had had this lesson on racial identity, I would not have been confused in fourth grade when I met Asian American students. They were labeled yellow, but they looked tan to me. I was being groomed to dislike my race by the microaggressions, racial slurs, name calling, and mocking beginning in kindergarten.

A rude awakening occurred in third and fourth grades. In third grade I had a Black teacher and learned I was Black (according to society’s labels) and my culture was from kings and queens in Africa. She shared that my people were doctors, architects, nurses, inventors, and teachers. At this age, I was moving into a new period of cognitive racial and gender development. I became inquisitive and wanted to know more in fourth grade when Asians and Whites were introduced into my educational setting. I began to show a greater interest in cultural characteristics, especially concerning Lacey who was my Asian friend. I wondered about her cultural group and its true history. I also wondered if Lacey faced a “double consciousness” (DuBois, 1903) like me, I did not officially know that term then. To me, her experiences were significantly different from the dominant culture she/we faced.

During the pre-adolescent and adolescence periods, I experienced incidents that aided in my understanding of differences in cultural factors that defined race and gender. Early
experiences with not belonging, coupled with positive experiences of being Miss Congeniality, helped to balance and develop my coping strategies to deal with both. I began to learn how to “code switch” (Young, Barrett, & Lovejoy, 2014). My decision to either express or suppress my emotions demonstrated a form of what Spencer, Fegley and Harpalani (2003) term a “reactive coping method” (p. 182) and what I call silencing. Social justice issues appealed to me, as my mother modeled how to participate in efforts to combat injustices. I discovered that school culture, which is comprised of traditions, policies, and practices, reinforces dominant societal norms that were marginalized and isolated during my summer school experience full of injustices. On a conscious level, I expressed an understanding of injustice in my school experiences as an African-American girl as they occurred in my world (Sherman & Balk, 2015).

As I grew older and transitioned from childhood to adolescence, my experiences with identity, emotional, and social systems transformed how I made sense of the incidents (Tinsley & Spencer, 2010). In addition, Black feminist thought help to expand the literature by positioning my Black girls’ school experiences within a greater societal discussion. It expanded conceptions of oppression, which contributed to my racial and gender identity development. As described by Collins (1990), vulnerability arises as an outgrowth of Black women’s lived experiences formed in a society that denigrates them. Unfortunately, age offers little protection against the legacy of this struggle. As an African-American youth, I developed identity consciousness across race and gender and internalized what it means to be a Black American female, which at times manifests as an asset or liability that either contributed to thriving or diminished my ability to thrive. The racism and sexism I experienced in K-12 were mirrored my subsequent educational experiences just manifested differently.
Part Two: Unraveling – Making of Adult Decisions

Vignette One: Undergraduate “Stopping Out”

I graduated from high school at age 16 and turned 17 two weeks later. I shopped the entire summer preparing for college. I was spinning with excitement when it was time to leave. We drove two cars. My cousin, Big Boy, a grown man from Wisconsin, drove his car with the heavy load. In my car were the pretty dresses and shoes I bought during the summer. The closer we got to college, the more nervous I became. Finally, after six grueling hours we saw cars filled with trunks and clothes lined up to get into the college. A White man with a large sign directed us to my dorm. There were no elevators, so we used the stairs to take my belongings to my assigned room. I was grateful Big Boy came along. My mom unpacked. My roommate wasn’t there so I chose the bed and desk by the window. I panicked when it was time for my family to leave. I had never spent a night away from any of my relatives. They agreed to stay a few more hours but had to leave before it got too late. As they left the lobby, my mom promised she would call daily, thinking that would satisfy me.

I dragged myself upstairs to my room. I thought that maybe I would feel better after the arrival of my roommate. I wondered, if she would be disappointed that I took the bed near the window or would want a particular side of the closet. We could talk about that later I guessed. I was exhausted from the excitement of the day and fell asleep across the bed. I heard someone at the door and sat up. The door opened and quickly slammed closed. I saw a White man peek his head in and jump back slamming the door again. I could tell they were in total shock! I heard her father say, “She’s a colored!” They scared me, I didn’t know if I should laugh or cry. I thought
someone had broken into my room while I was asleep. Her mom tried to calm him down, but he wouldn’t stop voicing his distain about the situation. This family had not anticipated their precious daughter rooming with a Black roommate! My roommate’s father screamed, “I will not have my daughter share a room with a nigger!” I heard doors opening because of the turmoil in the hall. Someone offered their room for my roommate to leave her suitcases while her parents made decisions. Her dad was so angry they stayed in a hotel nearby until Monday. He couldn’t wait to straighten out the problem (me). Whatever he said worked. The resident in charge of the dorm removed her name plate and placed it on another dorm room door. Occasionally on campus I would see her, and it was awkward. She never said anything to me. We never spoke, not even once.

I was alone! I wished for a Black roommate, but it didn’t happen. College was different and very impersonal. I knew several students from high school, but their dorms were far across campus from me. They appeared well adjusted and seemed to be coping with the new environment. Maybe it was because they were all near each other and socialized together.

The same weekend the school gave social events so we could meet and greet as they called it. I could hardly wait to start class so the semester would soon end and all of the other semesters would be over and I could graduate. The night before classes began, I searched for the science building. It was a little tricky, but I found it. The first day of class I was up early, had breakfast (alone) and I left to navigate the ginormous campus. It began to rain unbelievably hard. When I looked in the direction to find the science building, it had moved. Students were running in all directions. I was walking in the rain, confused and lost. Who could I ask for help? I read the signs, I pulled out the campus map, compared it to the directory on the corners. I was still lost. There was a Black guy standing on the corner, I asked for directions to the science building,
and as luck would have it, Mr. Know it all was wrong. He sent me to the wrong building. I finally found the right building, the right floor, and the right room. The professor was standing at the door. I waved and I thought she saw me. She, however, closed and locked the door. I jiggled the knob, she kept talking, and no one else in the room moved. I didn’t know what to do, so I stood there, looking at that locked door stunned and confused. I wondered if I should knock on the door. The professor saw me through the door’s window. Soaking wet, I decided to stand there. When Dr. Abrahams dismissed the class, I walked in to apologize for my tardiness. She never turned to look at me but said, “Late on the first day, (while sucking her teeth) unacceptable. Starting out like this, you probably won’t finish the semester well in my class.”

How does a seventeen year old reply to that? Upon leaving the room I spotted two students who had overheard our conversation. They were giggling; it seemed funny to them.

I left the class and returned to the dorm where I cried even more than the night before. I had to face that same instructor in four hours for another biology class. I felt doomed! I decided to prove myself and become the model student, so at the end of the semester she would have to apologize. It was difficult to begin early with four hour breaks between classes three times per week. That should have been ample time to study. I didn’t trust returning to my room, fearing I would oversleep. I spent my time in the library, actually people watching. I saw students studying together and walked by, hoping they would ask me to join in, but they never did. At test time I thought I was prepared. I actually broke out in a sweat I was so nervous. What class had I studied for; it surely wasn’t this one. When I checked the board for my grade, I felt like a dagger had gone through my heart. I had failed! I had failed my first of many college exams. It became a pattern. I was so disappointed in myself. What happened? I had been phenomenal in math and
science in high school, and now I couldn’t keep up. I was failing. I didn’t know what to do or who to turn to. Where were the counselors or did those things exist in college?

The professors kept teaching. Surely, they saw I needed help, but no one asked me to attend a conference. Everyone seemed to be doing well except me. I kept it a secret until I couldn’t anymore. The further I got behind, the more depressed I became. I stayed in my room alone. If someone knocked on the door, I ignored them and didn’t answer. I was too young to turn a negative into a positive. I had a private room in a crowded university.

The brochure said there were nurturing instructors who offered assistance for students needing help. I needed help. I pondered, “Is this the way it will be in college?” After two months, I felt it would take a miracle to turn my grades from an F to a C or B. I couldn’t take it anymore, so I packed my things and left. I told no one. I just wanted to get far away from a place that made me so sad. I told my mom immediately when I got home. I could see the disappointment in her eyes. Nothing she said changed my mind to return to college. She even wanted to talk to my instructors. I told her, “Mom, that’s not how it’s done in college.” She demanded that I return to college. Her demands had worked all of my life, but not this time. This time I stood my ground and refused. I guess I had matured a wee bit having to make decisions on my own.

I wish I had withdrawn formally from college for two reasons. Number one: I would have received withdrawal passes instead of failures, and number two: my parents would have been refunded some of their money. However, we found that out too late. I felt terrible because my family worked hard for me to attend college. I was supposed to be the role model for my family. I was to become the first college graduate because I was their first high school graduate. I hated that I disappointed them and was surprised my grandfather didn’t say, “I told you so.”
We had rules. No one stayed in our house without either working or attending school or college. I was given the choice. I chose to work. My mom woke me up and sent me to look for employment. Five days a week I left with friends looking for a job. My girlfriends had secretarial skills. They could type and were excellent stenographers. What were my skills – science and math? While they were completing their applications and passing the clerical test, I was at the movies, shopping or eating. They both secured jobs the first week.

My mom found a program she thought would interest me. I was never asked if it appealed to me or if I wanted to participate, she just enrolled me for a podiatry assistant class. Feet, I thought! Suppose someone had feet like her father’s (my grandfather) and wanted his/their nails clipped? My mom gave me that warning look, and I started the program. I looked, walked, and felt quite professional in my white uniform. I was allowed to drive my car to school, although it was within walking distance from home. I received a stipend of $75.00 a week. I thought I was rich! After training, we were assigned positions in doctor’s offices and the weekly salaries of $75.00 continued. I soon felt unhappy running back and forth for eight to ten hours a day. It was like I was a servant. My mom was ecstatic that I didn’t like being an assistant. I think she secretly hoped the experience would send me flying back to the university. She wanted her legacy to be that she had a college graduate.

When my friends came home for the summer I avoided being with them. I stayed away as much as possible. My heart broke when I heard of their experiences, successes, and how close they were to graduating. I was a little envious. No, I was more than a little envious. I didn’t want to work in the doctors’ office anymore and I didn’t want to go to college.

My mom insisted that I return to college. One of my mom’s friends worked for the junior college downtown. I was enrolled as if it was my first entry as a college student. I was pleased
that no one knew my history of failing after high school. I was now a Stop Out who was Stepping In. This time, I decided not to concentrate on any of the math or sciences. Instead, I chose psychology, social science, and a writing class. I hated every moment! This thought began to circle my mind, “maybe I wasn’t meant for college?” I was barely making passing grades, nothing to brag about. I could only tread water in these classes. I talked to my grandmother. I needed one person on my side. I knew she would tell me that we were from proud people and that if I really wanted to I could make those C’s and D’s turn to A’s and B’s. I knew she said those positive things because she loved me even more than I could love her. I was glad she decided to break the news to my mom that I was going to stop out again.

My mom was determined I would become a college graduate. She never gave up on me. It was determined that I had too many distractions living at home. The solution was to surround me with students who were serious about their studies. Trinity Christian College had serious-minded students. When we prepared for school this time, it was different – no big fanfare and very little shopping. College had been a huge adjustment and disappointment for me in the past. I made an adult decision. I decided I would not allow my past experiences to impede my future success. This time, I was more mature and three or four years older than the students in my classes. This meant I was a nontraditional student returning from a stop out and interacting with traditional students. This time I would view my experiences through a different lens.

Trinity Christian College contained 90% Dutch Christian Reform students. Their experiences were limited with diverse populations outside their race, culture, and religion. Their culture was different from my world. I felt older and I knew I wasn’t really part of this little community of people. I was definitely an outsider trying to be an insider. Here the females were subservient to their men and their religion. I dared to speak my true thoughts on building families
and childbearing. I voiced my opinionated concerns. After I finished talking, I wanted to tear my tongue out when I looked at the expressions on their faces. That was the wrong decision, wrong time, wrong place, and too strong.

Later that day in my history class, we discussed the women’s suffrage movement and its benefits for women. I thought, okay that’s something I know from high school. Also, I remembered my mom took my brother and me to a museum that featured the same subject. My mom said the movement was good for White women but Black women were not included in those benefits. The conversation was quite lively in class until I spoke and shared my views. I said, “You’re right, it was great for White women but not for Black women.” Was I supposed to silence my views and thoughts because I was a Black female? Again, I spoke up and spoke out. I had not learned a thing about using my voice from my morning class, I guess.

That same day my professor had a conference with me after class. He commented on my outspokenness and boldness. He commented that maybe it was Black women like me who caused Black men to not behave like men when it involved their families. Who was he referring to, not my dad, grandfathers or uncles, how dare he! I wanted to blast him out, but this time I held my tongue. I was burning inside. He had also said, “You should fly under the radar” (what in the heck did that mean) if I wanted to graduate from his college. That same professor later told me I would be incapable of earning a degree from Blue Mountain Christian College because my attitude was all wrong for this setting and why didn’t I go to a Black college? Funny he said that because I didn’t know what a Black college was. I learned he had intimidated another Black female who left school that semester. I admit that his comments and the actions of other instructors and peers on campus silenced me. His last comment to me was “a woman should stay
in a woman’s place, especially you.” This added another peel to my onion I would have to unravel.

I did have one close African American female friend, Betty, who was fighting to survive like me. When Betty was not around, I became invisible to Whites on campus. I withdrew inside and layered myself with peelings for my onion. I hated school and I questioned the school’s Code of Conduct and their Christianity. One night, half of the campus went skating and Betty and I decided to go. When we got to the rink, one girl said, “I didn’t know you guys could skate, I’ve never seen coloreds here before?” What—were we being scrutinized to see if we fit into their preconceived notions as to who and what we were? Were we guinea pigs inside a cage looking out at them as they looked at us inside the cage? Were we dismissing some of the myths they thought they knew about African American people? We enjoy skating, classical music, a good movie, reading a good book and eating in restaurants with silverware. We seemed to amaze them with our knowledge, skills, and talents.

Vignette 2: Undergraduate (1968) “We Shall Overcome, Someday!”

One summer, I was home from school and decided to attend the Wilson Junior college near my house. It was refreshing to see fellow Black high school friends in attendance and also earning extra credits to graduate early. I also met new people and was invited to their outings. I felt good again. I was invited to an African party by a White guy, Jay, in my class. I couldn’t believe I was on a date with the enemy. I broke my own personal race rule. But he was gorgeous, had charisma, and drove a beautiful yellow convertible corvette. We got plenty of stares and he made jokes about it. I never thought that most of our problems would come from my people. I can remember coming out of class early and catching some Black guys turning my car over. It
was unbelievable, and yet it happened. I had met Jay in an English Literature class, I liked the teacher, Dr. Lyndon. He actually liked me until he found out that I was dating Jay, and suddenly my A/B grades went to C/D/ with a few F’s. I got a D in summer school, who does that?

Jay and I broke up after a civil rights march in the inner city. My Mom belonged to an organization developed and dedicated to improving the lives of African American people. This march with Dr. King concerned housing; my mom signed up and I did too. Jay warned us that it would be dangerous. Although he wasn’t one of the White people who approached us with sticks, tree branches, bottles, and bats, afterwards, I never saw him the same way.

Back to college in the fall, I can remember my first sociology instructor and how the instructor observed our seating habits and patterns in class. Before the second class ended, he advised us to always intermingle (not to seat in the same seats with the same people). He warned that it would be to our demise to sit in the same place with our friends. After a couple of weeks, we began sitting together again, thinking he didn’t notice. The instructor had warned us only once and told us that our grade would depend on what differences we found in his little experiment. We had to identify various people by their first and last name and give interesting facts about them. He told us he would only mention this once. The first three or four weeks we carefully moved. I can’t remember when we began going back to our old groups. He had a chart with dates of our every movements. When I received my F, I was upset as the others, but we could say nothing because we had been warned. I had to take the class twice!

Vignette 3: Undergraduate Internship (1968-1979) “I Won’t Salute You!”

In my senior year, I spent twelve months of a laboratory internship at a Veteran’s Hospital. I imagined being away from Trinity Christian College would be a less stressful
experience. But it wasn’t. I jumped out of the pan into the fire, as my grandmother would say.

They hadn’t had an African American student in their lab in decades. One of the guys who worked in the lab for twenty plus years could not remember ever seeing an African American female student in the lab school. I felt as though I was an alien and no one knew how to treat an alien. I wish I knew a way of explaining the tensions that I experienced in their lab. The code switching, I engaged in at Trinity Christian College didn’t work here.

The only familiar face was another White female from Trinity Christian College. She tried but wasn’t sure how she could support me and still stay in the good graces of our internship provider. When the administration felt we were getting too close, they decided to disband our rotations together. I went on the floors alone. I received manuals to read before receiving skimpy instructions on how to run million dollar machines that I had no idea how to operate. My training occurred when it was always near the instructors’ lunch, breaks, or even times when they had to leave early. On the weekends, I sought extra instruction from some of the lab technicians I knew at St. Bernard’s Hospital. However, the machines could not compare to the ones at the Hines Veteran’s hospital.

I was tired of being rushed through every rotation in the lab, not given enough direction, nor receiving clear explanations. This mental mistreatment was beating me down. My Mom told me I was giving them what they wanted and I knew she was right. One of the Jewish pathologists interning at that time offered a little solace by telling me his story and offering to help where he could. But our schedules clashed when he went on midnight duty.
That winter my car decided to not cooperate. It became my one-way car, it would either drive me to school or take me home, but not both. One morning during a horrifying snowstorm, I was late and received a warning. I was told that after the second tardy I would be on probation, and the third tardy, I could be dismissed from the program. That winter the entire city stopped, the weather was brutal. To arrive on time, I left home at three in the morning and transferred from three buses and two trains to arrive on time.

I learned that my car couldn’t be repaired fast enough, so I bought a new car. I had come too far in this program to fail now (that wasn’t an option). That Monday I drove to the hospital in a new car that would take me to and from the hospital. I parked my new car, went in and shared
the news with my lab partner. We decided we would meet during our break to see my new car. We met in the lobby and went out to see that another car was parked in the exact spot where I had parked. My new car was gone; it had been stolen! Again, I had to endure thirty more days of buses and trains. “Please,” I prayed to God, “just let me finish this program.”

At the time of graduation, I had nothing left in me to tolerate a minute more of my classmates, teachers or administrators from Hines Veterans hospital. There was no more “wind beneath my wings.” I thought to myself, give me my certificate of completion and I’ll fly away! I refused to participate in anything that had to do with their graduation. I took no pictures. I did not attend the luncheon. Nor did I attend the ceremony from the hospital in June. I bid them farewell without a salute. However, I did attend Trinity Christian Colleges graduation, which was on my birthday in May.

Figure 8. Miss Bachelor’s degree, I did it!

Summary: Part Two

There were many layers to unpeel on the onion in Part Two. The vignettes above continued the dialogue with experiences with race, age, and gender incidents. My first college
entry was at age seventeen. I felt the university had made a conscious effort to recruit me but did not make a conscious effort to retain me. I experienced cultural shock. I was experiencing becoming further racialized, according to Collins (2000), by developing consciousness and awareness of myself as a maturing young adult Black woman in a predominantly White space.

For most students attending an institution of higher education, attaining a degree is their ultimate goal. That was also my goal. However, I developed a pattern of stopping out (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) to take a break from these institutions. I assumed college experiences would be drastically different from what I encountered in high school. I was wrong. Tensions were severely intense due to my personal pressure of wanting to do well, social anxieties, heavy workloads, being homesick and having too much downtime. While many of the challenges were associated with pre-college issues, several were related to institutional and external factors (Tinto, 1993).

The college I attended was a predominantly White university, and internally, I tried to fit in but ended up as an outsider. I felt alone and lost with no sense of belonging. The number one need of African American students is the need to belong (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When African American women are in a supportive environment that creates a sense of belonging, academics pose reduced difficulty (Ryan & Deci, 2000). I knew the dreadful feelings of not belonging in Part One were painful, but I was absolutely not prepared for the marginalization, isolation, and silencing of not belonging in a Christian college. Stopping out became a strategy I used to deal with external circumstances (Barefoot, 2004). Stopping out for me became a method of discarding one of my multiple consciousness—no longer a student—to become another
consciousness—a caregiver in major surgeries (patient), car accidents (patient), or serious falls (patient) (Spradlin, Burroughs, Rutkowski & Lang, 2010).

In Part One, I experienced the pains of being Black as a pre-teen and as a teenager. In Part Two, I experienced the pains of being Black and female as a young adult. Being young, gifted, Black, and a female was painful. The other Black female peer and I had no academic escape or counterspace (Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011; Southerland, 2010; Tweedell, 2005) to share our experiences and stories. Code switching (Johnson, 2015), as a strategy, was not enough. She was a traditional student and I was a nontraditional student. However, age seemed to matter less as we were both Black women in a hostile environment. I immediately developed coping strategies to endure those tense moments. My initial coping strategies were crude methods I think due to my age. Spirituality was number one, number two was cursing in my head, and number three was isolation. Yes, I isolated myself from all the tensions and just reflected on them in my head.

There were times I fought the internalization of societal messages about what forms of emotional expression are acceptable to racial, gendered, and societal norms. In the process of learning to manage my own emotions, I developed a multiple consciousness (Wing, 2000). I was in the process of learning how to communicate to stay within the norm. I had to make better adult decisions about expressing or suppressing my emotions and opinions to avoid being viewed as the angry Black woman (Griffin, 2012).

In the vignette above, I wrote about my failures in college and my immaturity. Dropping out of a senior college after attending there for only a couple of months seemed ludicrous to me as a teenager and throughout the years as an adult. It happened and after 42 years, I finally understand. I can now place my failure on the institutions I attended and not being immature. No
one was concerned that I left. I never received a letter or call asking why the girl in suite 402 left. For almost a half of a century, I believed this issue was my lack of immaturity. Instead, it was a lack of not being prepared for college life and the institution not ready to support students of color.

Part Three: Unraveling the Final Peels of the Onion

Vignette 1: Graduate School (1995) “Cool Runnings”

My first experience attending a predominantly Black university occurred when I decided to earn a master’s degree in Education at Chicago State University. It was so nurturing I decided to return for a second master’s in Principal Preparation. It was like cool running – no more experiences with code switching or microaggressions. The faculty were racially diverse, but the students in education were predominantly Black and nontraditional women. The understanding of the support needed by students enrolled in higher education is important no matter their race, gender, or age. This Black environment provided mentors, including professors, staff, and peers who guided me during this transition. This support was something I had not experienced before. Included in this support group were my family, friends and community who were vital to my successes. At Chicago State University, I received support and had a sense of belonging.

Due to location and time, Chicago State University was an ideal institution for me to attend. The campus was minutes from my house; the tuition was feasible; and the opportunity to leave the classroom appealed to me. The old Chicago Teachers College was to become the new Chicago State University was the vision of our Mayor Dailey who convinced the City Council to replace the old college with a better and safer teacher’s college (Seo & Haykal, 2018). My peers
were my fellow nontraditional students employed through the local public-school system. Most were there because they were experiencing teacher burn out and wanted administrative positions; a few were there strictly for pay increases.

I experienced excellent professors during my time at the university. However, there were some who stood out and were more than excellent. They were the professors who were absolutely inspirational, and they instilled the spirit in me that I, too, could be a change agent. I learned educational law from Dr. Fallis, educational research and design from Dr. Earl Oglesby (known to me only as Dr. O), grant writing from Dr. Ortiz; and math education from Drs. Lenzee and Landaus. These professors knew their students as individuals (we were not just numbers). These exemplary instructors treated us equally, were open to change, and taught while having a sense of humor. They were experts in their subject matter and how to convey it to students taking the materials to another level. They were open, fair, remembered personal details, and took active roles in caring for their students’ success.

My ultimate favorite, Dr. O developed a quantitative/qualitative Bible handbook for his students to support us in developing a plan for completing either our thesis or dissertation. I still use it now as a personal reference. There were times I was stuck and could not move any farther without Dr. O being a visit or a phone call away. When I appeared at his office door for my encouragement, someone was always ahead of me. I graciously waited, waited and waited; I was persistent. African American women who receive encouragement from their teachers/professors during their educational journey are the most likely to persist until they reach their academic goals.

After earning two master degrees, my confidence was up. To think of the many attempts, I made before earning my bachelor’s degree compared to how I breezed through graduate school was unbelievable. Now, I was finally ready to earn a doctorate degree. It was too amazing. I had my family, friends and the ladies from my Claver organization cheering me on to complete my dream. After taking several classes as a student-at-large in the doctoral program, I submitted an application for admittance. I began preparing for the interview process. Nervously, I asked those who were in the program regarding ideas about the interview questions. I also searched the internet for ideas unsuccessfully. I worried for weeks before my interview. The night before, I was so nervous I went to sleep earlier than usual. I wanted to be refreshed for the big day. When I left that interview I knew I would be admitted into the program. Doctorate degree here I come!

Everything seemed to be going well in my last stretch to victory (completing my doctorate). I was doing so well. I began to buy into the diversity declarations mentioned in the brochures for the university. I think my peers did also, especially the men. Our small circle of women and men African American scholars became each other’s supporters to lean on. Each gave off the aroma of strength that kept us on track in our expedition to complete our terminal degrees. My mom had always said “there’s strength in numbers.” She was right. We even found the counterspaces, talked and shared our experiences through the art of storytelling. Sometimes we laughed, at other times we sat speechless. Being together made us feel invincible, we were each other’s cushions. Storytelling helped us remove layers of tension. Counterspaces were key to having spaces where we listened to each other, talked, and networked reverently. This opportunity to brainstorm gave us strength to prepare for the challenges we knew we would face.

During the first two years of my doctoral program, most classes were held at a small junior college in Chicago rather than at the main campus 65 miles away. Travel time was greatly
reduced and it offered more time for me to spend with my family. A few of my classmates worked at the community college where our classes were held. Their offices were used as counterpaces for sharing our stories. However, throughout the years our group dwindled, as some of my peers graduated. Due to the visceral effect the academy can have on the spirit it was easy for a few of my peers to just throw in their hats and either stop out or drop out. Many of my peers had family responsibilities. One woman in our group had a principal that felt her being enrolled in doctoral courses took away mentoring time with the students in their afterschool program. That principal made things difficult for her by having meetings on the days she had to be in class. She needed her job and dropped out, never to return. At the end of my third year, our group had dwindled. The security I once felt with my peers had faded. All I could focus on now was my completing all requirements in order to graduate.

Being alone in classes felt different. I had no one to gather with during breaks or after class. Those who had left were no longer interested in my phone calls and what was going on at the university. Their disinterest put a toll on our relationships. It was if my joy was gone. My listener became my husband, family and the women in my Catholic Claver group. The loss of not having peers distressed me in many ways. It’s awful to be in a place where you feel like your dignity is under attack and you don’t experience fair treatment. The dominant group disturbing behaviors were not always obvious. Sometimes it was subtle, almost like someone blowing air behind you ear ever so gently. I felt it, it was annoying, and it had a devastating effect on me. It was so devastating I thought I would leave. I had second thoughts if I left, I would lose too much and I knew deep down this was a good program.

During my third year, I ended up stopped out due to an almost fatal car accident. After a year, I returned with great expectations. And sadly, I was disappointed. I expected the university
to enhance my mental, physical, and emotional well-being. I was expecting success. Originally, I chose this university due to its claim for diversity and equality. I took this claim at face value. I was optimistic. I saw the glass half-filled (positive outlook) instead of half empty. I did not expect to be exposed to the negatives of racism or genderism. However, I found the academicians at this university to be racist and sexist against Black women, which was the same experiences as in undergraduate school. I experienced a plethora of biases on different levels starting with professors who wouldn’t acknowledge me or answer my questions in class.

Vignette 3: Doctoral Program (2007) The Elephant in the Room

One particular class experience I dreaded was being placed in a group of all Whites. Due to situational barriers, I found it difficult being grouped with peers whose circumstances were different from mine because I was an older Black women student. For one of my classes, I was assigned to a group of eight White women that lived northwest from the university and I lived in the complete opposite direction. To work on our group projects, they decided, without my input, we should meet on a Sunday afternoon. As it was winter and the meeting was far away, I left hours early to find my classmate’s house. I called several times for directions as there were no navigational maps on our phones at that time. She gave me the impression that she had not the slightest clue of how to direct me to her house nor did the other seven girls present. To say the least, her directions didn’t help. When she would pick up the phone, I would hear in the background, “Is that her again?”

She could only direct me to the 7/11 convenient store that was a block or two from her house. I think I scared the clerks working in the store because each time I drove around they
would look curiously. Finally, one of the attendants came out to my car and asked if I had a problem. I called my classmate back, and I let him talk to her. He recognized her address and pointed out where she lived. Now comes the good part. Before I could ring the bell, the door opened and I saw everyone frantically packing their snacks. I overheard one of my group members say, “Why did she come here?” That gave me the impression that not all of my group members knew I was coming.

The classmate that was hosting our group said how sorry she was that it just happened that everyone had come super early and the meeting was finished. She handed me from the door a couple of scribbled sheets of paper describing what they intended to do for our project. She assured me that they would include my name on the project. When I tried to give her my notes, she hesitantly took them and laid them on a chair. I was still standing in the cold in the doorway. I said upon turning to leave, “I appreciate your concerns ladies, enjoy the rest of your day.”

When it was show time, the eight “hissing bugs” did not add my name to the group project. They apologized and said it wasn’t done intentionally. Because I had no trust in them, I had contacted the professor ahead of time and was assigned a project to do alone. I was prepared. My classmates were shocked when I made my presentation.

One African American woman, Alma, in our cohort was a staunch, committed Republican. She announced in every class, “I am a Black female Republican,” as if she wanted everyone to know. My White classmates pretended to mistake her name for Condoleezza or Dr. Rice. I liked her immediate response with “No, Miss Alma Smyth ABD for now, Dearie.” That was the White students’ standing joke. She had great resilience and took the negative comments along with their racist bullying.
Another critical incident in school occurred, when we the group of Black students, walked into class. One of the White guys in our class leaned over and said, “Here comes the freedom marchers” to his friends. Two of the Black men in our group cursed them and jumped at the White guys. All of the men in our group chimed in at once, they had to be restrained. It took about fifteen minutes to calm them down. That’s when the spiritual side of me started saying my Hail Mary’s, I didn’t want my friends to be kicked out of the doctoral program for an incident they did not cause. So, I began to pray and pray I did. From that moment on, there was tension in the air and plenty of room for prayer in that classroom.

Vignette 4: Bem-vindo-Welcome!

I received a brochure from the university offering an opportunity to study abroad in Brazil. Some of my peers decided that it would be an exciting adventure. I thought: Why not? It should be fun, plus I’ll earn credits toward my degree. It was fun traveling with friends while learning about a new culture. Brazil was breath taking. The people were beautiful and friendly. I ate so much in every city that I was sure I wouldn’t be able to get my seatbelt on after leaving this paradise.

On our very first stop in Joa Pessoa, I couldn’t believe what I saw! Children were climbing the garbage dump next to the school in the attempt to salvage food, toys and clothing. I saw them drinking from the gutters lined along the roads, from the same water that animals drank and used as bathrooms. I wondered how this could happen when next to this dump were massive mansions and million dollar condominiums. These places were so close everyone could see what I saw. It appeared that no one cared!
I became intent on helping to resolve this problem for this small community. Without a doubt no one here ever heard of “No Child Left Behind.” I wanted to assist in freeing this school from its inherited oppression. The wheels in my head began to spin. I wanted to become their liberator. I wanted to introduce them to technology. When we returned to the U.S., I looked for donors and grants to supply computers, printers, books, paper, pens, and calculators to help eliminate the digital divide.

While visiting a university in Brazil, I was introduced to a theory by Paulo Freire on the oppressed and the oppressors in his country. Freire’s theory piqued my interest as to why one group feels superior to another, as I am part of an oppressed group. I decided to explore Freire’s ideology and center it on critical consciousness issues. Hopefully this would help me to understand the oppressed and oppressors at my predominantly White university. Armed with this new knowledge of the oppressed and the oppressors, my aim was to close the inequality gap at my university.

I returned to Brazil yearly with supplies for the students. The teachers and students greeted me with amazing cultural dances and performances. On the last visit, I was honored with a parade and party. I felt like a dignitary! In my heart I knew I was making a meaningful contribution to those students and leading toward a positive change for continuing their education. I kept in contact with a few teachers and several of the students for years. Many continued to do well and graduated college. They committed and promised to help others who were also oppressed. I am saddened I did not continue the correspondence with the teachers and the graduates.

I wanted the world to know the lack of technology in rural villages in Brazil. I was beyond excited! Upon my return to the U.S. I began my research. I found a Brazilian
organization where I met expatriates who were helpful with information needed for this project. A curator introduced me to groups to obtain insider information. I met active expats from Brasilia, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and other small regions of Brazil. During our conversation the followers revealed the same sentiments of Brazil’s oppressions, which were the same as mine.

While dining with an expatriate at a Brazilian restaurant, I met a couple from Joa Pessoa who loved my idea of helping kids from their neighborhood. They too had been sending care packages of pens, pencils, books and paper to family members to distribute to the Aquila school in their village. After visiting their home, we began with strategies to update technology at “My” small school. I used the term “my” because I took ownership that made me feel as it were my project. I finally felt as if I were being productive and giving back to those who were oppressed. I’m sure this would meet God’s approval. I was beyond involved!

I thought my idea about my subject would be accepted. I submitted my proposal based on Freire’s theory, my experiences, and my research, but it was never approved. The proposal just sat on my dissertation chair’s desk and was finally rejected. I became angry, stopped traveling abroad, and stopped out of my doctoral program. My rationale for my anger and the decision at that time was – why help others when you can’t help yourself. I now regret that I did not fulfill my commitment and obligation to those students when it was not their fault.

I eventually stepped back into my doctoral program with an entirely changed research approach. I decided to change my topic and was ready to finish. I had satisfied all class requirements and qualifying exams and I needed only to concentrate on my dissertation research. One evening after class, my mom needed to talk. She said she was ill and required surgery and chemotherapy. All I heard was the last part. She had a doctor’s appointment, and I assured her I would be there. The very next day, my closest cousin, my best friend received the same
diagnosis. For two years, I became my mom’s primary caretaker forcing me to once again stop out.

A short time later, both of the dearest people to me had lost their battles with their illnesses. I stepped back into my doctoral program, but in the next year I had a car accident and a year after that a serious fall in my classroom. I felt like maybe God didn’t want me to earn this degree and again I stopped out. During this stop out, I became a grandmother. I had a light bulb moment that became a game changer. How can I not complete what I had started? How could I tell my grandsons not to give up on their dreams, when I did? I had to actualize my dream. This time grandma was here to stay.

Vignette 5: “I’m Back – Older, Retired, and More Persistent” (2016)

Since stopping out was a strategy that I used for my self-care, I was home taking care of my mom when my daughter, Kay, returned from college during the middle of the semester. Returning every month was a pattern she used to visit her grandmother. I thought this was a pop-up weekend. I noticed her car was packed more than normal. On Sundays, she would usually gather her things to leave; but to my surprise, this Sunday she didn’t. Later that night Kay said, “Mom, I am not going back to college.” I looked at my mom and from my mom’s face I knew they had talked already. I remembered having that same conversation with my mom many years ago. Was this déjà vu? I had modeled stopping out as a strategy for my daughter, I wasn’t sure if this would be a stop out or drop out. I went into a panic mode. This would have been Kay’s senior year, and she decides to drop out? As a family, we felt she had made the wrong decision. I asked myself, “Why would any sane young African American woman so close to receiving their degree stop out?” I wanted her reaching her goal to be a part of our family’s legacy.
Against our wishes, she stayed home and began working. Her younger sister Jessica graduated from my old alma mater and earned her degree in nursing. I thought Kay would be a little jealous, but she wasn’t. Or if she was, she never showed it. Approximately a year after that Kay said, “Mom, I’ve got everything arranged, it’s my time. I’m leaving for school in a couple of weeks because I’m ready.” Kay returned to school when all her friends had either graduated or dropped out. Because she was older, she was a nontraditional student in her classes. I asked if she felt older than her classmates, and her answer was “yes.” I laughed because she was only three or four years older than her peers and I was thirty to forty years older than my peers in my doctoral program as well as my chair. Oh my God, she renewed my faith in the legacy when she walked across the stage. I was beyond proud!

The reality was that I have had to leave my doctoral program for a variety of reasons: family issues, health issues, and work. Each time I’ve stopped out and stepped back in, I have built on my strategies for persistence and each time I became more resilient in my quest for my doctoral degree. I’ve learned to take the insinuations about my age and the jokes about how long it will take to walk across the stage. Someone even asked about my plans after graduation and added, “You won’t have a chance to recoup your monies at your age.” They have no clue of why I have continued to the finish. Not for monies but for my children and grandchildren to pass on my legacy. What they start I want them to finish; I want them to continue this educational inheritance! My child inspired me in many ways to step it up to the next level. What matters is that I persisted long enough to reach my goal of earning my doctorate degree.

When I returned for the fourth time in 2016, classes were only available at the main campus and the Naperville campus. In each class, we were asked to introduce ourselves by stating our names, educational background, goals, and final aspirations. As soon as I started to
introduce myself, the snickering began. One White student made mockery of my age. She said, “Why are you here, “my grandma is home, cooking, sewing and enjoying her last good years.” I asked, “Does she have an expiration date, I haven’t received mine yet.” Of course, her face turned blood red.

Another critical incident occurred when my instructor ignored me in the classroom and outside of the classroom as though I was invisible. When this happened, I couldn’t be that Angry Black woman they expected, so I thought and said to myself, Sand, it’s time for code switching. I had to restrain myself from violence because I knew the White girl would not support my actions. I asked myself “Did I come this far to fail over what I thought was racism.” I choose to be peaceful. Yes, I was an Angry Black Woman—justified and unapologetic. I knew the consequences of this stigma, which marginalized many Black women, leaving them with the ABD (all but dissertation) behind their names. Some researchers conceive angry Black Women as less likely to be heard when they speak and even less likely to be remembered, particularly in predominantly White classrooms (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005). However, acknowledging Black women’s anger and their reasons can lead to more extensive discourse on the social challenges and better understanding of ways to eradicate some of these damaging stereotypes (Beauboeuf-Lafontant). I felt unsupported by the faculty as a doctoral student.

There were incidents after incidents in which I experienced microaggressions. I no longer had a network to buffer the microaggressions that became daily experiences, and I no longer just smiled. Although I was older and a bit more mature, I was using better coping strategies. I changed my vernacular somewhat. I had learned how and when to code switch and use my double consciousness. I used more of a valley girl twine. In class I laughed at their corny jokes and would make comments that I thought would meet their approval. Once when we were
talking about racism, I had to silence myself because I was the only Black person in class. One of the White men commented on being colorblind and how he wasn’t racist but liked a good racist joke. He and a couple of others (all White) thought that was funny. As soon as he finished his comment, all eyes were on me. This was a time I thought I would hold my tongue in silence, I used a more mature approach and sat expressionless. I could hear my mom’s voice saying, “Sand don’t say nothing.” And sat in silence, a form of resistance.

Resilience emerged as a crucial element to my persistence. This was surprising to me, although research says that Black women have an ability to adapt to a hostile and racist environment using a heightened state of resilience. Resilience is necessary to support how effectively and efficiently Black women adapt to their conditions and keep moving toward their desired goals (Wacquant & Howe, 2008).

Stepping in for the last time after stopping out, I felt the anguish of aging, which stimulated my persistence to conclude this journey in academia. I reentered with high expectations of myself and completion of my doctorate was next on my bucket list. I returned with a new dedication and a new dissertation committee to support my journey towards completion.

Each time I returned to higher education to complete my degree, my voice became louder—not to be ignored or silenced. I will end what I started several times before. Writing this autoethnography has allowed me an opportunity for deep reflections by entering a space of remembering and putting a spotlight on my experiences as an older Black woman collegian which is often overlooked. I reentered the doctorate program to begin a legacy among my family, I promised my mother that I would finish. I am only moments away and I believe in my
heart that I have completed my promise. I end this chapter by leaving a legacy for my family that will be passed down. I give the gavel to you to continue in your revolutions around the earth.

Although the doctoral program ends my college journey today, the unraveling of the onion continues. I am excited and delighted to discover hidden talents and gifts I possess. This dissertation displays my clarion call for a deeper more nuanced focus on my past and present experiences in higher education as they relate to social issues of race, gender and age. My first platform will be Toastmasters International where I am allowed to take baby steps to cultivate a message that can be shared as articles in African American journals and magazines. I leave you today, Dr. Sandra Barney-Inniss.

Summary Part Three

Students’ interactions with the institution are key factors to determining whether students drop out or persist to complete a degree (Tinto, 1993). Part Three highlights my awareness of the differences of the campus climate of a predominantly Black university compared to a predominantly White university. It is important for institutions of higher education to be aware that institutional climates can influence educational attainment outcomes for students. Strayhorn (2012) suggests that belonging is a basic human need in which one’s sense of self and feeling of value are essential. I relate to Strayhorn and Hausmann et al. (2007), who concluded that early social interactions through peer relationships and interactions with faculty play an important role in helping students develop a sense of belonging on campus. Belcastro and Purslow’s (2006) suggestion aligns with my experience with peer and professor relationships being at the forefront of collegiate success for a nontraditional student.
While attending a predominantly Black university, overwhelmingly my support looked Black, which included familial, community-based, on-campus, and peer support. Given this opportunity to reflect back I found my third grade teacher’s explanation of what it means to be Black is what I felt and experienced at this predominantly Black university. As an older African American woman graduate student, I was instantly connected to a network of like-minded peers and advisors, both faculty and staff who were invested in my persistence and success. The combination of racial and gender identity consciousness helped my development. I had a clear understanding of who I was as a Black woman. It felt good to feel accepted with a sense of belonging in a Black space. Therefore, in this experience, it was imperative that I had a basic understanding of my racial and gender identity.

Black feminist theory described how I understood the world as the researcher but also how I understood the study through an intersectional lens as a Black woman. Attending a predominantly Black university helped me to better understand my identity as a Black female. I was a member of an oppressed group with special kinds of knowledge by virtue of my perceived marginalized status in society. The knowledge gained via my perspective can lead to a raised group consciousness. However, raising the consciousness of others about the marginalized group is not in line with the intent of this study since other participants were not involved. However, my experiences align with Collins (1991), who underscored that Black women are “outsiders within” because they have enough personal experiences as insiders to understand their social place but also enough critical distance to allow critique (p. 85).

Attending a university with a positive campus climate provided quality connections with faculty, academic peers, and academic advisors, all of which were rewarding to my academic success in attaining a master’s degree. Enrollment at this university was so rewarding I returned
for a second master’s degree. There were no tensions in the classrooms. My voice was heard. I felt included. I felt I belong on this campus (Gusa, 2010). What I unraveled in Part Three is that attending a predominantly Black university as an African American woman helped me to understand that I have the strength of character and the ability and drive to work through, within, and across any campus culture or system to succeed.

Part Three highlights my experiences with unraveling the final peels of critical incidents of a nontraditional African American woman. I chose a predominantly White university to earn a doctorate degree and was led by false advertisement as it related to race, age, and gender. Based on admissions brochures, conversations with university representatives, and the institution’s website, I anticipated a large percentage of African American students with an established network, counter spaces to share stories, nurturing professors, and compassionate peers.

After my experience with an all-Black university, I had high hopes. However, I discovered the student demographics did not necessarily reflect what was represented in the brochures. But since I was now a mature adult, I had honed great problem solving skills. I knew the importance of a network. Although we, Black students in the program, were few in number, we formed a network because we had the same goals and perspectives about graduation and needed unity for support within the Black student body. We were all nontraditional students. We felt comfortable with each other.

Assuming there would be a student lounge designated for diverse student gatherings, there was none. However, using our collective creativity and resourcefulness, we found counterspaces to relieve racial tensions and have our counter storytelling sessions. We brainstormed anticipated challenges and strategized how to cope. The barriers I faced as an older African American woman doctoral student in post graduate school due to my age and stage of
maturity required strategies for coping that were situational, institutional, and dispositional (Benshoff, 1991; Terrall, 1990; Thomas, 2001). As an older African American woman, I had to learn despite of barriers, I had to cope with the problems I faced (unraveled). I have and always will be a African American woman. I wear the mask for all to see. What I have unraveled is not to the core, my continuing unraveling is to share my experiences with future African American Woman who will attend predominately white institutions.

Summary

Chapter 4 presents the findings as counter-stories from my narratives about race, age, and gender. My narratives reveal the critical convergence of my past and present life experiences, both positive and negative, during my educational journey from Kindergarten to higher education. The most important finding revealed that race and gender incidences occurred at the classroom level for nontraditional African American women at predominantly White universities. I, as a nontraditional African American woman, appeared briefly on campus for advising, faculty visits, and classroom time. I juggled my time among studies, work, and home responsibilities and received caring support from family, professors, peers, and friends.

From the discussions about education and completing college, it was very evident that my mom wanted me to do well and graduate college. This led to making strategic decisions to persist that enabled me to complete my degrees. Stepping in and Stopping out became strategies for my persistence to keep dreaming and to dream big. Incidents that depicted race, age, and gender inequalities all supported, or refuted, concepts of critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism and concepts of empowerment through visibility and voice. These narratives also revealed that there are race and gender influences at the lower school, middle
school, high school, undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate levels, and these influences manifested into challenges and successes for nontraditional African American women doctoral students.

Four incidents were paramount for my educational journey. The first was my blatant introduction to racism and sexism at St. Rita Catholic all boy high school. Second was adult but immature racial experiences at Trinity Christian College. Third was the silenced and invisible treatment by a professor in graduate school, and fourth was the rejection of my proposal after studying abroad in Brazil. Issues like these are often detrimental to the persistence of nontraditional African American women at White universities. According to the findings, I was able to succeed because of intrinsic motivation, identified in literature as a key strategy for nontraditional African American women in higher education. I say I survive because of my persistence, and tenacity to achieve. Chapter 5 provides further discussion of findings as they apply to the implications and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The experiences of students that are nontraditional African American have been explored in multiple ways, but few studies have examined the ways in which African American doctoral women have matriculated through a predominantly White university. For this study, I used my own experiences as a Black girl in Kindergarten to a Black woman doctoral student to explore how educational experiences are mediated by race, gender, and age.

I have written this chapter in a scholarly and personal voice in alignment with critical race theory, Black feminist thought, and critical race feminism. The three frameworks allowed me to write the final portion of this chapter in first person to make meaning of my lived experiences as a nontraditional African American woman in higher education. The guiding research question for this study was: How did my racialized and gendered experience mediate my educational journey and trajectory? I also explored three sub-research questions:

1. In what ways, did my K-12 experiences socialize me to the institution of education?
2. How did my persistence strategies change over time?
3. How did relationships with family and educators contribute to my educational journey?

Using the methodological approach of autoethnography, I used vignettes, artifacts, and narratives to produce in a three-part counter narrative that described my experiences from Kindergarten through doctoral education. Narratives are labeled: Part One: Unraveling Coming into Consciousness Regarding Race, Age and Gender, Part Two: Unraveling the Making of Adult Decisions, and Part Three: Unraveling the Final Peels of the Onion. These three parts include
information about the impact of childhood, pre-college, higher education and post graduate critical incidents associated with race, age, and gender.

In this dissertation I situated myself as on an educational journey from a Kindergarten student to an older adult student returning to college as one who had to unravel layers of racialized and gendered experiences. The findings of this study align with much of the literature regarding nontraditional students that indicates returning adults typically enroll in college with a clear purpose to graduate (Tinto, 2012). Additionally, my own experiences model the literature related to how gender and race mediate educational experiences for Black women.

In this chapter, I discuss the primary research questions and discuss the contributions of this study to the existing literature. I conclude the chapter with implications and recommendations for potential future studies that could be conducted as a continuation of this work.

Socialization into Education

Socialization in education addresses the primary research question and sub-research question one related to my lived experiences. Socialization prepares one for social life by teaching a group’s shared norms, values, beliefs, and behaviors and is the process of learning about one’s culture and how to live within it (Stone, 2014). This understanding is important because socialization can affect desired academic outcomes, sense of belonging, and retention rates (Stone, 2014). Feelings of belonging represent the phenomenon relating to how adult students feel they fit into their college experiences, and this is an area that can be influenced in many ways by family, faculty, and peer relationships.
I describe my educational journey and trajectory as mediated by my race, age, and gender through critical incidents. Racism and sexism were engrained in my life at an early age. The challenges of racism are still prevalent in higher education today (Collins, 2009). I experienced role conflict as an African American woman because I was “pulled” by two sides. My double jeopardy occurred because I was Black and a woman, and my double consciousness because I was Black and having experiences in a White institution. This dual burden of racism and sexism created special challenges for me attending a predominantly White university (DeCuire & Dixson, 2004). I also realized that the interactive oppressions that circumscribe my life provided a distinct context for my Black womanhood; therefore, for me the notion of double jeopardy was not a new one.

Tinto (1993, 2007, 2012) theorized that students must assimilate to their new college environment to become academically and socially engaged. The systemic oppression I experienced as a Black girl and later as a woman did not start in college but during my K-12 experience. These macro/microaggressions started in K-12 by White teachers teaching in Black schools and later by White professors in predominantly White educational settings from undergraduate through my doctoral program. Strayhorn (2010a) identified teacher attitudes, practices, and stereotypical beliefs regarding African American girls as factors that discourage and affect their engagement in school. In the lower grades, I was exposed to such stereotypical beliefs and racism before I knew what the word meant.

Although critical race theory, Black feminist theory and critical race feminism are based on the premise that racism and sexism are prevalent in various institutionalized systems, including education, I rarely used the words racism or sexism in my narratives. The critical incidents shared in the counter-narratives revealed how race, age, and gender influenced my
educational trajectory from elementary to higher education. This study’s findings regarding race challenges within the classroom environment are consistent with Strayhorn’s (2010a) research. His study argued that it can be more burdensome for students of color to navigate college. Black students who attend predominantly White institutions report feelings of culture shock and alienation (Banks, 2009). I had great expectations for my college experiences each time I stopped out and stepped in. I was shocked that racism still existed each time I stepped in, especially during my doctoral program in the 2010s. This finding also affirmed the research by Williams and Nicholas (2012), who indicated “present-day discrimination is often more subtle, but no less insidious and impactful than blatant, overt racism” (p. 89).

The two ways I was socialized from K-12 responds to sub research question one. First, I was socialized through my family (primary socialization) and the second through school (secondary socialization). This ongoing process of learning is an expected behavior in which values, norms and social skills occupy particular roles in our society. It is important that these socialization skills were built in two parts. Fröebel (2018) agreed and proposed that it is first in the home and then in Kindergarten when educational and social experiences shape unformed minds, build habits and competencies that promote lifelong success.

Therefore, my primary socialization to the institution of education began at home. My mother and father nurtured me and provided an environment and relationships of vital importance to me as a young child. The influence of family in my lived experiences affected not only my socialization processes but also the development of my racial and gender identity. My birth certificate said I was born colored. I was transformed by my parents, relatives, and others into a culturally and socially acceptable colored human being. For instance, I learned as a girl how to be a daughter, sister, friend, (when I grew older) wife, and mother. This happened when I
role-played adult interactions in our games. Initially, my mother later taught me to obey rules, know right from wrong, face consequences for my actions, and learn my colors from other members of my family.

Second, at age five, I graduated to kindergarten, the next step for secondary socialization skills. The socialization skills I learned at home extended to school, especially obeying authorities. My secondary socialization primarily happened in a classroom. I learned individual identity (Miss Dove was White and I was colored), acquired language and began to develop cognitive skills. As I progressed through the grades I found social and emotional development was important for a successful school experience. It was important for me to learn more constructive ways of expressing my emotions and to respect the feelings and needs of others. I learned as I grew older and entered higher levels of social learning that I could play alone or in a group. When I transferred to what my parents thought was a more diverse school, I wondered why I was not allowed to talk or play with the Asian and White students or was it because they were the superior race like Mr. Erhardt said.

In third grade I learned I was no longer colored, but I was a Negro with descendants who were from the continent of Africa. My social behavior, as a Negro, was to honor them and live up to their legacy as a princess and queen. My gender socialization was further on display as I felt like a princess every day, modeling for my peers in the eighth grade classroom. In its most basic form, Halawah (2006), declared that education consists of a series of interactions between a teacher and students, between groups of students, or between students and various school personnel. It is assumed that a student’s lack of social skills can affect his or her social skills in high school (or later on in school). I presumed this would be true during 10th grade summer school. Nevertheless, what I experienced were microaggressions from students, teachers, and
administrators. Was it me or was it them who had inappropriate social behaviors? What happened to appropriate consequences for inappropriate behaviors? Somewhere along the line I missed out on how to resolve conflict as a social skill.

High school was not just about building an impressive profile to gain entrance to a top college-this period was also about mastering the social skills required to succeed in various aspects of life. Along with communicating effectively, I was able to collaborate with others, respect peers’ space and opinions, and stand up for myself in school and social situations. Social skills are an integral part of functioning in society. Demonstrating good manners, communicating effectively, being considerate of the feelings of others and articulating personal needs are all significant and vital components of social skills. The year-long preparation for the Cotillion prepared me with these social skills, including accepting my new identity as being Black. Developing these important skills required a variety of strategies in each stage of my social development.

In addition to the skills acquired for socialization into education, I received academic preparation for college through four years of English, four years of mathematics, four years of science, two years of social studies, and two years of French. Subsequent preparation provided rigorous academic coursework that prepared me for the demands of college: writing, note taking, and advanced library skills. These courses and information were required for entry into a four-year college. Although there may be slight differences in the requirements, all higher education requirements included social skills (Lowe & Cook, 2003).

Black feminist theory helped me understand the effects my race and gender since Kindergarten. As a lens for my study, the use of Black feminist theory opened my eyes to the reality of oppression and invisibility I experienced as an African American woman in a White
space (Collins, 1990). Without the introduction to Black feminist theory I would not have known that African American women are significant, as traditional scholarship has relied on White women for the feminist perspective and men for both the Black political and social perspectives (Collins, 1990). Understanding my lived experiences as an African American woman through Black feminist theory may assist in promoting progress among African American graduate students seeking to transition from student to professional.

Findings of this study reveal experiencing racism, ageism, and sexism prior to being enrolled in college impacted how I responded to incidents in graduate and postgraduate school. My experiences with race and gender inside and outside the classroom were discussed at length. Despite the critical incidents, I persisted, using motivation, resilience, nurturing relationships, and coping strategies. This study identifies the factors that affected my needs, classroom experiences, and implications for supporting my development in the classroom.

 Changing of Persistence Strategies

My persistence strategies have changed throughout my educational journey. These strategies included prayer, obedience, self-talk, resilience, cursing, relationships, counterspaces, stopping out/stepping in, and code-switching. Despite similarities to persistence in some strategies, it is expected that an adult doctoral graduate student’s strategies should be more developed, if for no other reason than personal maturity gained through life experiences (McGivney, 2004).

Throughout my education, I engaged in resiliency and learning to cope with adverse situations. I learned how strong I was when I used resilience to cope with adversity and overcome the most challenging circumstances (Morales, 2014) at the all-boys Catholic high
school steeped in tradition. However, I often had to make decisions about expressing or suppressing my emotions and opinions to avoid being viewed as the Angry Black Girl and later the Angry Black Woman (Griffin, 2012). Resilience was used as an interceding influence amid the difficulties of my college experiences and educational accomplishments (Munro & Pooley, 2009).

As the education pendulum swings back and forth, one thing has remained constant as a strategy is the idea of relationships. I established relationships with teachers, professors, and faculty that I have continued to build as the years progressed. Creating counterspaces with peers that looked like me gave voice to my network of peers who often remained silent in classrooms where majoritarian perspectives prevailed (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). There were gathering places in which we supported one another, experienced a degree of protection, and made some sort of a sense of the community on the campus. Utsey et al. (2001) found that African-American women utilize the coping behaviors of seeking social support considerably more than African-American men.

While nontraditional students constitute a significant portion of postsecondary students, there are often few institutional supports to help adult learners persist in college. Moreover, there is often a significant discrepancy in degree attainment between traditional and nontraditional students (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Despite the campus outreach programs, I experienced frustration with a sense of silencing, isolation, marginalization, and microaggressions as well as a fear of reaching out for help, especially since prior experiences of reaching out had failed. When I could not figure out the instructors’ selected rules, due to cultural differences, I used the strategy of stopping out as a way of solving my problems.
The classroom becomes the focus of nontraditional students’ on-campus experiences and development (Kasworm, 2003). Broschard (2005) found that “while traditional students may need a more rounded college experience that includes more social and co-curricular experiences, nontraditional students use the classroom as their stage for learning” (p. vii). In addition, Broschard reports that “involvements that seem to be geared towards the classroom such as academic and faculty involvement were rated higher by nontraditional students (for intellectual, personal, social, and career development)” (p. 110). To conclude, it seems that nontraditional students’ persistence may not necessarily be related to what happens at the university, but instead the classroom provides a setting in which nontraditional students feel isolated, marginalized or silenced that comes from not feeling comfortable or welcomed. These practices are in alignment with my experiences in postsecondary education.

This study’s findings regarding race, challenges within the classroom environment, and experiences with the campus climate are consistent with Strayhorn and Terrell’s (2010) research that argues it can be more burdensome for students of color to navigate college and Black students who attend predominantly White universities report feelings of culture shock and alienation (Banks, 2009; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010a). These findings are affirmed by my experiences and in research by Williams and Nicholas (2012), who indicated “present-day discrimination is often more subtle, but no less insidious and impactful than blatant, overt racism” (p. 89) – for instance, my experience where the professor ignored me in class and on campus grounds. These critical incidents from my educational journey caused concerns about the classroom environment and challenges interacting with peers that could have also negatively impacted my persistence and ultimately my ability to be retained let alone completed.
I found that isolation, marginalization, microaggressions, silencing, (Wacquant & Howe, 2008) and other barriers contributed to my stopping out as an undergraduate student as well as my ultimate persistence. Various experiences, values, and resilience eventually led to my reentry. The experiences fall into the categories of outside encouragement, coping with challenges, being a role model, having a career, and especially a desire to have an education (Aryan & Guzman, 2010).

Feelings of isolation, marginalization, and invisibility were frequent barriers I experienced in the classroom. Previous findings on Black doctoral students have indicated that the culture of the university and department is significant in helping them feel more comfortable and in combating feelings of isolation in the classroom (Acosta et.al, 2015; Coleman-Hunter, 2014). This was not my experience, but it was one I longed for and, therefore, I persisted until I found it.

Relationships with Family and Educators

Relationships with my family and educators contributed greatly to my educational journey. First, my family was my primary support system. Family culture is significant to African Americans and the discipline of education is deeply rooted in Black culture (Felder et al., 2014). Parental involvement is also a factor that is heavily linked to student achievement as well as high quality teacher child interactions that are important to academic achievement and social success for students at all levels of education (Stewart, 2008). The concept of family for Black students is rooted in the idea of collectivism in which group support is above individual support (McCallum & Price, 2017). This idea of pursuing an education was seen as a way for me to give back to my community, to serve as a role model for my family, and to encourage other
Black females (Brooks et. al., 2012; McCallum & Price, 2017). Collectivism, as defined by my family, included parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, uncles, and others not related but considered family who have impacted my persistence (Brooks et al., 2012).

I particularly noted that financial, emotional, and childcare support from family members were vital components in my doctoral persistence (Brooks et al., 2012). I had a positive disposition about life and attributed that to my parents’ persistent support. I owned the image of the strong Black women, so I kept pushing myself and stayed focused on seeking the doctoral degree no matter the negative impact on my physical and emotional well-being. This type of thinking is also related to culture and racial identity but serves as a motivating factor for persistence in the doctoral journey for Black women. My sheer belief in my ability to persist to completion is what drove me through the doctoral experience (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Collins 2009 contends that many women doctoral students share that spouses want to be supportive but do not fully understand the requirements nor the sacrifice of time needed to persist to completion of a doctoral program. While the doctoral process presented itself with challenges, my spouse was my greatest supporter because he was once a nontraditional student and fully understands the requirements of earning a doctoral degree.

As expected, relationships affect many components of a culturally engaging campus, but for me three types of relationships emerged as being most influential and prevalent to my sense of the environment: relationships with family, relationships with peers, and relationships with faculty (Museus et al., 2017). Prior research indicated that for African American women doctoral students factors such as supportive mentors, social support, a welcoming institutional environment, and motivation all contribute to persistence (Felder, et al., 2014; Jones & Guy-Sheftall, 2015; Rogers, 2006; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Woods, 2001); however, these factors
were revealed in traditional residential programs specifically. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature regarding the experiences related to race, age, and gender and factors of persistence for nontraditional African American female doctoral students in higher education. This autoethnographer attempted to fill this gap to explore the experiences of an African American female’s journey in education from Kindergarten to a doctoral program as it relates to race, age, and gender.

When I decided to reenter at a predominantly White university, the decision was driven by peers, family, friends, co-workers, and former professors. The results of this research built on previous research that indicated family support, professors, peer relationships, and intrinsic motivation are important factors in the doctoral persistence of an African American female (Martin, 2011; Shavers & Moore, 2014). This study revealed that in addition to maintaining motivation and believing in one’s ability, it is also important for a Black female doctoral student to maintain her level of effort and commitment toward reaching her goal despite adversity and challenges. When I reflected on areas of my persistence as a Black female doctoral student, I felt as though I had something to prove regarding my ability to succeed and complete the doctoral process as a Black woman (Robinson, 2013; Shavers & Moore, 2014).

In addition, in this study I found support from Black individuals, both peer doctoral students and best friends as well, to be significant strategies to my persistence. I also found support from non-Black students and faculty, but much like previous research (Acosta et al., 2015; Coleman-Hunter, 2014), I found the relationships between me and individuals who were Black to be most valuable. Black female doctoral students in previous research found this support to be important (Coleman-Hunter, 2014). We formed a network of Black individuals and found counterspaces to discuss topics and situations in a different manner. This result was
consistent with previous research on Black students, indicating that social support in any form is valuable, but it is most valuable when it comes from other Black persons (Acosta et.al, 2015; Coleman Hunter 2014).

Further, even if the relationships were not with other Black persons, I still found others to build relationship with as a way of persisting. This is similar to previous findings, indicating that social support by way of relationships with peers and faculty members who were not Black is significant in persistence for all doctoral students (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Lovitts, 2001 & Terrell et al., 2012). Social support of family of origin and spouses is a significant social factor for Black women enrolled in predominantly White universities. As reported, spouses played an important role in supporting their doctoral student wives in ways such as cleaning, cooking, providing time to write, assisting with childcare, and providing words of encouragement. This support is consistent with previous research conducted with all doctoral students and does not appear to be specific to Black females (Kurtz-Costes, Helmke & Ülkü-Steiner, 2006). Indeed, my spouse played a significant role while I studied or when I did anything school related by buying the groceries, cooking, cleaning, running errands, providing time for me to write and offering a plethora of words of encouragement. He along with my daughters and grandchildren have been my rock to persistence.

In a study, for distance as a barrier against education, it was important for the students to be able to maintain proper balance between school, home, and work (Terrell, et al., 2012). The results of this autoethnography corroborated previous findings. Nontraditional female students may feel afraid to speak in class (Miller, 2000). Goncalves (2014) identified the importance of voice for women and the direct responsibility women have for making their own choices for their lives. I silenced myself to be with other people, I gave up relationships for the sake of having
relationships, I often doubted my own abilities to navigate the educational system. It was with great boldness and outspokenness that I took on the task of stepping out to accomplish something totally out of the realm of my prior experience. Code-switching was my number one navigational tool over barriers.

Lastly, the third research sub question examined how family and educators supported my educational journey. There were a few family members and educators who both supported and hindered my pursuit for this degree but I persisted. There is an inherent system of racism in educational environments that Black students must overcome and universities must address for Black students to achieve educational success (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). A critical incident of racism and not feeling supported was when I was not allowed to use the theorists I thought important in my initial dissertation proposal. This instance may be reflective of the racism in institutions of higher education purported in critical race theory in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Previous research indicated that the chairperson has a significant influence on the persistence for women doctoral students (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Terrell et al., 2012). This study confirms that this was also true for me. This study revealed that the commitment and support of my chairpersons were paramount to my success in persisting. My first chair and I had a personality conflict, that became overwhelming and stressful for both of us. As a result, I decided to move on to another chair whose personality was more compatible with mine. This stood in contract to my current chairperson who had standing appointments with me, provided words of encouragement, and were interested in my overall well-being outside of the doctoral process. Through my journey I turned negatives into positives as this relationship correlates with
previous research indicating the significance of positive relationships with chairpersons and educators (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Terrell et al., 2012).

Implications and Recommendations

The findings from the current autoethnography reveal several implications for policy, researcher, and practice. This study implies that it is imperative to the success of nontraditional African American women students to transition into a campus environment that is conducive to their needs. Without a smooth transition as a nontraditional student one could become overwhelmed by college campuses and stop-out or leave without the attainment of a degree. Based on that knowledge, without a school instituted mentor that could further influence a nontraditional African American women student, one could fail to persist or take longer to graduate.

First, for campus policy makers who are seriously interested in improving the positive classroom experiences of nontraditional African American women, findings from this study reveal the importance of honest conversations about the realities of racism, specifically at predominantly White universities. The findings affirm that college campuses are a microcosm of the larger society, thus racism exists and operates in both micro and macro forms, such as in the classroom, through institutional policies and through campus climate. In fact, it can be considered at all times as a potentially salient identity of Black students, particularly females. Campus policy makers, for example, might think about the inclusion of Black females when drafting policies that directly target them, eliciting stories from their experiences and thus recognizing their voice as valuable and credible. Institutions should be accountable for providing professional training for administrators, staff, student leaders, and faculty on how to lead
effective conversations about racism in the classroom and as advisors. Recognize that Black students need safe spaces at predominately White universities where we can have a reprieve from anti-Black racism.

Second, researchers who are interested in understanding the racial experiences of Black women at predominately White universities should use critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism as analytical tools. Prior research fails to expose the realities of racism on college campuses. Results presented here reveal the importance of the experiential knowledge of the oppressed. Yet, all too often, the oppressed are excluded or silenced from discussing race. Why am I participating on a campus that I am not allowed to be me, or that I am not allowed to voice my concerns? Future researchers and theorists who are interested in studying Black females might resolve this problem by drawing on experiential knowledge and admitting the racial realities of college campuses through the words of the participants.

Although the study is limited in scope, it adds to the dialogue about African American women and the experiences they may encounter as doctoral students at predominately White universities. Additionally, one of the most valuable implications of this research is how predominately White universities support the African American women who are in doctoral programs. Researchers can play a vital role by educating scholars and others about the negative experiences, such as racism and unwelcoming cultures that are sometimes common at predominately White universities (Gildersleeve et al., 2011).

This research provides a lens as to why diversity is important in higher education institutions. To fully understand the needs of students of color, there should be platforms to allow students to share their lived experiences. First, I want my peers to learn about my culture and the many contributions Blacks have made toward society and stop demanding
that I give up my particulars of being Black—styles of speech, appearance, values, priorities, and preferences to code-switch just to fit in with theirs. Then I wish my peers would be willing to have courageous and intentional conversations around implicit bias and racism aimed at NAAW students in the classrooms and speak out on behalf of unheard of black people and stop silencing me when I speak. Despite the need for more flexibility in modes of course instruction and academic support, faculty members may be hesitant to move away from the traditional model of course scheduling and delivery (Hurst, 2015). Evening administrative services are not consistently available to nontraditional students and they most often attend classes that require administrative services at night. The implication is that without the availability of evening classes, nontraditional students that rely on evening classes may fail. Instead institutions may sponsor a minority doctoral student support group in which students of color will feel comfortable joining and sharing their experiences. The mentorship and status as a role model of Black faculty to Black doctoral students is vital to their persistence, regardless of university affiliation. Moreover, African American women should develop peer-support groups and also support groups outside of their ethnicity to help them in their academic journeys at predominantly White universities. Nontraditional students site often that they do not have relationships with their peers outside of the classroom. The implications are that the nontraditional student could feel less a part of the overall academic and social environment of the institution and fail to persist. Lastly, if the African American female doctoral students are not receiving all of the academic tools they need to excel in their classes at predominantly White universities, they should voice their concerns about the lack of support to individuals at their institutions.
Change cannot happen without institutions understanding the populations they serve, their needs, and what they would like to see changed at the university level. Faculty can assume accountability when they learn what is problematic for nontraditional African American women in the classroom. When I wish to respond to racial issues don't intimidate me with your superior power attitude and authority in the classroom. Pay conscious attention to the microaggressions that occur in the classroom and help dispel the myths. Institutions may opt to provide counseling, academic, and career services with evening hours and online services (Jeffreys, 2007). Institutions may consider providing professional development programs to improve use of technologic resources for course instruction (Elliott, Rhoades, Jackson & Mandernach, 2015). Without the benefit of classroom policies relative to silencing nontraditional students could decide to attend colleges with stronger policies relative to the behavior of students in classes. Without effective guidance, advisement, and counseling, nontraditional students could fail to persist, graduate in a timely manner, or they may decide to attend a more nontraditional student centered institution.

My reflective narratives captured my perceptions of my experiences with racism, ageism, and sexism from Kindergarten to higher education. One implication for practice is the classrooms in which microaggressions occur most frequently. Predominantly White universities should do more to improve the classroom culture to support doctoral students. Predominantly White universities should reserve spaces and rooms on their campuses for African American women in doctoral programs to go and verbalize their concerns to mentors and coaches. Equally, another implication is predominantly White universities should create safe spaces where African American women can voice their opinions without being ridiculed, misjudged, and viewed as not
academically prepared to excel in doctoral programs. The narratives and experiences captured in this study recommend eradicating racism and unwelcoming institutional culture that is prevalent at predominantly White universities.

The findings in this study also suggest that being an African American woman is only one example of intersectionality and double jeopardy. Black women are encouraged to take breaks as needed, stop-out, talk to a trusted friend or counselor, and ask for assistance throughout the doctoral journey. This will not only lead to their persistence, but they will ultimately emerge as a healthier version of themselves at the end of the doctoral experience.

This study also implies it is important for future Black female doctoral students to have support from various sources. This support appears to be most impactful when it comes from individuals who are of a similar race and gender, meaning Black females. The support of family is also an important aspect of success within a doctoral program. Black female doctoral students are encouraged to involve their families in the process, share what they are experiencing in their doctoral programs, and educate their families about the process of earning a doctoral degree. Often the spouse is one of the family members closest to the doctoral students as they go through the program, thus it is not only important that spouses are educated about the doctoral process but are aware of the specific ways they can be of support.

Finally, findings from this study are also important for practice. For administrators and faculty members who work with African American women at predominantly White universities, this study reveals strategies that proved effective for the participant. For example, specific strategies such as relationships, counterspaces, and storytelling were critically important in this study. Thus, talking candidly with Black female students about such strategies and how they can employ them in their college experience will likely enable the students to persist in school.
Recommendations for Future Research

Further research is needed to understand the lived experiences of African American women at predominantly White universities. Research on older African American female doctoral students’ experiences is limited, and exploratory studies such as this is needed in order to better understand this growing student population within different institutional environments, especially the classroom, should continue to be pursued. Predominantly White universities should develop and administer surveys and focus groups for their nontraditional African American females who are in doctoral programs to solicit their opinions on how predominantly White universities can help African American women’s journey to earning their doctoral degrees. The findings and feedback could be used to develop programs and support groups. Lastly, I believe these initiatives could empower African American women in doctoral programs to break the code of silence and to be assertive about putting services in place to address their needs.

Quantitative methodologies have previously been the dominant means of gathering data on students balancing adult roles while in school. However, as this study suggests, allowing older students the opportunity to reflect on their educational journey can be a rewarding experience for participants and can increase the richness of the data gathered in the process. Further research is needed on the intersection of older learners’ identity with additional oppressed group identities, the impact of family, and counterspaces as well as how this influences African American women’s experiences and needs (Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011; Southerland, 2010; Tweedell, 2005).
Conclusion

This autoethnography explored race, age, and gender associated with the lived experiences of a nontraditional African American female student and her educational journey from Kindergarten to a doctoral student at a predominantly White university in the Midwest. This study sought to understand more about what influences the persistence of nontraditional students, a population considered at risk for non-completion (Guidos & Dooris, 2008; Wlodkowski, Mauldin, & Gahn, 2001). Although the specific research questions regarding race, age and gender did not result in specific language for each, the study clearly indicates that nontraditional students tend to have a high commitment to degree completion and, therefore, persist in spite of race, age and sex. This study confirms a finding from Tinto’s (2012) pivotal work, which concluded that “high commitment to the goal of college completion, even with minimal levels of social and/or academic integration and therefore institutional commitment might not lead to dropout from the institution” (p. 43). Of the barriers analyzed in the current study, racism surfaced as the single greatest negative experience of the nontraditional student starting in Kindergarten.

According to critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism, race and gender intersect and cannot be experienced one without the other, illustrating the double experience of my entire educational journey. Although I am not representative of all African American women in doctoral programs, the findings draw attention to the importance of looking at ways African American women are not supported on the doctoral level. My counter-stories recommend that predominantly White universities should eradicate the code of silence that could be embedded within their institution’s culture, especially the classroom.
This study extends our understanding of the role of race, age and gender for Black female collegians. Employing an autoethnographic method in this study to document the author’s experience enhanced our understanding of the strategies this Black female employed to navigate and cope with racism. Studies like this are important for several reasons. First, autoethnography allows one to critically reflect on their experiences in ways that help expose and dismiss established stories that have existed. Second, it is important in strengthening the educational outcomes of Black females, who may experience college in ways similar to or different from other students. Finally, it is imperative to better understand their challenges, dismantling policies and practices that systematically veil the realities of racism on college campuses.

New knowledge has been built on existing literature related to this research topic. Through strategies that encouraged voice and meaning making, this study promoted insight into a nontraditional African American female doctoral student’s academic struggles. A comprehensive literature review was evident in this study, embracing various perspectives and contexts of the college degree completion problem. Due to the limited size of the study, future studies should confirm the findings of this autoethnography.

There should be future research on nontraditional African American female students who graduated with doctoral degrees from predominantly White universities. Further research is needed to enhance and contribute to the existing body of literature about African American women who attended predominantly White universities.

Coda

In a couple of weeks, I will participate in a virtual event—oral defense of my dissertation—that ends sitting in classes and unraveling the layers of my dissertation. I have
evolved during a process of mastering the tools necessary to accomplish this goal. My postgraduate degrees did not prepare me for the rigors of what I faced during this process of taking ownership of this project! I had an idea of what I wanted to research but could not express myself in the style of writing I chose. I wanted to know if other African American women especially older African American women were having the same experience as me at their predominately White institutions. The process was a bit confusing and muddling, but I eventually learned the necessary steps. It took self-confidence and assurance to justify and add to the contributions other academicians have made to the literature.

In my earlier years, I was not sure what I was experiencing and made many mistakes. Events in my educational journey were disheartening at times. This journey was new yet intriguing. It was exciting because autoethnography allowed me the opportunity to tell my story through frameworks of critical race theory, Black feminist theory and critical race feminism. Using these theoretical lens, I unraveled the racialized, gendered and age-related experiences of my journey’s difficulties until the light bulb moment appeared.

I was participating in an organization that did not fully accept me because I am an African American woman due to the systemic ingrained racial beliefs. Throughout this educational expedition I have found flaws both in myself and in this culture. I am not a member of the dominant group, I have attempted to assimilate into their culture using code switching as a strategy. Based on the mistakes I have made, I drew from strategies I used to endure the challenges; by sharing my feelings of neglect with my family and friends. This journey has been rough! I had to take it bit by bit, as small as one sentence, one paragraph, one page, or one chapter at a time when the unraveling became too much.
I have lots of African American women in my life: my daughters, my nieces, my cousins, and my friends all born with this darkness of melatonin to their skins. They are judged many times because of this double jeopardy (Black and woman) and not the content of knowledge encased in the brain of their black skins. These are the women I desire to pass my legacy of knowledge to. Each of our generations creates improvements for the next, so I lay my gavel on the table by earning a doctorate and wonder who will out earn me and how.

Today is my day, I will be conferred as a doctor of education; it has been my dream, although because of the pandemic, I will have a virtual graduation. I dreamed my family would be sitting in the audience waiting to see me in my regalia. In a few minutes I would hear the orchestra begin to play “Pomp and Circumstance,” my cue to march in. I have worked to celebrate this moment since Kindergarten.

Within these walls I have learned from academicians. Will this sheep skin change me, will I look and sound different, will I code switch in front of certain audiences even more than before? With these initials behind my name will my White professors and peers see me differently? I am now ready for my next journey. I am ready to pass my torch to many members of my family and friends. I have to continue to be a trail blazer by helping to eliminate the categories of the oppressor and oppressed. I will fight for the justice to end the racialized and gendered experiences of African American women.
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