

# Black and Male on Campus: An Autoethnographic Account

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*The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to explore the ways in which race and racism coalesce in shaping the college experiences of Black men. I employ Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyze my own reflections about lived realities experienced as an undergraduate at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Findings center on the role that race played in shaping my experiences related to achievement, engagement, and representation in college. Implications for the study highlight the importance of grit and double consciousness in the success of Black men in college, as well as the role of “racial symbolism” in coloring their experiences at PWIs.*

*Keywords:* Black men, critical race theory, autoethnography, higher education, racism, race

On Saturday, July 13, 2013, just one day after their deliberations began, the jury in the widely publicized *State of Florida v. George Zimmerman* trial found Mr. Zimmerman not guilty of second-degree murder and manslaughter. Immediately following the verdict, there were reports of peaceful street protests, impassioned debates about race and racism, and widespread frustration with the state of America’s justice system and its mistreatment of Black<sup>1</sup> males in particular. This response, however, represented a culmination of frustration with society’s inability to provide equitable opportunities, resources, and representation for the advancement of Black men. Indeed, history provides a salient reminder of societal practices and policies that often affirm oppression, prejudice, and marginalization despite espoused American principles of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness.

Black men are sorely underrepresented in several domains of American life. Consider higher education for instance. Today, there are over 19 million college students enrolled across more than 4,200 colleges and universities; approximately, two million of them are African Americans. While Black men represent just one-third of Black college students nationally

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(Aud et al., 2013) research implies that they are more likely to begin at two- versus four-year institutions (Flowers, 2006), to attend less selective institutions, or to leave college before degree completion (Strayhorn, 2008a). If we know anything from years of sociological research in higher education, it is that campus environments are often mere microcosms of the larger society. The same currents of oppression and marginalization that shape the experiences of ethnic minorities in society—namely racism—operate on college campuses. For instance, Feagin and Sikes (1995) note that Black students at PWIs employ self-imposed segregation to cope with the harsh realities of institutional racism. While useful, their study focuses on the experiences of Black students broadly, failing to identify the nuanced experiences for Black men on campus in comparison to Black women.

Although prior research on Black male collegians lends much to our understanding of their experiences on campus, there are important gaps in our knowledge. First, there is an absence of scholarship on Black men that centers race in the analysis. As such, we know little about the role of race and racism in Black males' experiences at PWIs. Second, there is a wealth of scholarship that negatively portrays Black men in college as underachieving and unlikely to succeed (Jackson & Moore, 2008); however, few studies highlight the ways in which Black men have successfully navigated societal barriers, thus achieving success (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Third, little is known about the strategies employed by those who are able to overcome racist stereotypes and exceed expectations. Finally, relatively few scholars (e.g. Miller, 2008) employ autoethnographic methods to narrate their own stories, which can challenge canonical stories—that is, authoritative and projective story lines from those in the majority about minority lives (Ellis, 2004). These gaps are addressed in this study.

Before presenting the purpose, literature review, and methods employed in this study, there is one caveat about voice and point of view. True to autoethnographic methodology, the autobiographer writes in first person, thus displaying multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural (Ellis, 2010). In this tradition, I will refer to myself in first-person throughout this article.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to explore the ways in which race and racism coalesce in shaping the college experiences of Black men. I employ Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyze my own reflections about lived realities experienced as an undergraduate at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Findings center on the role that race played in shaping my experiences related to achievement, engagement, and representation in college. Three central research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways, if any, are the campus experiences reflected in this study racialized?
2. What forms of support reflected in this study enabled persistence in college?
3. What strategies reflected in this study are employed to cope with racialized experiences on campus?

### **Review of the Literature**

Over a decade ago, Ronald Roach (2001) made an important observation about the plight of Black men in college, noting their observable absence on campus. Directing attention to the Black male crisis was a clarion call to action. Prior to 2000, little was known about the unique experiences of Black men in college. Roach's article, along with a number of others (e.g.

Arenson, 2003; Jones, 2007) and the alarming statistics regarding high school graduation rates, college enrollment and completion of Black men, arguably, spurred the next wave of research on this population.

Apart from national reports, scholars have devoted considerable attention on examining various aspects of Black male collegians. For instance, attention has been given to high-achievers (Bonner, 2001; Fries-Britt, 1998; Harper, 2005); low-performers (Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Palmer & Young, 2009); athletes (Donnor, 2005; Messer, 2006); those attending two-year institutions (Flowers, 2006; Wood, 2012); members of Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) (Harper & Harris, 2006); those who were formerly incarcerated (Strayhorn, Johnson & Barrett, 2013); economically disadvantaged students (Harris, 1995); and those at HBCUs (Bridges, Cambridge, Kuh, & Leegwater, 2005; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). For instance, Harper (2005) examines the experiences of high-achieving African American male students, exploring their impetus for active engagement outside of the classroom, and the impact of it on their overall collegiate experience.

What we know about Black male collegians can be organized around three major categories: (a) environmental, (b) social and (c) psychological. Environmental factors refer to issues that either promote or impinge upon their success, or as Strayhorn (2013b) notes, “aspects of the campus ecology . . . that either affirm Black male collegians’ sense of belonging, facilitate their involvement in the academic and social life of campus, or marginalize them in ways that deny access to supportive networks that are critical for success” (p. 2). The literature is replete with accounts of Black male collegians that perceive their environment at PWIs as chilly and at times hostile (e.g., Bonner & Bailey, 2007; Davis, 1994; Fleming, 1984; Flowers, 2002; Flowers, 2003). The negative environmental cues Black men experience on campus can be internalized, thus interrupting their desire to engage on campus (Berger & Heath, 2005). For instance, Bonner and Bailey (2006) explained, “To create academic climates that foster the success of African American men, higher education institutions must focus on a number of issues that defy solutions of a singular nature” (p. 38). These factors include, peer group influence, family influence and support, faculty relationships, identity development and self-esteem, and institutional environment.

A second line of inquiry focuses on the interpersonal factors of Black males that either foster or impede their success in college. These include, but are not limited to: interactions with diverse peers and supportive relationships with university faculty and staff (Flowers, 2003; Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2008a, Strayhorn 2008b). For instance, in his analysis of 531 Black and White men, Strayhorn (2008a) found that cross-racial interactions were significant predictors for Black men and contributed to their sense of belonging at PWIs. Furthermore, Harper (2006b) noted that Black men who are actively engaged in student organizations and campus activities gain more from college than their same-race male peers who are not uninvolved.

A third line of inquiry identifies the role of psychological factors in the success of Black male collegians. As such, scholars have examined the role of cognitive, non-cognitive and behavioral traits for student academic achievement, retention and persistence. In a recent study, Strayhorn (2013b) tested the importance of a non-cognitive trait, *grit*, to predict grades for a sample of Black males attending a PWI. Defining grit as perseverance with passion over time, he demonstrates that grittier Black males tend to earn higher grades than their same-race male peers. Furthermore, Palmer and Strayhorn (2008) look at the role of non-cognitive factors in the success of African American males at a historically Black college and university (HBCU). Based on interviews with 11 Black men, they found that non-cognitive factors, coupled with

institutional support, were significant variables in Black men's retention and persistence at their institution. Lastly, Strayhorn, Johnson, and Barrett (2013) examine the adjustment and transition experiences of formerly incarcerated Black male (FIBM) collegians. They identify three important factors for FIBMs in college. For example, the ex-offender label served both as an impediment and motivation for them to pursue higher education.

To this point, the literature has been presented in separate and discrete categories, but recent scholars (e.g. Strayhorn, 2013b) explain that students' lives are hardly separate, but rather at all times intersecting and complex. To accommodate this complexity, scholars encourage the use of intersectionality as an analytic tool for understanding the lives of college students generally, and Black college students specifically (Strayhorn, 2013a). Using intersectionality as an analytic tool for examining social inequalities directs much needed attention to interlocking systems of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw, 1991). For instance, Dancy (2013) suggests that intersectionality is useful for understanding the complexity of Black male identity in an effort to undo homogeneity in qualitative research. In the present study, I use intersectionality to describe the ways in which race and racism intersect with social identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity) within overlapping systems of oppression and subsequently affect the college experiences of Black men. Before describing this study's sample, the next section presents the methodological framework.

### **Methodology**

This study draws on the theoretical perspective of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the methodology of autoethnography. Given the importance of race and racism on the lived experiences of Black male college students at PWIs, I draw upon CRT as a useful analytic tool for the present study. CRT is a form of oppositional scholarship originating from critical legal studies. The CRT movement involves a collection of activists and scholars interested in investigating and transforming the relationship among race, racism and power (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado, 2000). "Unlike the traditional civil rights, which embraces incrementalism and step-by-step progress, CRT questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning" (Delgado, p. 3). Since its inception, CRT has crossed disciplinary boundaries, lending its tenets and core constructs to specific lines of inquiry. For instance, within the field of education, scholars have used CRT as an analytic tool to understand issues of school inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

There are five core tenets that shape the basic assumptions, perspectives and research methods of CRT (Delgado, 2000; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Tate, 1997):

- 1. The centrality of race and racism:** The belief that race and racism are defining characteristics of American society. Racism is ordinary and is embedded in the structures and practices of everyday life; it is normal.
- 2. The challenge of dominant ideology:** CRT challenges dominant ideologies such as liberalism, colorblindness, meritocracy, and race neutrality. Indeed, it reveals the ways in which these ideologies veil power, privilege and the self-interest of dominant groups.
- 3. The centrality of experiential knowledge:** CRT recognizes and acknowledges the experiential knowledge of people of color as a credible source in understanding their subordination.

4. **A historical context and interdisciplinary perspective:** CRT challenges ahistoricism, situating race and racism in both a historical and contemporary context using interdisciplinary methods.
5. **A commitment to social justice:** CRT is based on a fundamental commitment to improving the material conditions of people of color, linking scholarship with practice and policy.

Taken together, these core tenets of CRT help form a framework that can be applied to the lived realities of students of color in higher education. In this study, CRT provides a lens for examining the ways in which race and racism impacts the college experiences of Black male collegians and the strategies they subsequently employ to cope with such experiences. To understand such racialized social and academic experiences, an autoethnographic methodology was employed.

Autoethnography is defined as an “autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739); it is not conducted according to a prescribed formula (Ellis, 2004). Typically written in first person as a highly personalized narrative that critically assesses one’s place in relation to others in social contexts (Spry, 2001), autoethnographic research challenges traditional boundaries of postpositivist inquiry, illuminating lived experiences from a unique perspective (Jones, 2009). As such, autoethnography blends well with CRT and its centralization of voice and experience at the crux of analysis.

Furthermore, both autoethnography and CRT share a social justice commitment in exposing structures and systems of control “that marginalize or silence counter narratives, [and] stories that deviate from or transgress the canonical ones” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 744). The following are characteristics and criteria for autoethnographic work: (a) participation as reciprocity; (b) partiality, reflexivity and citationality as strategies for dialogue; (c) dialogue as a space for debate and negotiation; (d) personal narrative and storytelling as a form of opposition; (e) evocative stories as a call to action; and (f) engaged embodiment as a condition for change (Jones, 2008).

When writing an autoethnography, the author retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences. Most often, the author writes about epiphanies—remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life (Denzin, 1989; Ellis & Bochner, 1992). These epiphanies, however, are oftentimes made possible by being a part of a culture and/or possessing a particular cultural identity. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) noted:

Autoethnographers must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience, but also must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders.

To accomplish this, one might compare personal experience to research, interview cultural members, and/or examine cultural artifacts. For the purposes of this study, I connect my experiences to existing literature and examine cultural artifacts.

## **Procedures**

### **Autobiographer**

In consonance with autoethnographic research, the author of this study is the primary

participant (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). From 2006 to 2010, I attended a four-year, public, PWI in the mid-western region of the country where I completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science. My university is a Research-1 institution, and during the period of my attendance, had a yearly enrollment of over 40,000 students. Approximately 55% of the student population was male and 45% female, and less than 10% identified as African American or Black.

It is also important to make mention of my social involvement and academic achievement. This information is particularly helpful in contextualizing my experience at this PWI. Socially, I maintained an extensive record of leadership involvement in multiple organizations, including membership in Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); and the student programming board. Furthermore, I participated in enriching educational experiences (i.e., studying abroad, internships, and summer research programs); and completed my undergraduate career with a cumulative grade point average of 3.6.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection proceeded in accordance to autoethnographic methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Specifically, “Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angles lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their [my] personal experience; then they look inward” (Ellis & Bochner, p.739). I was especially concerned with producing thick descriptions of both personal and interpersonal experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). As such, data collection proceeded in three phases and took place over 12 months.

The first phase included data collected through the writing of an individual autobiographical narrative, in which I responded to the prompt, “Reflect on the role of race and racism in your educational experience.” This autobiographical narrative was organized chronologically, using main events to structure the story.

In the second phase, I engaged in a process referred to as “sociological introspection and emotional recall” (Ellis, 1999, p. 671). This involves collecting field notes; paying attention to my own physical feelings, thoughts and emotions; and imagining how I felt being back in the scene, both emotionally and physically. There are important benefits and disadvantages of this process. Revisiting a scene emotionally allows one to remember other details. When writing close to the time of the event, it does not take much effort to recount lived emotions. The disadvantage, however, is that it is difficult to analyze your experiences from an outsider’s cultural perspective because of your emotional involvement in the scene or event. Taken together, both of these processes are important in moving in and out of your gaze as the autobiographer. Thus it is important to write about an event immediately while your emotions are fresh, and then revisit it once you are emotionally distant. In this tradition, I retrieved blog journal posts (n=4) that I authored during college, many of which related to my encounters with racism on campus. Not only did I recall those experiences using the procedures described above, producing field texts (n=4), but I also drafted additional field texts (n=6) for other significant experiences in college. The field texts were transcribed for analysis.

The third phase involved collection of cultural artifacts from my time in college. For instance, I identified four news articles from the campus newspaper, which document campus-wide incidents. Additionally, I retrieved my undergraduate résumé and four letters of recommendations from faculty and administrators during my time in college. Some of these artifacts are important for understanding the local culture (i.e., college campus) in relation to my

personal experiences as the ethnographer. In the following section, I discuss the data analysis techniques employed within this study.

### **Data Analysis**

Data from the autoethnography, verbal accounts, and field-texts were organized using inductive approaches characteristic of qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). As such, data analysis of transcripts proceeded in three stages in accordance to analytical techniques by Miles and Huberman (1994). First, data were reduced. This included (a) reading and rereading data to become familiar with it; (b) developing a code list to label and describe data; (c) coding, which involved rereading the data, assigning codes either from the list or with new ones that emerged. Second, data were organized in a chart, a more accessible way to see all the data at once. Third, data were verified by looking for alternative or competing themes, reviewing outliers (i.e., data that did not fit the pattern), and triangulating and cross-examining through various data collection methods. Finally, cultural artifacts were analyzed in accordance to methods outlined by Hodder (2000). First, I identified the contexts of each artifact and interpreted the boundaries of each. Second, I determined similarities and differences of said contexts. And third, I assessed the relevance of history theories (both general and specific) to the data at hand.

In consonance with autoethnographic research, the results from this analytic process produced a narrative, linking my autobiography with sociocultural contexts in a way that affords a rich descriptive story, within the CRT framework. Before providing an overview of the techniques that were employed to ensure the quality of the study, the next section describes how the data will be presented.

### **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 in order to provide short stories that elicit emotional identification and understanding from the reader with respect to culture and context (Humphreys, 2005). Indeed, autoethnographic vignettes were useful in sharing my life events, providing a window through which the reader can understand, engage and/or experience what it was like to be a Black male at a PWI. The next section describes the steps that were taken to ensure quality of data.

### **Quality of Data**

The existing literature on autoethnography provides limited guidance on techniques to ensure rigor and quality in autoethnographic research. Consequently, terms like reliability, validity, and generalizability take on different meanings in autoethnographic research (Ellis et al., 2011). “Autoethnographers value narrative truth based on what a story of experience does—how it is used, understood, and responded to for and by us and others as writers, participants, audiences, and humans” (Ellis et al., p. 8). However, recognizing that memory is fallible and that it is impossible to recall or report on events in language that exactly represents how those

events were lived and felt (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), several steps were taken to aid in the reliability/validity of findings.

First, consistent with techniques outlined by Denzin (1989), I strove to provide thick descriptions of my experiences and the setting in which I was enrolled. Rich descriptions also enhanced the transferability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Furthermore, peer debriefing was useful for the study as well. To ensure accuracy of data in recounting certain events and experiences, I shared my memories and impressions with former classmates and campus administrators, who affirmed my recollections, offered revisions to my ‘his-tory,’ and challenged me in ways that rendered more accurate versions of my stories.

Second, triangulation was useful in this study as a way of verifying across multiple data types. For instance, data for the present study were drawn from personal reflections, campus artifacts, and online blogs. The real strength of triangulation is reflected in the blending of data types, all providing evidence to support the same conclusion (Creswell, 1998). This enhanced the validity of findings reported in the next section.

A final note about quality of the study. I grappled tremendously with identifying the most appropriate methodological approach to best represent my story. While this study is in no way meant to be generalizable to the experiences of all Black men at PWIs, I hope that by sharing my story one might gain insight to the ways in which race and racism coalesce in structuring the lived experiences for some. Thus, the quality of this study will, in part, be determined by the readers and to what extent, if any, they relate to, empathize and/or identify with my experience.

## Findings

### *Vignettes: The Grit That He Daily Shows*

In this first series of vignettes, I document the ways in which I channeled my racialized experiences—such as racial slurs, stereotypes, and low expectations—drawing inspiration and motivation from them to fuel my success in college.

*At no other point in my life did I feel the weight and implications of being a Black male, than in college. Although growing up I had conversations with my parents about what it meant to be a Black man in society and how I should act accordingly, it took on a heightened meaning in college. As a Political Science major in a very conservative department at a PWI, I often felt out of place, questioning my decision to pursue my academic major. My advisor, an older white man, was incredibly hostile and maintained very low expectations of me. “You know you’re going to actually have to work if you want to be successful in Political Science,” he said during my first meeting with him. “Most students who take my intro class barely receive Cs. You think you have what it takes?” he asked me. Both shocked and disappointed, I wondered why he had such low expectations of me. “Did other Black students not do well in his class?” I thought...Or did he have something personal against me?...While some professors were better, I can’t say that he was an anomaly. In fact, in many of my classes within the Political Science department, I felt like a target. And of course, when talking about issues of diversity and people of color, I was designated the representative. “What does Obama’s election mean for the Black community?” “Really?” I thought... “I’m not the Black community,” I thought. I was labeled as defensive in many instances, but in reality, it just felt like a*



*burden. Rather than drop the class, however, like so many of my [Black] peers did, I stuck it out. I refused to be sidetracked by these distractions.*

*One thing I learned growing up was that race mattered, and if you were Black, it really mattered. Living in an all-Black community most of my life and attending all-Black schools, I rarely had to deal with blatant forms of racism. I always experienced it in more subtle ways. For instance, I think almost every Black man at some point in their life has or will experience a situation in which a white woman clutches her purse when she sees you or crosses the street to avoid walking past you...I have and so has every Black man that I know. That reality is inextricably linked with being a Black man in America. The frustration I experienced from encounters like that however, took on new meaning when it happened in a place where I was supposed to feel safe – in class. Working on a group activity in my Political Behavior class one day, I entered a heated debate with one of my White classmates about the direction of our project. Out of nowhere, however, he interrupts me as I am making a point, yelling “Hey, don’t shoot me! I have no money” [throwing his hands up in the air]. It was mortifying. My classmates erupted in laughter...This wasn’t the only incident though.*

*In that same class, months later, as I was packing my bags to leave class, I was approached by my professor. “You have a moment to talk with me for a second?” he asked, looking concerned. “Sure,” I replied, clueless on what he wanted to discuss. Up until this point in class, I had completed all of my assignments and scored fairly well on all tests and assignments, so I was certain it wasn’t about [my] performance in the class. [Waits for students to exit room] “It has come to my attention that some of your classmates are not comfortable working with you on your group project” he said. [Long pause] Struggling to gather my words in order to respond appropriately, I asked, “Why?” “Well, apparently some of the female members in your group are not comfortable working with you,” he said. Thinking to myself, there is only one female in my group and she is white...the same girl who always seems to be startled when I walk past her in class to take my seat...Needless to say, I was infuriated...[Pausing before I responded] I asked, “Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?” He continued for a short while, outlining what he thought I should do to respond to this situation and to make her and others feel better, offering no explanation whatsoever about what it was I was doing to scare her. While filled with mixed emotions, it was clear that she was uncomfortable because I was Black. And because of the stereotypes she maintained of me, I was moved from one group to another to accommodate her. Not once did my professor ask me how I felt...it was an incredible lesson I learned that day...This was a perfect topic for discussion in my NAACP meeting later that evening.*

*There were a number of other organizations like NAACP that played important roles in my college experience. Becoming an Alpha [i.e., member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.] was perhaps one the best decisions I made in college. Not only did I gain a supportive brotherhood and network on campus, but it also helped strengthen my resolve to excel. After joining, I felt like I could literally do anything. During our membership intake process we were taught to model the aims of the fraternity: manly deeds, scholarship, and love for all mankind...There was one poem in particular we learned*

*called, "The Test of a Man." The first couple of lines of the poem read: "The test of a man is the fight that he makes, the grit that he daily shows. The way that he stands upon on his feet and takes life's numerous bumps and blows." Something about those words resonated with me, as they spoke to my experience in life broadly as well on campus...an experience of struggle and perseverance in spite of it all.*

Throughout these vignettes, I use words and phrases that allude to my development of grit. Subtle and not-so-subtle experiences, like those described above, strengthened my ability to persist in the face of racism. My collegiate experiences were not only influenced by my race/ethnicity, but in some ways by my sex. Indeed, the intersection of my race and sex heightened my feelings of subordination on campus.

Comments from students in the vignettes are consistent with racialized stereotypes about Black men in society (e.g. low expectations; labeling as aggressive or violent). Simply put, dominant narratives label Black men as threatening, dangerous, and uneducable. Encountering racist stereotypes could lead some Black men to leave college prematurely (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Rather than dropping out of college, changing majors, or leaving the institution altogether, these experiences fueled my motivation to succeed academically. In fact, hostile encounters with racism nurtured my grit, which forced me to respond in more effective ways. Additionally, I highlight the role of a Black Greek Lettered Organization (BGLO), in further nurturing grit, as well. Internalizing the espoused principles and values of Alpha nurtured my resiliency, thus allowing me to become grittier. This is illuminated through my achievements on campus despite these challenges. Taken together, grit played a critical role in my ability to navigate and cope with racism.

### ***Vignettes: Double Consciousness***

The phenomenon of double consciousness—referring to an internal conflict that Black people face in navigating the psychological and socio-historical realities of racism and oppression in a European society—also emerged from the data analysis process (DuBois, 2007). In the following vignettes, I describe what appears to be an adoption of double consciousness as a strategy and coping mechanism for my racialized experiences on campus. Specifically, this allowed me to manage low expectations and racialized stereotypes, learning how to fully engage within this PWI as a racialized minority.

*"Son, you might not get everything you work for, but you will work for everything you get," my mom would say growing up. The idea of that angered me. That reality became clearer, however, as I got older... In college I learned quickly that in order for me to excel, I would have to accept this as my reality, and learn to instead navigate within these less than desirable circumstances. Rather than exhaust time and energy being angry about it, I learned to choose my battles, bite my tongue sometimes and ultimately redirect my anger into more productive forms of resistance. This, in turn allowed me to branch out, diversifying my involvement on campus. I forced myself to engage with white peers and administrators who I wouldn't otherwise interact with because of skepticism I maintained, as a result of so many negative experiences. This was good for me in several ways. First, it helped me understand that I could have meaningful and productive relationships with people who weren't Black. Second, I was exposed to the realities of*

*power and privilege and ways in which they manifested on campus. Third, I acquired strategies to help get me get through college while benefiting from experiences that I would not otherwise have been exposed to.*

*While initially a bit rebellious, I learned that I was limiting myself from so many opportunities. So, rather than give people the opportunity to say, “He’s just like the rest of them,” or exclude me from things, I did what I needed to do to manage: I code switched, I suppressed my emotions at times and in many ways allowed things to fly that I wouldn’t normally allow. This new persona I adopted, helped me better manage relationships with White peers, especially ones who maintained low expectations of me. Eventually, I learned to adopt language that was most appropriate in challenging racism and power, regaining my own voice and power in the process. I learned that I didn’t have to fully acquiesce; however, there would be times where I have to bite the bullet, and ultimately choose my battles.*

The comments reflected in these vignettes allude to the development of a double consciousness. Recall my internal struggle of navigating ‘self’ within a racialized environment. For instance, recognizing that many of my White peers maintained low expectations me, pushed me to be more creative in my response or attempts to challenge to them. Indeed, the adoption of a new persona allowed me to maximize my experience in college. I learned how to interact with White students and coexist, despite negative stereotypes, and my initial distrust of some. My ability to manage this exposed me to resources and provided access to information that other students of color, namely Blacks, lacked or held in low supply. The ability to code switch—that is, alternating my usage of Black English and Standard English (SE) in certain spaces—for example, was useful in my negotiation of situations where racialized stereotypes were present.

### ***Vignettes: Racial Symbolism on Campus***

Finally, the concept of racial symbolism (Bell 1993a) is closely related to the ways in which Black males’ experiences are racialized at PWIs and the meaning that students like myself make of them. The following vignettes describe the ways in which my institution’s espoused values of inclusion and diversity were cast publicly, although its responses to racism on campus were modest, thereby leaving most students of color feeling tokenized, or *racially symbolized*. Consider the following:

*I entered college in perhaps one of the most contentious times [on campus]. While trying to get acclimated to the campus, I started seeking out opportunities to get involved and be around other Black students. I recall going to the Black house [African American Cultural Center] and hearing conversations about a recent event that had just took place on campus. It was around October of 2006...during a Greek exchange between a fraternity and sorority on campus. The organizations held a series of racially themed parties in which members arrived to the party dressed as landscapers and pregnant women, meant to be representative of Mexican culture; while during a different party, members dressed as “pimps and hoes,” meant to be representative of Black culture. It was incredibly offensive, particularly to Black and Latino students. The university’s failure to respond incited additional frustration.*

*Finally, after protests on campus and lobbying in front of the vice-chancellor's office for weeks, the university decided to hold a town hall meeting. Sitting in the student union, students recalled a number of encounters with racism and discrimination; all students of color. For many of them, this event represented a culmination of frustration with inaction of the university. Indeed, university officials who comprised the panel seemed aloof, all wanting this nightmare to be over...They weren't engaged and seemed to lack appreciation for the sensitive nature of these events. As a freshman, this was my introduction to the university – and what an emotional experience it was...students lined up one-by-one, reliving hurtful stories and experiences. I questioned how senior level administrators like the Vice-Chancellor could not feel a commitment to act...It all felt like a formality though– like it was something the university had to do to shut us up, to appear concerned about what happened. No real change ever surfaced. In fact, the organizations were only recommended to send its members to diversity courses and training...many of these same activities persist today.*

*There were other situations. By my third-year there were a string of crimes on campus. In accordance with protocol, the campus police department released campus-wide notifications informing the community of the occurrences. In all of the crimes that involved Black male suspects, however, the description outlined very general and broad characteristics. For instance, "suspect is described as a Black male, early to late twenties, between the heights of 5 feet 6 inches and 6 feet 2 inches, weighing approximately 150 to 210 pounds. "Really?" I thought. That could apply to any Black male on campus!*

I questioned my sense of belonging to the institution almost immediately upon arrival to campus. Adding to this lack of connectedness with the school was the institution's response to the racially themed parties on campus as well as the campus-wide crime alerts that seemed to target Black men. This frustration was compounded by the university's public pronouncement of inclusiveness and diversity on campus. For instance, at the time of attendance, the university marketed a campus-wide diversity campaign promoting the university as 'one.'

Similarly, note that I described the town hall meeting as a "formality." This is the message that I received as a student from administrators on campus, particularly the Vice-Chancellor. Their inattentiveness to these issues and lack of responsiveness cemented these feelings. My comments illuminate the incongruences of the espoused mission of the institution as a place where differences are embraced, with the ways in which students experienced college, namely students of color. Indeed, the administrators' insensitivity at the meeting contradicted the institution's decree of inclusiveness.

Finally, I describe the hyper-surveillance of Black males on campus in response to a series of crime alerts in which suspects happened to be Black men. The descriptions outlined in the reports were so broad that it could apply to any Black male on campus. The university's response created discomfort and distress for myself and other Black men on campus. Indeed, this manifested itself in a growing anxiety while on campus, refraining from wearing suspect attire (e.g. hoodie and sweat pants), and a looming fear of profiling and arrest.

Again, this is another example of racial symbolism on campus: praising inclusion publicly, while promoting exclusion and marginalization, in practice.

## Discussion

First, findings from this study suggest the significance of race and racism in the academic and social experiences of Black male collegians attending predominantly White institutions. That race powerfully influences the interactions and decisions of Black students at PWIs is not new information on its own; indeed, we've known since Fleming's (1984) ground-breaking study that Black students' experiences in college are shaped by race and the significance that faculty and peers attach to racial differences. What this study adds, however, is clarification about the ways in which race intersects with racism on American college campuses to create a complex array of racialized stereotypes that set faculty and peer expectations about Black men. These lowered expectations can act as burdens for some Black men who are then driven to prove them wrong, similar to information shared by previous scholarship on high-achieving students (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Steele, 1997; Strayhorn, 2009). Yet, results from the present study make clear that race and racism are not only endemic to American society (Bell, 1992; 1993b) but they operate similarly on college campuses, which often are mere microcosms of the larger environment. The effects of race and racism can be particularly pronounced for individuals about whom a stereotype exists, such as Black men at PWIs.

Second, findings from this study highlight the ways in which the experiences of some Black men in college are marked by racial symbolism. For instance, scholars have referred to the superficial, public celebration of diversity and racial progress in America as mere symbol of racial progress (Bell 1993a). Similarly, the experiences described in this study represent racial symbolism. Although the campus espoused a commitment to diversity, that did not preclude Black men from being subjected to hyper-surveillance on campus through crime reports, nor did it drive administrators to respond quickly to acts of discrimination.

Next, while negative in nature, my racialized experiences in college served as sources of motivation. Vignettes presented in the previous section reveal the importance of experiential knowledge of historically oppressed populations, which is a major tenet of CRT. My narrative exposes ways in which Black men, like myself, cope with race, racism, and resist negative stereotypes at PWIs. Related to the notion of grit, the present study illuminates how some Black men resist stereotypes by staying focused on their short- and long-term goals (Strayhorn, 2013b). This study explains the cumulative effect of experience and grit--with every negative experience on campus, I became grittier, thus better able to negotiate racism and hostile campus environments. Information presented in this study raises important new questions for the stereotype threat line of inquiry. For example, some believe that Black students are dissuaded by negative stereotypes (Aronson & Steele). In this study, I describe being motivated by such stereotypes, similar to points raised by others (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Harris et al., 2011; Jenkins, 2006). These conflicting findings raise additional questions that will likely occupy future studies on this topic. For example, do stereotypes operate differently for different students? Is the influence of stereotypes on students determined, in part, by factors such as grit?

In addition, results from the present study highlight important linkages to prior literature on BGLOs. For instance, recall that findings presented here suggest that organizational involvement in a BGLO aided in my persistence through an increased boost in confidence, but also, by nurturing grit. Similarly, Kimbrough and Hutcheson (1998) argued that BGLO members, regardless of campus type, demonstrated greater student involvement and had more confidence in their leadership skills. In similar form, data from the present study underscores the significant role that fraternity played in my leadership development. For instance, deep

involvement in a fraternity led me to strengthen my skills in coordination, delegation, and even more practical skills (e.g., running a meeting). Despite these gains, it is clear that self-confidence also is needed for student success.

Finally, findings from this study affirm the usefulness of intersectionality in understanding the lived experiences of Black men at PWIs (Strayhorn, 2013a). Though far from explicit, findings from the present study correspond to the essence of intersectionality theory--that individual social identities intersect with one another within a larger matrix of domination (and subordination) so as to create relatively unique circumstances for individuals who might otherwise be assumed to be more similar than different. In the previous section, I document the intricacies of my racial identity and the marginalization and discrimination subsequently experienced as a Black male. Indeed, there are many Black men who struggle to succeed academically in college. Yet, far fewer may experience academic struggles in college as a direct contradiction to previous messages about ones' academic readiness for college, prior achievement, and extensions of dominant racialized stereotypes that paint Black men as academically unfit. Intersectionality is a useful tool for analyzing qualitative data in this way and may highlight possible future uses for the theory in race work.

### **Implications**

Results from this study lend themselves to policy, practice and research in several important ways. First, for campus policy makers who are *seriously* interested in improving the material conditions of Black men both broadly, and specifically at PWIs, findings from this study reveal the importance of honest (but sometimes difficult) conversations about the realities of racism. 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. Policies initiated cannot merely veil this reality. As such, policies grounded in racial symbolism or race-neutrality proves ineffective. So, let us acknowledge race. In fact, consider it at all times as a potential salient identity of Black students, particularly males. Campus policy makers, for example, might think about the inclusion of Black men at the table when drafting policies that directly target them, eliciting stories from their experiences—thus recognizing their voice as valuable and credible.

Second, researchers who are interested in understanding the racial experiences of Black men at PWIs should use CRT as an analytic tool. Prior research in this area fails to expose the realities of racism on college campuses. Results presented here reveal the importance of experiential knowledge of the oppressed. Yet, all too often, the oppressed are excluded from the proverbial table when discussing race. Future researchers and theorists who are interested in studying Black men, might resolve this problem by drawing on experiential knowledge and admitting the racial realities of college campuses through the words of participants.

Finally, findings from this study are also important for practice. For administrators and faculty members who work with Black men at PWIs, this study reveals strategies that proved effective for the participant. For example, specific strategies such as intentional (and direct) conversations about the realities of racism were critically important in this study. Thus, talking candidly with Black male students about such strategies and how they can employ them in their college experience will likely enable them to persist in school. For example, there are a growing number of Black male support and mentorship groups across the country at PWIs. For ones' who are seriously concerned with improving the material conditions of Black men in college,

these groups might be sites for these types of conversation. This however forces administrators and faculty members to challenge their own notions about Black men, moving away from deficit centered approaches when working with them, but rather empowering through meaningful engagement and equipping them with the tools and strategies necessary to navigate their experiences. Also, given the importance of grit in this study, administrators might aim to help Black men nurture their own grit. One might consider designing summer programs that resemble academic “boot camps,” cultivating students’ endurance, resilience and grit, ultimately.

### **Conclusion**

This study extends our understanding of the role of race and racism for Black male collegians. Employing an autoethnographic method in this study to document the author’s experience enhances our understanding of the strategies Black men employ 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 canonical stories. Second, it is important in strengthening the educational outcomes of Black men, who may experience college in ways similar to or qualitatively different from other students. Finally, there is a moral and social justice imperative to better understand their challenges, dismantling policies and practices that systematically veil the realities of racism on college campuses.

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<sup>1</sup>The terms ‘Black’ and ‘African American’ are used interchangeably throughout this manuscript, referring to individuals who trace their ancestral origins to groups of the African Diaspora, including West Indians, Africans, Caribbean’s, and Haitians, to name a few.

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