

DETERMINED TO RISE: A CONCEPTUAL AND COUNTER-NARRATIVE
ANALYSIS OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION ATTAINMENT EXPERIENCES OF
THREE AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN

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by
LESLIE DULA MCKESSON

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APPROVED BY:

Brandy Bryson, PhD., MSW
Chairperson, Dissertation Committee

Alecia Youngblood Jackson, Ph.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

Michael E. Jennings, Ph.D.
University of Texas at San Antonio
Member, Dissertation Committee

Audrey Dentith, Ph. D.
Director, Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Max C. Poole, Ph.D.
Dean, Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies

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Abstract

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Leslie Dula McKesson
B. S., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
M. A., Appalachian State University
Ed. S., Appalachian State University
Ed. D., Appalachian State University

Dissertation Committee Chairperson: Brandy Bryson, Ph.D., MSW

This study presents anti-deficit counter-narratives of higher education attainment among African American men. Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), this work disrupts anti-Black educational discourses and informs initiatives to improve community college degree completion for Black men. A hybrid qualitative/postqualitative research methodology was designed to examine the educational experiences of three African American men who completed a community college degree, and to inquire into how their counter-narratives both intersected with and were divergent from dominant social and educational discourses. This specialized methodology facilitated multi-faceted explorations and deconstruction of a single set of data, viewing themes and concepts, socially produced silences, marginalization, and agency and resistance through a CRT lens. It further facilitated philosophical explorations such as Angry Black Man Ideology and the role of neoliberal discourses in the contemporary community college. Recommendations for educators, community partners, and policy makers who wish to design programming to help Black men persist to graduation are provided, as are recommendations for the training and professional development of individuals who work to support degree completion among African American men.

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There is in this world no such force as a person determined to rise. The human soul cannot be permanently chained.

W.E.B. Dubois

Dedication

This study is dedicated to my mother, Rosa Lee Forney Dula, who was my first and most influential teacher. While she neither lived to see me embark upon nor complete this particular educational journey, it is the love of family and of learning that she instilled in me that inspired my study and has brought me to this place.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Our positionality also affects the way we perceive the nature of the research relationship. For us, empathy, collaboration, dialogue and intersubjectivity are important ingredients in the relationship. Gill and Goodson, 2011, p. 160

I was a child during the 1960s when the American Civil Rights Movement was at the forefront of world news. Even though I was too young to understand why I had to sit in the balcony of my hometown movie theater and why “We”¹ couldn’t go to the nice bathroom or the big concession stand in the lobby, I knew intuitively that it was tied to the color of my skin and that I was seen as less than those who had access to the main theater. I also knew that being treated this way was wrong. At that time, my teachers, my classmates, the people I went to church with and those with whom I interacted on a daily basis were all of varying shades of beige and brown, and this was normal in my young world. Most communities were still segregated, and that separation permeated not only schools and churches but also daily commercial and social transactions. It was only on Saturday trips into town with my parents that I would see the “Other”² children who didn’t look like me with parents who didn’t look like mine; their faces somewhat translucent and not quite real to me. As little children we would exchange curious glances and stares, sometimes smiling, sometimes sticking out our tongues rudely, but we would each hold firm to our parents’ hands and move a little closer to them as we passed on the sidewalk.

¹ A common communication around my African American community when I was a child was the culturally coded reference to ourselves as the collective “We.” It was inherently understood, for example, that to say “We can’t go there,” with proper inflection on the word “We,” signified racial restriction.

² I refer to White children as “Other” as a deliberate contradiction of the master narrative categorization of non-Whites as “Other.” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004)

When I entered the fourth grade, mandatory desegregation put me face-to-face in the same spaces with the “Other” children every day, and as children often will when left to their own devices, we became friends. As relationships emerged and grew I began to see that they were, in fact, real, and much like me in many ways. At the same time, I continued to experience how differently we were treated in society; how the Belk Department Store sales ladies followed me and my beige/brown friends around the store giving us The Evil Eye but offered no such surveillance when I was with a White friend, how my 7th grade teacher showed visible signs of discomfort when she made her frequent and often obscure references to what, in her old-south parlance, she called the “NEE-gra” children in the class, and even how anxious my parents looked the first time I told them I wanted to go to home with a White friend after school.

Experiences such as these and the various cultural transmissions I received while growing up Black in America caused me to think deeply about race, and they stirred a passion for equity and right-treatment in me that only increased as I matured. As a young woman I attended a predominantly White university³ then later married and gave birth to four children, three of whom are males. I watched my children matriculate through the public school system with far too many of their experiences still tainted, as mine had been a generation before, by racism. My children’s oppression, however had taken a surreptitious turn because, while the mechanisms of racism were similar, its existence was no longer as readily acknowledged, acquiesced, or confronted as it was during my youth when discrimination was recognized as part of national discourse and ideology. During their secondary education years, I found that racism was particularly oppressive

³ Predominantly White Universities/Institutions are referred to in my study as PWIs.

for my older sons; manifesting itself in efforts to inaccurately place them in lower level courses, to pander and profit from their athletic abilities, and to criminalize certain typical teenage behaviors. Academic (faculty) and athletic staff zealously advocated for them and maintained their eligibility to play during high school sport season, but failed to offer comparable support toward persistence and graduation once the season ended. In addition to the experiences that my own sons faced, I personally knew many of their contemporaries who were similarly commodified by high school athletic departments; some of whom later fell into stereotypical roles or succumbed to the school-to-prison pipeline. With limited institutional support mechanisms, I helped my children apply for admission to college, register and prepare for entrance examinations, complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and wade through the complex litany of pre-requisites to going to college.

As an African American⁴ mother, educator/administrator, and community member, I accept an historic and moral imperative to help fashion a better and safer world for all young Black men, and I believe that gaining access to academic success and all that can come with it will improve their lot in America. During my years as both a community college educator and an academic administrator, I have been privy to discourses, policies, and practices which appear to have impacted the higher education attainment outcomes of Black men in both positive and negative ways, and I believe that degree completion has the capacity to better their lives, their families, their communities, and society as a whole. It is based upon this personal ideology and sense of mission that I

⁴ In the context of my study, the terms “African American” and “Black” are used interchangeably to represent United States citizens whose African ancestry spans multiple generations in America.

undertook this study centering the positive outcomes and attainment counter-narratives of Black men.

I began this chapter by sharing my own counter-narrative for two reasons. First, I intended to establish a reflexive openness and disclose my positionality as a researcher. Gill and Goodson (2011) noted the role played by the social constructions, subjectivities, and positionalities of researchers as they contend with dominant discourses, and in this vein I have offered my counter-narrative as part of the research assemblage⁵ produced by my study. Stories such as my own and those of the men who participated in my study offer up a counter-narrative; a counter-hegemonic discourse produced by minoritized people that is an essential element of the theoretical framework and research methodology I have chosen. Counter-narrative data consists in stories that present the lived experiences of marginalized people in contrast to the normalized, majoritarian tales of the master narrative, and in my study the term counter-narrative is interchangeable with the term counter-story. The second reason for presenting my personal story is to introduce counter-narrative as a form of data and to demonstrate its capacity for opening up non-normative ways of thinking about and viewing the social world. The opening counter-narrative can be examined under the tenets of Critical Race Theory in a historical context as well as under the tenets of racial realism, interest convergence, social justice, and Whiteness as Property, all of which are explicated in the Theoretical Framework chapter. My counter-narrative might likewise be viewed with an eye toward uncovering potential paradoxes or focusing on what may be missing from my counter-story.

⁵ “...an assemblage isn’t a thing; it is the process of making and unmaking the thing. It is the process of arranging, organizing, fitting together...to ask what new territories are claimed as they encounter the process of plugging data into theory into data with us in the threshold.” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2011, p.13)

Many studies are designed primarily to respond to existing, pre-identified needs or “holes” in the research, but the primary intent of my study is to *step in front* of social issues regarding racism in education in order to disrupt hegemonic discourses. An additional benefit of my study, however, is that it adds to the limited body of relevant literature giving voice to Black men and it presents the counter-narrative stories of their community college degree completion experiences. As a leading scholar in the field of higher education attainment, Dr. Shaun R. Harper has called for anti-deficit research that centers the higher education attainment counter-narratives of African American men. In this conceptual and counter-narrative methodological study I respond to Dr. Harper’s call by gathering and analyzing the higher education attainment counter-stories of three African American men, ages 24, 40, and 41, who have completed a community college degree since the year 2010. My research questions are:

- What were the experiences of African American men who completed a community college degree as they pursued higher education attainment?
- How do their counter-narratives intersect with dominant social and educational discourses regarding African American men?
- How are their counter-narrative experiences divergent from dominant social and educational discourses regarding African American men?

By conducting both qualitative and postqualitative analysis of the same data I encountered nuanced, unpredicted, and sometimes conflicting ways to think about some of the factors corresponding to the positive educational outcomes of the men who participated in my study, such as a comparison of the ideological value of higher education attainment with its more tangible social benefits. My study is also significant in that I crafted a hybrid

research methodology that opened up new and disruptive ways to think about degree attainment for Black men, identifying behaviors and attitudes through which barriers to higher education were successfully engaged and overcome at the individual level and suggesting ways in which institutional structures might support degree completion. The findings of my study may be used to improve programming designed for Black men as students, to inform the education and training of change agents, and to challenge the deficit based master narrative that espouses African American inferiority and incapacity.

In my study I use the term *men* to refer to adult males. The term *male* is extensively used to reflect the contemporary liberal/neoliberal language of categorization, de-politicization, and depersonalization; operating in epistemological opposition to poststructural and critical ways of thinking in which aggregation and singular hegemonic truths are rejected. Because there are limited signifiers for gender within the English lexicon, I concede to the use of the term *male* when referring to youth or boys who have not attained the age of majority, to identify the combined category of adults and boys, and as an adjective. I privilege the term *men* because, while a fish or a baboon can be male, only humans have the capacity to be what is ideologically construed to be *men*. Black men were historically hailed as *Hey, boy!* within the master narrative as an act of discursive denigration, with the term *boy* indicating that Black men were neither the equals of White men nor were they at parity with White women. This interpellation de-valorized the identities and social status of Black men and facilitated their subjugation. I, therefore, make the commitment to privilege the term *men* in my study as a counter-hegemonic discursive device to directly and deliberately disrupt the deficit-based language of the master narrative regarding African American men.

Critical Race Theory creates a space for the analytical consideration of race as a social construct and issue. Contemporary neoliberal ideology attempts to present social problems exclusively in terms of market factors in spite of the residual and ubiquitous effects of America's racialized history. Based upon the theoretical framework and review of the literature to follow, I established five key assumptions to serve as an epistemological foundation for my study, which were as follows: 1) the American education system perpetuates various forms of racism, 2) the lived experiences of Black men open up new ways of thinking about and understanding their educational outcomes, 3) social justice demands a more equitable distribution of the educational properties historically reserved for Whites, 4) the ideologies of colorblindness and meritocracy enable and perpetuate educational inequities, and 5) gender causes Black men to experience higher education in ways that can be distinguished from the college experiences of Black women. Having introduced the assumptions and conceptual framework undergirding my study I turn next to a summary of the contents of this study.

The Theoretical Framework chapter provides a discussion of the history, tenets, and current developments in the field of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which is both the theoretical and methodological framework used to explore the attainment counter-narratives of the men who participated in my study. Essentially, CRT presumes that racism will always exist, that society assigns value to Whiteness by perpetuating schemes of privilege and supremacy, that the advances made by minorities will be sustained only to the extent that they coincide with and do not devalue the interests of Whites, and that the stories of those who have been Othered should be used to challenge and disrupt the master narrative. In a contemporary society such as ours, in

which discussions surrounding race have been both passively avoided and intentionally obscured, Critical Race Theory enables the *centering* of race for the purpose of exposing and examining acts and manifestations of racism.

In the Methodology and Research Design chapter, I describe the social justice and scholarly purposes of my study, which are, respectively, to disrupt the anti-Black master narrative and present a counter-hegemonic discourse, and to explore the generative tensions of qualitative and postqualitative research methodologies. I then expound upon the hybrid research methodology that I designed for my study, which uses counter-narrative methodology and analysis in addition to conceptual analysis to present both qualitative and postqualitative findings arising from a single set of data. The conceptual analysis consists in a deconstruction of selected thoughts and mental constructs arising at the intersection of my positionality as researcher and the counter-narratives of the men who participated in my study, while the counter-narrative analysis consists in a theory-bound review of their counter-stories. Within the context of those considerations I explain how I formed participant counter-narratives using critical race methodology, and explicate how I applied the quasi-methodology known as the *analytics of disruption* to the deconstruction of the counter-narratives.

The Counter-narrative Research Texts chapter is comprised of stories of the degree attainment and broader social experiences of Malik Freeman, David Stokes, and Xavier Barnes (pseudonyms) as they contended with educational and social discourses regarding African American men. The counter-narratives identify ways through which their educational experiences were racialized. As an example, each man identified at least one classroom incident in which he perceived that he was disparately treated because of his

race. These incidents are examined in light of the theoretical framework and literature review in the Analysis and Discussion chapter, opening up representations of Angry Black Man Ideology and Discourse. The counter-narrative data also contribute to the Implications, Reflections, and Conclusions chapter by uncovering traits and mechanisms these men utilized to progress toward degree attainment.

The Analysis and Discussion chapter presents a postqualitative conceptual analysis of the counter-narrative research texts centering the exploration of two conceptual streams: Angry Black Man Ideology and Discourse, and Higher Education Attainment as Compliance and Resistance. The conceptual analysis consists in a deconstruction of selected thoughts or perceptions represented within the counter-narrative data and my own Research Journal Diary, which is utilized as an additional source of data. As a second form of postqualitative analysis I employ the methodology known as *Thinking with Theory* to engage a theory-bound analysis of the counter-narrative data by examining participant experiences in light of the tenets of CRT. In addition to examining these men's experiences through the lens of CRT, I also consider the two conceptual streams in light of theory, considering, for example, the interrelationships between Angry Black Man Ideology and Discourse and Whiteness as Property. Certain thematic/interpretive matters also rose to the surface during analysis, such as the formation of cultural counter-spaces and the communal ethos of the men who participated in my study. By combining qualitative and postqualitative approaches, and by also combining analysis and discussion, a more unified and nuanced way of thinking about the subject matter is enabled, rather than the traditional categorical approach that dissects and dis-unifies the issue.

Finally, in the Implications, Reflections, and Conclusions chapter, I make specific recommendations for educators, community partners, policy makers, and others who wish to improve college degree attainment rates for Black men, as well as for Black men who wish to successfully pursue a community college degree. I argue the value of utilizing a hybrid research methodology for the study of complex social problems in order to enable a broader, deeper, and more nuanced look at counter-narrative research data. Malik Freeman, David Stokes, and Xavier Barnes (pseudonyms) lived a number of experiences during the completion of their community college degrees, which they interpreted through a racialized lens. Their counter-narratives document some of the ways in which they pushed against what they perceived to be dominant or stereotypical notions of the behavior and capabilities of Black men, and in some instances, how they found themselves without recourse or remedy. Overall, however, these men succeeded in their higher educational pursuits because they were constitutionally “determined to rise.”

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework:

Viewing Education through the Lens of Critical Race Theory

The theoretical framework is the foundation from which all knowledge is constructed (metaphorically and literally) for a research study. It serves as the structure and support for the rationale for the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance, and the research questions. The theoretical framework provides a grounding base, or an anchor, for the literature review, and most importantly, the methods and analysis.

Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 12

A theoretical framework which has proven particularly prolific in terms of producing new ways of thinking and being in the world is Critical Race Theory (CRT). Critical Race Theory emerged from legal scholarship to provide a comprehensive lens through which to frame, represent, and analyze data regarding people of color who are oppressed, marginalized, or silenced in society due to their ethnicity, race, color, or national origin. Late in the twentieth century, educational and sociological scholars began to examine the intersections of racial identity and academic achievement through the lenses of non-traditional, race-based theoretical frameworks such as oppositional culture and “acting white” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), stereotype threat (Steele & Aaronson, 1995), multicultural theory (Banks & Banks, 1989) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2002). Some of these theories focused on what were viewed as cultural deficiencies within African Americans, and CRT arose, in part, in opposition to the “deficit-thinking paradigm” (Griffin, Jayakumar, Jones & Allen, 2010, et al., 2010, p. 234). In my study, a specialized application of CRT known as Critical Race Theory in Education, which specifically applies the tenets of CRT as a legal theory to educational policy and practice, was employed in conjunction with traditional CRT to examine the higher education attainment counter-narratives of African

American men who have completed a community college degree (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

The Evolution of Critical Race Theory

In the following section I describe the history, tenets, foundational applications and current developments of CRT. Beginning with the foundation in Critical Studies, I discuss the development of Critical Legal Studies (CLS) as a response to liberal ideologies. I then provide a detailed discussion of CRT as it emerged in rejoinder to the stalled efforts of the Civil Rights Movement, followed by a review of the specialized development of CRT within the field of education. I then evaluate and critique the utility of CRT in education as a framework for uncovering and viewing matters of race and racism in academe, and I discuss the specific applicability of CRT to studies centering higher education attainment and Black men.

First Generation Critical Studies

Stemming from the word *critique*, Critical Studies seeks to reveal and dislodge dominant and repressive ideologies that maintain inequities through the analysis of hidden structures which create and control the flows of power and privilege, further seeking to offer sites of resistance and change. In this regard, Critical Studies surpassed the ambitions of more traditional theories, many of which operated from a deficit perspective with a fundamental aim of explaining social phenomena. Critical scholars took an interdisciplinary approach and sought to change society by questioning ideologies, considering them incomplete knowledge that serves hegemonic interests. Occupying a stance against “advanced capitalism” (Masquelier, 2013, p. 397), Critical Studies dates back as far as the 1930s and credits members of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research as founders,

including philosophers Max Horkheimer and Jurgen Habermas (Kompridis, 2014). Critical Studies scholars consider such topics as heavily bureaucratized forms of government, the elevation of reason over affect and privileging the cognitive over the sensuous, highly productionist regimes, and the commodification of culture. Critical Studies opened the door to a number of more specialized and activist forms of scholarship, one of which was Critical Legal Studies, a second-generation critical theory and precursor to Critical Race Theory.

Critical Legal Studies

In response to what some legal scholars deemed to be the disempowerment of the Civil Rights Movement, Critical Legal Studies (CLS) came into prominence during the 1970s. Critical Legal Studies (CLS) exposed the institutionalization of class-based ideologies within purportedly neutral contexts and pointed to the relationship between power and law, questioning America's role in the legitimization of oppressive structures. Similar to Marxist theory, the central concerns of CLS are class and market forces (Roithmayr, 1999). Critical Legal Studies scholars were the first to challenge traditional liberal ideologies such as universality and legal autonomy—the notions that truth is static rather than relative and that legal reasoning is objective and impartial. Critical scholars, also referred to as Crits, seek to debunk the myth that the law is “neutral, value-free, and unaffected by social and economic relations, political forces or cultural phenomena” (Brown & Jackson, 2013, p. 12) and they refute the ideological notion that “justice is blind.” By revealing the political nature of legal and economic practices, CLS assumes that law and politics are one in the same rather than treating them as separate forms of reasoning. The central foci of CLS are material inequality and class relations, and its proponents foreground the role of the law in creating and perpetuating social inequality.

Some scholars have argued that CLS has been marginalized in recent years by its failure to address the rise of neoliberal discourse and its narrative of decline (Blalock, 2015). Critical Legal Studies theorists hold that neoliberalism, a “post-political discourse” (Blalock, 2015, p. 73) in which the condition of individuals and society as a whole is measured in terms of market values, is ubiquitously manifest within the dominant society. Because neoliberalism has been adopted by political conservatives as well as progressive legal scholars, it has effectively replaced liberalism and become invisible while maintaining ubiquity.

With particular emphasis on the intersection of higher education and the American legal system, Tamanaha (2013) called Critics to task for their complicity in the increase in law school tuition and its concurrent furtherance of exclusionary, class-based participation within the various echelons of the legal profession. Because wealthy people can afford the best law schools, which leads to the best career paths, law school admission directly and inevitably impacts the legal system itself by stacking the decks (as well as the courts and legislatures) in favor of the wealthy. Such allegations are particularly concerning given that a fundamental goal of CLS is to reveal hidden mechanisms of oppression and bring about the liberation of marginalized groups. In spite of and, in many ways, due to its limitations, Critical Legal Studies was one of the theoretical springboards to Critical Race Theory (CRT).

Critical Race Theory

McCoy and Rodericks (2015) described CRT as “a movement comprising scholars committed to challenging and disrupting racism and its associated social, legal, political, and educational consequences” (p. 5). Centering the construct of race in thought, research, and

praxis, CRT came into being when Critics realized that, by fore-grounding economic and class factors, CLS failed to account for the salience of race. Martin (2014) summarizes the basic tenets of CRT as follows:

The main principles of critical race theory include the recognition of race and racism in society, a critique of the traditional western values of objectivity and neutrality, a reliance on the knowledge and experience of people of color in the definition of its tenets, an interdisciplinary focus, [and] the goal of the elimination of all forms of oppression. (p. 246)

Critical Race Theory seeks to make visible, problematize, and disempower racism⁶, Exposing the existence, operation, and intransigence of White supremacy, CRT troubles how race and racism continue to exist yet simultaneously assumes that people of color, and more specifically African Americans, will never achieve full equality in America. This assumption is known as *racial realism*, and it is expressed by Derrick Bell (1992), who is known as the founder of CRT, as follows:

Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary ‘peaks of progress,’ short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain White dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance. (p. 12)

Critical Race Theory arose between the mid-1970s and the early 1980s as a third generation critical framework. Because of their commitment to a more just society, Critical race theorists engage in activism by way of scholarship and recognize the inevitability of conflict (Bartlett & Brayboy, 2005). Emphasizing social justice, these scholars examine the role of racism in interdisciplinary contexts and work toward the eradication of the many

⁶ [T]he set of institutional, cultural and interpersonal patterns and practices that create advantages for people legally defined and socially constructed as “White,” and the corollary disadvantages for people defined as belonging to racial groups that were not considered Whites by the dominant power structure in the United States. (Casteñada & Zuniga, 2013, p. 58)

forms of subordination and subjugation (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000). CRT is an emancipatory theory grounded in resistance and empowerment which takes an expansive social view of equality, believing that it must be addressed at an institutional level rather than solely in response to isolated events.

Critical Race Theory was originally categorized by some legal scholars as a form of Multicultural Legal Scholarship (MLS). According to Blalock (2015), newer iterations of MLS such as CRT arose in response to the neoliberal ideals of universality and centrism—the normalization of dominant ideologies and the acceptance of social hierarchies—intending to open up spaces for more counter-hegemonic discourses around the distribution of power. Contemporary multiculturalism and diversity initiatives are critiqued by CRT scholars because of their focus on race neutrality and colorblindness (Closson, 2010). More comfortable with their classification as “race-based oppositional scholarship” (McCoy & Rodericks, 2015, p. 5), CRT scholars consider the liberalist multicultural paradigm a “depoliticized, assimilationist view that seeks incremental change rather than radical change in the system” (Dixson, 2007, p. 15). By enabling change that occurs at a gradual pace, Whiteness as Property⁷ and the rights appertaining thereto are preserved, and change is brought about in a manner that accommodates and preserves existing schemes of domination. As opposed to radical change that would disrupt current sites of power, the *incremental* change so typical of social institutions is viewed as problematic in that it facilitates the perpetuation of current sites of power and oppression and simultaneously satisfies the liberal need to create the *illusion* of social justice (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Problematically, liberalism privileges equality over

⁷ Whiteness as Property is the notion that there is a property interest inherent to being identified as White which preserves White supremacy and privilege.

equity. When everyone receives an equal share of a benefit or experience, the status of those who already had access to that benefit or experience remains superior to the status of those who did not, and hence, superiority is maintained. Rather than incremental change that preserves existing hierarchies, Ladson-Billings (1998) posits that addressing racism requires “sweeping change” (p. 12)—change that would effectively devalorize Whiteness by distributing property in terms of equity or fairness rather than on the basis of equality – and she further asserts that liberalism presents neither a process nor a platform that would support such transformation. Derrick Bell (2008) argued that, like liberalism, CLS also failed to offer transformative strategies because it did not consider race and racism and the various ways in which they manifest. On that premise, CRT scholars established a research agenda that centered issues of race and racism (McCoy & Rodericks, 2015).

Advocating social transformation, CRT is predicated upon and incorporates American history and the radical tradition, the latter of which is represented by such thinkers as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. Dubois, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Caesar Chavez. The Civil Rights, Black Power, and Chicano movements of the 1960s also played prominently into CRT’s formulation, as did radical feminism and the works of such European philosophers as Jacques Derrida and Antonio Gramsci (Brooks & Newborn, 1994; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Roithmayr, 1999). In addition to Derrick Bell, other prominent CRT scholars include Allen Freeman, Angela Harris, Richard Delgado, Lani Guinier, Cheryl Harris, Patricia Williams, Mari Matsuda, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Neil Gotanda. These theorists have troubled the role of law as a mechanism for the construction and maintenance of race-based economic and social oppression.

The empirical findings that authenticated the oppression of Blacks and led to the Civil Rights Movement also served as the impetus for CRT. The 1970s brought a halt to the progress made after *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* and demonstrated a rise in hostility toward legal policies created to rectify past injustices. Bell (1992) indicated that as of the 1990s, the slow progress made by people of color during the Civil Rights Movement in terms of unemployment, income, and poverty, had slowly reversed. These reversals inspired critical race theorists' efforts to bring about social justice, economic empowerment, and liberation for marginalized peoples and especially Blacks (McCoy & Rodericks, 2015). Critical Race Theory distinguished itself from Critical Legal Studies by attempting to address the delays and set-backs in civil rights law, and theorists sought to provide "an adequate critical vocabulary for articulating...an alternative account of racial power" (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995, p. xxi). Critical Race Theory provides an interdisciplinary lens through which the intricacies of race and society can be viewed and social phenomena can be held to the light. It offers a robust theoretical framework through which one may think about how history colors the present, and it supplies a language which facilitates thinking and talking about how existing structures perpetuate a race-based caste system in America.

The key tenets that comprise Critical Race Theory include: 1) the permanence of racism and racial realism, 2) a critique of liberalism and a commitment to social justice, 3) privileging the lived experiences of people of color and employing counter-storytelling as a form of scholarship, 4) exploring the concept of Whiteness as Property, 5) examining interest convergence, and 6) studying intersectionality. While I have addressed each tenet separately, the concepts are so closely interwoven that they play into and around one another

as a theoretical and analytical assemblage throughout the following discussion and the remainder of my study.

The permanence of racism and racial realism. A primary assumption of CRT is the continual presence of racism (Bell, 2008). This tenet examines how race and racism interact with social institutions and considers their existence a social norm rather than an aberration. Parker and Roberts (2011) held that CRT promotes the notion of race as a social construct, with the distribution of privilege being established and perpetuated through powerful historical institutions such as the legal, economic, political, and educational systems. According to Bell (2008), “knowledge of history is an aid in identifying the contributing problems of race” (p.7), and Solórzano and Yosso (2000) contended that U.S. history reveals a construction of race that has been used to stratify groups and establish a superiority/inferiority binary. While race itself is a social artifice, the idea of race and its defining discourses have created implications and effects that are real and tangible (St. Pierre, 2011).

According to Ladson-Billings (2013), racism is so entrenched in American society that it is invisible to most, and CRT holds that racism coexists with American democracy in a symbiotic, reinforcing loop (Bell, 1992; McCoy & Rodericks, 2015). Taking an expansive view of racism as a form of oppression, CRT asserts that it exists systemically rather than as a series of random, individualized enactments, and because it is a manifestation of institutional power it is an ideological stance which the objectified cannot occupy (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). When acts of hate, whether minor or horrific, can be attributed to the isolated acts of rogue perpetrators, institutionalized racism⁸ is no longer

⁸ that which is “implanted within the structure of our society and reflected in the everyday interactions between human beings” (Olivos, 2006, p.42)

culpable and slips further into invisibility, reinforcing and entrenching the illusion of a postracial society⁹. For example, by presenting Charleston mass murderer Dylan Roof as a lone, mentally deranged bigot, the American historical and social structures that create and perpetuate racism stand intact, invisible, and blameless, vindicating the dominant society and its institutions in deference to an isolated, individualized instance of hate. With the election of President Barak Obama, the nation's first African American Commander-in-Chief, postracial ideology asserts that race-based institutional oppression no longer exists and that racism is now only acted out at the individual level. Furthermore, postracial thought asserts, structural or institutionalized efforts such as affirmative action which were intended to address systemic racism are no longer appropriate. This ideology serves the dual purpose of delegitimizing race-based discourses and absolving the dominant society of any further responsibility to disrupt the racist structures upon which its supremacy and privilege is built and perpetuated. CRT troubles postracial ideology by asserting that racism will never cease to exist despite liberal and neoliberal ideologies of meritocracy and colorblindness.

A critique of liberalism and a commitment to social justice. The second tenet of CRT is that it provides a critique of liberalism and promotes social justice. Critical Race Theory offers a valuable analytical tool for challenging Eurocentric¹⁰ epistemology and exposing liberal and neoliberal agendas which privilege market values and disavow race (Taylor, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, Sule, & Maramba, 2014). This epistemology informs policy, practice and governance. Somekh and Lewin (2012) indicated that CRT emphasizes “the importance of viewing policies, practices, and laws within a proper historical and

⁹ A postracial society is defined as one in which institutionalized and structural racism no longer exist although instances of individualized racism may continue.

¹⁰ Eurocentrism is defined as the tendency to interpret the world in terms of Anglo-American values and experiences (Nordenbo, 1995).

cultural context in order to deconstruct their racialized meanings” (p. 78). While concepts such as colorblindness, objectivity, meritocracy, equal opportunity, and incremental change may seem egalitarian and optimal at first glance, CRT scholars critique these ideologies within the context of United States history. Color-blindness and objectivity assume that all people are on equal footing because of a mutual humanity, but these concepts fail to account for the historic presence and permanence of racism in America. Meritocracy and equal opportunity ignore the long-term and residual effects of oppression, and the former has been called a “facade for racism” (Closson, 2010, p. 277). Liberalism, therefore, is seen as a cache of ideological devices ultimately employed to absolve those in power and to preserve the status quo while verbally ascending to and appearing to concede equality.

Neo-liberal policies are typically characterized by a desire to cut back state-funded provision, an individualized perspective that views success as a reflection of merit and hard work, and a belief that private provision is inherently superior. Neo-liberalism typically works through colour-blind language that dismisses the saliency of race-specific analyses. (Gillborn, 2013, p. 27)

Williamson and Land (2006) assert that race-neutral policies and laws actually serve as a mechanism for preserving White dominance and furthering the subordination of Blacks, acting as an infringement upon their civil rights. Solórzano and Yosso (2000) held that such ideologies serve as a “camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society” (p. 473). Similarly, DeCuir and Dixson (2004) asserted that:

. . . given the history of racism in the U.S. whereby rights and opportunities were both conferred and withheld based almost exclusively on race, the idea that the law is indeed color-blind and neutral is insufficient (and many would argue disingenuous) . . . Furthermore, the notion of color-blindness fails to take into consideration the persistence and permanence of racism and the construction of people of color as Other . . . [D]ifference in the color-blind discourse almost always refers to people of color because being White is considered ‘normal.’ (p. 28)

By contrast, some liberal critics of CRT have questioned whether it adds new dimensions to scholarship (McCoy & Rodericks, 2015). In response to this critique, Closson (2010) pointed to the power of CRT to analyze policies and practices that present themselves as race-neutral, as is demonstrated by the analysis of the mission statement of the North Carolina Community College System later in this work. Other critics have said that CRT critiques liberalism and neoliberalism without offering an alternative; and Delgado (2003) stated that in this regard CRT has become a “discourse about discourse” (Closson, 2010, p. 277). Furthermore, CRT has been said by some to be incomplete and lacking an articulation of racial equality. Critical Race theorists have countered this contention, however, by promoting an asymmetrical model of racial empowerment (equity) instead of the liberal ideology of colorblindness and meritocracy (equality) (McCoy & Rodericks, 2015).

By removing race from the discourse and replacing it with ideologies of meritocracy, colorblindness, individualism, and class, liberalism and neoliberalism create an artificial environment in which the history of people of color and the repressive predilections of a nation can be annulled (Williamson & Land, 2006). While liberalism seeks to create a society in which race is irrelevant, it attempts to do so in a society that was founded upon the distribution and withholding of property rights according to the very construct which it now wishes to undo. To disregard history is contrary to the tenets of CRT and it has the effect of maintaining the current locus of power in social institutions. It is undisputed that those who are marginalized remain disempowered whether they are categorized by class *or* by race. However, removing racism from the discourse surrounding their disempowerment while racism continues to exist gives racism the super-power of invisibility, making it all the more

endemic and intractable. For example, to remove “Black” from the discussion of the educational issues facing African American men places them at an impossible parity with White men—members of the most privileged group in the history of the country. To explain achievement disparities in terms of class-based and economic factors alone ignores one of the most distinctive features of these young men’s identities and positions in society: their race. Furthermore, such explanations leave no room for the depth and richness of the kind of data that is discoverable through counter-narrative inquiry.

Lived experiences of people of color and counter-storytelling. The third tenet of CRT centers the voices of people of color and acknowledges the validity of their counter-narratives. Critical Race scholars criticized CLS scholars for their failure to give consideration to the histories and lived experiences of the marginalized Other (Yosso, 2005). Because CRT scholars de-center the master narrative¹¹ and privilege cultured and experiential ways of knowing, they consider counter-narratives valid, explanatory, and appropriate data for educational and analytical treatment. Unlike more traditional approaches to scholarship, CRT employs various narrative methodologies such as family history, testimony, biography, storytelling, chronicles, and metaphysical tales (McCoy & Rodericks, 2015). Such devices as these are employed for “exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000, p. 32). Counter-narratives are utilized to add context to or to debunk purportedly objective positivist standpoints (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Telling the stories of those who have been Othered exposes racial mythology, confronts stereotypes, and challenges the normalization

¹¹ “Master narratives are the stories developed by those in power and that tend to legitimate their position of power.” (Khalifa, Jennings, Briscoe, Oleszweski & Abdi, 2014)

and hyper-valorization of Whiteness.

Whiteness as Property. A fourth tenet of CRT holds that the confluence of White supremacy and White privilege creates tangible property rights, and that being perceived as White incurs certain physical and psychological benefits that are tantamount to a property interest. In other words, Whiteness as Property holds that there are both concrete and indefinable benefits and privileges assigned to and reserved for those who are socially construed to be White. Property ownership is a legal construct which creates restrictions and “enforces or reorders existing regimes of power” (Harris, 1995, p. 280), thereby producing and reproducing inequities. Property ownership is also a mechanism through which private interests are protected and boundaries are imposed. Operating at three levels, property holders enjoy the essential rights of possession, use, and disposition.

Also foundational to the understanding of the law of property is the notion that those who have *absolute* property ownership enjoy not only the right to use their property as they see fit, but that they also have the rights to exclude others from enjoyment and use. Whites and those perceived to be White have historically enjoyed privileged social, political, and economic statuses from which non-White *Others* have been systematically excluded. Cheryl Harris (1995) described the concept of Whiteness as Property as operating, “in ways so embedded that it is rarely apparent, [such that] the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being White have become a valuable asset” (p. 277), conferring “tangible and economically valuable benefits” (p. 280) based on unilateral preferential treatment (privilege). These benefits were reified and perpetuated by sovereign authority through laws that restricted access and ingress to Whiteness, such as the historic *one-drop rule* of hypodescent whereby persons with any amount of Black ancestry were

prohibited from identifying with or claiming the benefits attendant to Whiteness (Harris, 1993). Such laws ultimately preserved the exclusionary and ideological purity of the White race, both producing and reproducing social and material advantages that became even more valuable with their abjuration from the minoritized Other (Williamson & Land, 2006).

Critical Race Theory scholars hold that property rights in America are rooted in racial subordination, and that there exists an unacknowledged yet omnipresent property interest in Whiteness which continues to uphold and reproduce oppression. Critical Race Theory considers Whiteness to be both an asset and as a particular social experience, and therefore, to be simultaneously a privilege-bearing interest and a social identity. The Eurocentric paradigm through which Whiteness is normalized and hyper-valorized is challenged in CRT (Harris, 1995; McCoy & Rodericks, 2015; Pollack and Zirkel (2013) asserted that “race-related controversies, which are typically framed as ideological conflicts over democratic ideals of justice, fairness, and equality, can be seen as conflicts over property” (p. 298). Consistent with CRT tenets, a review of the historical context within which these property rights originated and assets were distributed and withheld is informative.

Although the earliest colonists to the New World were conscious of race, lines of subordination were not systematically drawn until the latter half of the seventeenth century when Black inferiority was reified through slavery laws. As Africans were formally categorized as chattel¹² property, Whiteness became a privilege-bearing status. Private and

¹² Merriam Webster Dictionary defines chattel as “an item of tangible movable or immovable property except real estate and things (as buildings) connected with real property. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chattel>

public benefits were granted to colonials who were deemed to be White, and these benefits were concurrently withheld from those deemed to be Black. Due to the unique race-based status that categorized them as property and subsequently facilitated their commodification, slaves could not assemble, own weapons or property, travel without permits, or even be educated. Originally through the laws of slavery then later in the form of Jim Crow and other schemes that legitimized and perpetuated White supremacy and privilege, the non-White Other was discriminated against systemically, systematically, and with full force and authority of the law.

Despite the eventual repeal of Jim Crow laws and the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Whiteness as Property, in the forms of White supremacy and White privilege, was so firmly entrenched and institutionalized within American systems as to become invisible and yet remain both operative and decisive. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2000), "...even those Whites who lack wealth and power are sustained in their sense of racial superiority and thus rendered more willing to accept their lesser share by an unspoken but no less certain property right in their 'Whiteness'" (p.28). Harris (1995) similarly asserted that even those Whites who lack material wealth receive "compensation" (p. 286) for their Whiteness in that it causes them to be positively distinguished from and seen as superior to Blacks.

Some of the property rights conferred to Whites may be classified as intangible and intellectual, chief among those being the "absolute right to exclude" (Dixson, 2007, p. 8; Harris, 1995, p. 282), whereby Whites determine who does and does not have access to privilege and resources. While the Civil Rights Acts of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries assigned some temporary property rights to non-Whites, CRT theorists

argue that those gains were reversed in short order as the courts first adopted Jim Crow laws and then later took on the contemporary ideologies of colorblindness and meritocracy. Exemplifying the proliferation of liberal thinking, current events demonstrate the erosion of affirmative action as the U.S. Supreme Court again reviewed admissions policies in the case of *Fisher v. University of Texas (2013)*, in which the practice of allowing race to factor into undergraduate admission decisions to promote diversity was challenged. Harris (1995) argued that affirmative action in particular is being challenged in an effort to forestall the redistribution of power and to maintain the potency of Whiteness as Property; further asserting that “affirmative action creates a property interest in true equal opportunity—opportunity and means that are equalized” (p. 289). Also exemplifying racial realism, these developments poise African Americans to once again lose the short-lived quasi-reparation of their Otherness while the value of Whiteness as Property is preserved. Occasionally, however, there are instances in which there is some sustained benefit to the minoritized Other. These occasions during which the political interests for the oppressor and the oppressed align are called *interest convergence*.

Interest convergence. As one of the more well-known tenets of CRT, interest convergence postulates that people of color will make significant advancements only to the extent that those advancements also benefit the dominant society; in short, when the interests of the marginalized Other converge with the interests of White, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied men, the marginalized will realize a benefit (Bell, 1980; Brown & Jackson, 2013; Taylor, 2009). Critical Race Theory asserts that equity-focused change does not occur because the dominant society recognizes and renounces its privilege or arrives at moral rectitude, it occurs because such doings actually provide an identifiable benefit to the

dominant society (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013). Seminal CRT scholar in the field of education, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2013) argued that interest convergence is about “alignment, not altruism” (p. 38); for example, educational diversity initiatives that result from legislative or policy compliance rather than from a sense of moral aptness exemplify interest convergence. In other words, interest convergence holds that the social, political, and economic benefits afforded to people of color also benefit those in power. Critical Race theorists assert that what is construed as progress toward justice is, instead, part of a cyclical process in which advances are made and subsequently withdrawn, thus reinforcing the permanence of racism (Bell, 2008). Furthermore, according to CRT theorists, even when interest convergence offers an effective intervention, the benefit afforded to the minoritized Other will never threaten the superior social status and dominance of Whites. This thinking is similar to Marxist theory, which posits that the bourgeoisie allow advances among the proletariat to the extent that they realize some benefit themselves (Taylor, 2009).

While the concepts of *interest convergence* and *interest divergence* were both introduced in Bell’s (1992) groundbreaking Harvard Law Review article, the former received significantly more attention and application until Lani Guinier (2004) centered the latter concept in her work. As the more prevalent condition, interest divergence is manifest through perpetuations of White supremacy and privilege and the maintenance of racialized hierarchies that benefit the dominant social group by marginalizing Otherness. Thereby, the property rights attendant to Whiteness are reasserted (Lynn & Dixon, 2013; Pollack & Zirkel, 2013). Gillborn (2010) found it remarkable that so much attention was initially paid to interest convergence when it is something of an anomaly, while the less-attended-to concept of interest divergence is the status quo.

Exploring intersectionality. As another tenet of CRT, intersectionality recognizes the existence of multiple sites of oppression. Kumasi (2011) defined intersectionality as “the belief that individuals often have overlapping interests and traits based not only on their racial identity but also their class position, gender, and so forth” (p. 216-217). The entanglements between race and gender, sexuality, class, ability, national origin, religion, and other identity categories play out differently and profoundly in their various permutations; significantly impacting people’s lived experiences. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) pioneered the concept of intersectionality in CRT with her examination of the oppression of women of color based not only on their race, but also on their experiences as gendered and classed individuals. The theory of intersectionality recognizes that individual experiences cannot be neatly confined within the binaries to which they have historically been ascribed: White/Black, male/female, able/disabled, heterosexual/homosexual, and others. While race is centered under CRT, its scholars disapprove of analyses that focus *only* on race without also considering other sites of oppression (McCoy & Rodericks, 2015).

Because of America’s history of racism, contemporary matters related to the higher education attainment of African American men should be critically examined in light of the ubiquity of Black oppression. Issues of property rights yield themselves to consideration within educational contexts given the inequitable distribution of educational properties, specifically college degrees, among this population. By assessing and dismantling liberal and neoliberal ideologies regarding the educational attainment of Black men, particularly as informed by their own counter-stories, I contend that a more positively generative discourse can begin to change the effects of racism.

A Critical Race Theory Analysis of Race and Racism in American Education

McCoy and Rodericks (2015) asserted that racism within academe has taken on “a more nuanced manifestation” (p. 2) in what has been called postracial America. Some of these *nuanced manifestations* are covert, obscure, and/or intersectional, and as such they can be reframed as socioeconomic issues. Critical Race Theory provides the analytic framework for a significant body of educational research that rejects such rationalizations by centering race and shining an intentional light on otherwise invisible and insidious incidences of institutional racism. Issues which have been considered include the ways in which traditional education has perpetuated racism and systems of power, the battle between liberalism and social justice, challenging the master narrative by centering the voices of the oppressed, conceptualizing and framing education and curriculum as forms of property, and using interest convergence to bring about educational equity.

Traditional Education and the Perpetuation of Racism and Systems of Power

Because early American education not only reflected but was built upon the discourse of White supremacy and Black deficit, the early curriculum was a racially oppressive and Eurocentric structure. A CRT analysis of early American education reveals racism within the formal curriculum of the early schools, demonstrating how that curriculum reinforced accepted social strata using the exclusive study of European history, literature, and philosophy to transmit the racial, sexual, and religious superiority of White Christian men (Ornstein & Huskins, 2004; Wilder, 2013). In addition to the early schools, the family, the community, and the church played significant roles in what Baylin (1972) called the “transmission of a civilization” (p. 6). Because the Eurocentric ideologies which were institutionalized throughout the nation’s history continue to serve as the foundation of present day American education, the contemporary education system reflects traditional

ideologies, transmits culture, and perpetuates both policy and practice through what has become a hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum covertly reflects and scaffolds the ubiquitous deficit discourses and schemes of oppression that contain and constrain Black students and overwhelmingly prepare them for subordinate roles in society (Howard, 2014; Palmer & Maramba, 2011).

Prioritizing and promoting the education of White men, nineteenth century compulsory illiteracy statutes outlawed the education of Blacks in many southern states while segregation laws in the north excluded them from public education by *de facto* means. Jim Crow's *separate but equal* precedent, which remained in effect until the second half of the twentieth century, established the means by which the dominant society maintained and reinforced segregation, superiority and ideological absolution by providing inferior resources under the legal guise of *equality*. The tide temporarily turned with the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s and 1960s when the legal and educational systems took steps toward addressing *de jure* White privilege; going so far as to dilute the absolute potency of Whiteness as Property through affirmative action initiatives. Such initiatives were soon challenged by *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), whose allegations gave rise to the concept of reverse discrimination. In spite of the fact that the U.S. Supreme Court upheld affirmative action in *Bakke*, it was the first case to tread the slippery slope of reversal, upon which affirmative action recurrently stands.

As the liberal discourses of colorblindness and meritocracy later produced the strange fruit of *suspect classifications*, under which the propriety of race as a property-bearing category is questioned, the rights briefly assigned to Blacks and other non-Whites because of their minority status – what liberals and conservatives alike argue created a

system of unmerited minority privilege – have come under siege as racial realism once again rears its head.

We see this attack in federal and state governments backtracking on affirmative action and moving away from the rigorous enforcement of antidiscrimination laws. We notice it in the weakening or abandonment of college and university programs for African American students, sometimes at the behest of federal and state courts. We observe it in the recent sale of hundreds of thousands of copies of books questioning affirmative action, anti-discrimination laws, and even the intelligence of African Americans and other people of color. (Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996, p.158)

So while various temporary, equity-based, and minority-directed legal concessions are being rescinded, Whiteness as Property remains institutionally intact, maintaining status quo and demonstrating both interest divergence and racial realism. Within the legal system, courts of equity have been historically empowered to adjudicate what is *fair* as opposed to what is *legal*, but as the modern legal system trends more toward liberalist ideologies it progressively moves the needle from equity to equality to merit. With this trending, higher education is experiencing the temporary granting and recurrent removal of what some might consider unmerited “minority privilege” as the preservation of dominant interests continues and social justice is averted with impunity.

Liberalism vs. Social Justice

While liberal ideologies have combined with neoliberal quantification methods and narratives of decline in an attempt to show that the problems of contemporary (postracial) American society are not race-based, a social justice analysis positioned within CRT asserts that it is nonsensical to disregard the aggregation of certain educational performances, such as lower college graduation rates, around the construct of race. Critical Race Theory privileges race in research and analysis to point out the inadequacy of liberal and neoliberal ideologies to address and rectify race-based issues. Gillborn (2010) held that statistics can

readily be manipulated and interpreted to conceal racism and simultaneously reinforce deficit orientations, and CRT charges that the liberal and neoliberal notions of poverty, culture, and class are insufficient to explain certain experiences and outcomes that are profoundly affected by race. The combination of these ideologies with America's past and present operation under the influences of anti-Black deficit discourses justifies the privileging of race in the interpretation and analysis of statistics regarding higher education attainment for Blacks and, therefore, also for Black men. Critical Race Theory should be employed to inform critical analysis, to mitigate deficit discourses, and to scaffold the design of counter-actions intended to alleviate or remedy related inequities. A more critical and counter-hegemonic discourse is mandatory if this country is to authentically approach its espoused ideals of freedom and equality, and this discourse must include the voices of those for whom the rectification of past and present inequities is sought.

Centering the Voices of the Oppressed to Challenge the Master Narrative

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Dubois (1903) asked the poignant question "How does it feel to be a problem?" (p. 8). His query reflected the political, economic, and social issues then facing African-Americans, who were still striving with the realities of a recent yet only partial liberation. The experiences of Black Americans were framed within deficit-based theories of cultural and biological inferiority throughout much of the twentieth century (Brown & Brown, 2012). In the same manner that mainstream scholars and writers at the turn of the twentieth century studied what they perceived to be the problematic existence of Black people in America, their twenty-first century counterparts have framed a nuanced narrative of inadequacy, particularly regarding Black men, while simultaneously disregarding the salience of race. This contemporary negative narrative permeates modern media, the press, and research in the

social sciences (Howard, 2014). Critical Race scholars use counter-narrative methodologies as a form of activism through which they engage with social issues. They work *with* study participants as co-researchers rather than positioning themselves as disengaged, purportedly objective and passive observers. In this manner the lived experience of participants is privileged and cared for in light of the positionality of the researcher in order to debunk stereotypes and valorize the stories of those who have been Othered. Scholars such as Tyrone Howard (2014) exemplify this scholarship by using a CRT framework and counter-storytelling to uncover the lived experiences of Black men and interject them into the existing body of literature; one which has largely been developed *about* Black men but without participation *from* or collaboration *with* Black men. Changing the discourse that undergirds the master narrative is critical to achieving a more equitable distribution of educational properties and benefits.

The Conceptualization of Education and Curriculum as Property

The connections between level of education and such measures of prosperity as salary, upward mobility, and even longevity have been asserted by empirical data, thus giving great weight to the notion that education carries or grants access to things or statuses that hold tangible value and can, therefore, be categorized as property. Legal scholars who ascribe to the tenets of CRT assert that the initial intent of the U.S. Constitution was to convey and preserve the individual's right to own property, further noting that civil rights came into being as a mechanism to establish property rights for Blacks after the abolition of slavery and the co-requisite humanization of individuals of African descent (Bell, 2008). The idea of property rights specifically carries over into education with concepts such as intellectual property and curriculum as property.

If education is property, and if property can be possessed by a citizen as a matter of

Constitutional right, then the statistics demonstrating the disproportionately negative educational outcomes for Black men with regard to degree attainment pose a threat to or possibly even a denial of their civil rights (Williamson & Land, 2006). Colorblindness and meritocracy, interconnected notions holding that any individual can possess whatever she or he earns, posit that the right to amass intellectual property is being willingly relinquished by those who affirmatively fail to seize equally available opportunities. This ideology, however, gives no recognition or treatment to historical or structural inequities, such as institutionalized racism, which preclude parity by denying the same level of access to social benefits for people of color.

Another issue regarding the educational property rights of minoritized Others relates to curriculum as property. Because the dominant society in America is of European descent, this group maintains power to create, sustain, or modify what is taught and with that, has the wherewithal to reinforce and further entrench dominant ideologies such as individualism versus communalism and meritocracy versus equity. Given this intrinsic bias in the curriculum, interest divergence preserves the superior/inferior and White/Black binaries, perpetuating them through powerful processes and practices—hidden curricula that perpetuate and promote White privilege and supremacy—that are cloaked by social invisibility. In contrast to the invisibility of interest divergence, interest convergence is generally made highly visible for the purpose of hegemonic moral absolution, and it may, therefore, offer one path toward greater social justice.

Reclaiming Interest Convergence as a Tool of Educational Equity

The landmark case *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) addressed academic diversity in college admissions, demonstrating interest convergence by upholding such initiatives not

solely because doing so provides a benefit to the minorities in question, but because diversity in higher education also benefits White students by exposing them to a more varied population. Educational institutions that meet diversity requirements which are tied to externally imposed mandates, such as those attached to regulatory or legal compliance, funding, or accreditation matters, also demonstrate interest convergence. In spite of the fact that it is by no means tantamount to reparation or repentance for past injustices, some CRT scholars have pointed to interest convergence as one strategic pathway toward a more just society because of its capacity to bring about some degree of equity-focused change (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013).

Current Developments in Critical Race Theory

Borrowing from history, ethnic studies, women's studies, and sociology, CRT reaches a multidisciplinary community of scholars and practitioners, and Critical Race theorists have expanded their fields of inquiry beyond the experiences of African Americans to center those of additional groups (Lynn & Adams, 2002). Derivative theories for ethnic "outgroups"¹³ such as Critical Latin@ (LatCrit) Theory, Critical Tribal (TribalCrit) Theory, and Critical Asian (AsianCrit) Theory have emerged in critique of the original White/Black binary that undergirds traditional CRT. Together with African American/Black CRT practitioners, these scholars are collectively known as *racecrits*. Common to all branches of the CRT family tree is the assumption that people of color are marginalized and Othered in America, and each derivative theory enables particularized explorations that encompass and center the histories and experiences of its people. Even so, Yosso (2005) admonished the various branches of CRT not to be in competition and not to be mutually exclusive. Yosso

¹³ "Outgroups" are marginalized and racialized non-White ethnic groups who exist outside the original White/Black binary of Critical Race Theory (Dumas & ross, 2016).

(2005) further asserted that to engage in a comparison of experiences with racism is ineffective, positing that each branch of CRT reflects particular manifestations of oppression and that all should work toward the eradication of race-based social subjugation.

A related yet independent framework which theorizes the Black experience is a multi-disciplinary philosophy known as Africana Critical Theory (AfricanaCrit). Originated by Reiland Rabaka (2009) as a derivative of Africana Studies, AfricanaCrit is a praxis-based derivative of first generation Critical Theory which arose in critique of the latter theory's lack of engagement with issues of race. AfricanaCrit re-conceptualizes Black radical and Black revolutionary traditions as espoused by DuBois, Fanon, and others, and aims for a "deconstruction and reconstruction" of the "dialectics of domination and liberation" (Rabaka, 2009, p. 5). Troubling racism, Eurocentrism, and White supremacy, the ultimate goal of AfricanaCrit is "to create a new anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist, and sexual orientation-sensitive critical theory of contemporary society" (Rabaka, 2009, p.6).

In response to Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) theory of CRT in Education, which is explicated in the next section, Dumas and ross (2016) propose a theory called BlackCrit in Education. Arising to address the ascent of the racecrits who privilege the experiences of Latin@, Asian, and Native peoples, BlackCrit offers a poststructural approach to the interrogation of Blackness by considering "how Black bodies become marginalized, disregarded, and disdained" (p. 3) BlackCrit shines a particularized light on the social and educational effects of "anti-Blackness" (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 3) as they manifest in suffering and violence for Black people.

Other theories derived from CRT include Feminist Critical Theory and White

Critical Theory, the latter of which consists in “the interrogation of Whiteness” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p, 27). The studies of Critical Race Philosophy and Critical Race Pedagogy provide further evidence of the cross-disciplinary expansion and influence of CRT (Curry, 2015; Lynn, Jennings & Hughes, 2013), and Carter (2008) proposed a Critical Race Achievement Ideology (CRAI) wherein academic success among Black students is situated as a form of resistance. Through its application in both original and derivative formats, CRT has been widely and usefully employed to explore the effects of race and racism on the experiences of people of color, including African Americans, within the educational system.

Critical Race Theory in Education: A Derivative Theory

Critical Race Theory presents such a useful and explanatory framework for the exploration of matters of racism that a derivative, education-specific theory has been developed and widely employed in education in tandem with the original theory. Yosso (2005) defined Critical Race Theory in Education as “a theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses. [It] is conceived as a social justice project that works toward the liberatory potential of schooling.” (p. 74) Critical Race Theory in Education arose in specific critique of the liberal ideological interpretation of multicultural education scholarship and practice (Dixson, 2007) which depoliticized educational disparities affecting people of color. First introduced by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate, III (1995), CRT in Education is epistemologically situated in the concept of identity, which the theory posits to be socially constructed, shaped, and constrained by discourse. This theory first asserts that identity is unequally positioned by race and experienced by racialized individuals in inequitable ways, second that institutionalized policies and practices are complicit in this inequitable construction, and third that identity is closely

tied to matters of property (Dixson, 2007; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

According to Gillborn (2013), “CRT views education as one of the principal means by which White supremacy is maintained and presented as normal in society.” (p. 26) Presupposing that racism has played a significant role in group privileging and stratification schemes, Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) conceptualization of CRT in education added three principal assumptions to considerations of matters of academe; 1) race continues to be a significant part of American society, 2) American society is based on property rights rather than human rights, and 3) the intersectionality of property and race provide a powerful analytic through which to view educational inequity. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) also challenged the liberal notion that poverty and culture alone explain educational inequity, asserting that gender- and class-based studies fail to describe variances of experience and performance that are ultimately attributable to race. In my study, CRT and CRT in Education are applied holistically because the latter is an extension of and cannot exist without the former. This theoretical framework, therefore, is built upon an expansive application of Critical Race Theory, and the research assemblage includes educational, historical, legal and social contexts. Within this assemblage, I turn next to a discussion of social discourses surrounding African Americans for the purpose of explicating both the content and the effect of the master narrative regarding their higher education attainment.

Deficit Paradigms and Discourses

In my study the deficit paradigm is presented as a form of *discourse*, the latter being defined in Foucauldian terms as follows:

Discourses are social, political and cultural arrangements of ideas and concepts through which the world as we know it is communicated and constructed; they are observed in terms of the elements of knowledge and power inherent in them. Discourse is about the production of language and practices by particular systems

that produce existential meanings which then shape our individual lives.
(Drazenovich, 2015, p. 7)

Foucault (1972) held that discursive practices are inherent in technology, institutions, behaviors, cultural transmissions, and pedagogical practices; all of which are situated within historical and social contexts and designed to self-perpetuate. While discourses in general are considered neither inherently positive nor negative, they are always productive, generating flows of power. Deficit discourses, however, are negative by definition, presuming that marginalized people possess a lack of cultural resources and capital, and ignoring the fact that they are and have historically been denied certain structural benefits because of their Otherness. Deficit discourses, which undergird deficit-based theoretical frameworks, focus on identifying what is lacking in the people who participate in the study (cultural deficits) rather than on examining systemic inadequacies (structural deficits) that result from and perpetuate institutionalized racism. The liberal, humanistic ideologies inherent in deficit discourses infer that unacceptable behavior and low achievement are culturally generated and can be “fixed” (Weiner, 2006, p. 42) through positivist interventions, but there is no critical consideration given to the role of structural performance inhibitors (Guerra & Nelson, 2010).

Among the theories produced to explain the purported inadequacies of African Americans are *acting white* and oppositional culture discourses, in which lower academic performance is seen as an individual or collective act of resistance to normalization (Foley, 2004). Other theories, such as role identification, stereotype threat, racial coding, and commodification of the Black underclass generally infer a lack of agency and view educational deficits as structurally generated (Brown & Brown, 2012; Mocombe, 2011; Strayhorn, 2009). By and large, accepting a deficit orientation perpetuates stereotypes,

causes students to disengage with the learning process, and allows higher education as a system to ignore its own active and ongoing role in creating and perpetuating the obstacles faced by minoritized students (Gardner & Toope, 2011; Smit, 2012). Weiner (2006) argued, however, that this discourse of inadequacy can be countered by acknowledging and critically examining its existence, and by shifting the focus from manifestations and causes of lack to positive identity formation and effective interventions. Brown and Brown (2012) asserted that just such a “counter-discourse” (p.11) as this must arise as a direct challenge to the anti-Black master narrative. Critical Race Theory provides a powerful lens through which the master narrative may be critiqued and a methodology through which to present the counter-discourse. In conjunction with the tenets of CRT, then, I next provide historical and legal contexts to reveal the origin and institutionalization of deficit discourses surrounding African Americans within society as a whole, and more specifically within higher education.

The Historical Context of Anti-Black Deficit Discourses

Matters of race and racism involve intricately complex ideas and interactions that have been somewhat haphazardly engaged throughout United States history. Over the course of some four centuries this nation has grown from colonial settlements into a world power, but it has yet to bridge the unfathomed race-based divide upon and around which it was built. Every generation has re-framed and re-transmitted the practice of racism according its own contemporary cultural consciousness, but such practices have become more insidious, disruptive, and disturbing as each age grapples with more entrenched, covert, and nuanced manifestations of inequity and institutionalized oppression. Critical Race Theory holds that oppression cannot be adequately addressed apart from its historical

context. As explicated below, the intersection of legal and educational histories enables a compelling analysis of the standing of Blacks in America.

The role of American law in establishing and perpetuating deficit discourse.

The American legal system has played a pivotal role in formulating and maintaining deficit discourses surrounding African Americans. Foundational to the legislative and judicial initiatives of early America was the “almost universal belief in Negro inferiority” (Bell, 2008, p. 26). Introduced as a justification for slavery in a nation established in pursuit of personal freedom, the inferiority paradigm positioned those in bondage as unequal to liberty in a manner intended to resolve systemic paradoxes and maintain ideological integrity for Whites (Burrell, 2010). The *Dred Scott* (1857) case, in which the U.S. Supreme Court held that people of African ancestry lacked the capacity to become American citizens and had no rights which Whites were bound to uphold, established the precedent through which White interests would be advanced at the cost of Black rights and lives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000).

A subsequent landmark case, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), utilized the rhetoric of equality to establish both the concept of Whiteness as a property right and the doctrine of *separate but equal*, which established Jim Crow law and allowed for the segregation of Blacks in public facilities as long as their accommodations were “equal” to those from which they were excluded. Because such facilities proved inherently inferior, the doctrine of separate but equal was, in fact, a legal fiction. Jim Crow doctrine remained the law of the land until 1954 when the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* rendered segregation in public schools unconstitutional and required that it be dismantled *with all deliberate speed*. This mandate toward undefined and incremental change provoked hegemonic rebellion,

particularly among White southerners who considered integration a depreciation of their rights (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). *Brown* was the threshold case of the modern Civil Rights Movement, with new Civil Rights Acts adopted in 1957, 1960, 1964, and again in 1965 with the Voting Rights Act (Bell, 2008). Ironically, the purpose of most of the new Civil Rights legislation was to enforce the 14th and 15th amendments which had been enacted nearly a century earlier. Scholars argue that many of the advancements of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s are now being reversed, citing the devolution of affirmative action and the stalled reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act as prime examples. Precedents such as *compelling state interest*, *strict scrutiny*, and *suspect classifications* work together to nullify considerations of race with regard to public accommodations and programs, demonstrating yet another manifestation of racial realism and the liberal/neoliberal ideology of color-blindness (Bell, 2008).

The anti-Black narrative is so fundamental to the American ethos and identity that it has been a bedrock of jurisprudence, originally through slavery laws and then in the form of Jim Crow legislation which remained effective until just over 50 years ago (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Troutman, 2002). Because White supremacy and privilege was literally the foundation upon which were built the most basic ideologies, laws, and institutional structures of America, it has remained viable, though largely invisible when viewed through the liberal, meritocratic lens. Laws no longer blatantly advance White interests over those of Blacks and other minorities, but they continue to act covertly in preservation of the status quo and White social dominance, perpetuating the myth of Black inferiority and legitimizing deficit discourses.

Higher education's contributions to deficit discourse. The American education system has played a key role in preserving traditional structures of social and racial dominance. Because African Americans have been historically and universally deemed inferior, they were denied the opportunity to pursue not only higher education but also basic literacy in early America. Furthermore, because of this privation most African Americans came to venerate education, equating it with social autonomy and power and seeing it as a pathway to self-efficacy and advancement (Palmer & Maramba, 2011; Yeakey & Henderson, 2003).

Deficit discourses and their effects on African Americans were also visible in higher education in myriad ways that did not limit themselves to the deprivation of knowledge. The early colleges benefited immensely from the business of slavery and served as bastions of the “antebellum racial order” (Wilder, 2013, p.3), incubating and entrenching the ideologies that dehumanized and dispossessed Native Americans and enslaved Blacks. Through their studies of *racial science*, early American academicians lent scholarly validation to the ideological stance of Black inferiority. Scholars parlayed their research into political and economic prowess for themselves and their institutions as they delivered the message that merchants, traders, and slaveholders wanted to hear; human bondage was scientifically justified by the inherent inferiority and relative inhumanity of Blacks. In 1830, Professor John Collins Warren of Harvard proclaimed to his students that the most advanced scientific research verified the biological, intellectual, and cultural superiority of Whites (Wilder, 2013). This foundational belief undergirded an institutional curriculum that was both literally and figuratively built upon the political, economic, and physical subjugation of Native Americans and Blacks. Wilder (2013) notes that slavery required the

cooperation and promotion of higher education institutions, which implicates early higher education as a progenitor, a practitioner, and a perpetuator of the anti-black master narrative and deficit discourse.

Although the turn of the 20th century brought about some degree of progress in higher and professional education opportunities for a select few Blacks, Woodson (1998) points out that “Negro law students were told that they belonged to the most criminal element in the country... [and] in medical schools Negroes were likewise convinced of their inferiority in being reminded of their role as germ carriers” (p. 18). As such, while college curricula had, for the most part, abandoned the study of racial science by the 1900s, the inferiority of Blacks remained an academic lynchpin, again demonstrating the permanence of racism. In addition to the deficit discourses attached to African Americans in general, there is an additional and unique status of inadequacy attached to Black men. This unique status exemplifies the intersection of symbolic racism¹⁴ and negative discursive practice (Gardner & Toope, 2011; Palmer & Maramba, 2011). Having explored the historical backdrop of deficit discourse surrounding African Americans, I now turn to an examination of the contemporary construction of Black men in America.

The Social Construction of Black Men in Society and Higher Education

Deficit-oriented findings in traditional social science research have served to construct and compound narratives of inadequacy and peril with reference to African American men. According to Howard (2014), Black men have traditionally been depicted in five deviant categories; physically brutish and anti-intellectualized, useless and lazy, overly

¹⁴ Symbolic racism is defined as “Whites collective oppositional attitudes toward Blacks that are deeply rooted in abstract moral values rather than in negative personal experiences with specific Black individuals” (Comeaux, 2013, p. 456).

and overtly sexualized, criminalized, and gangsterized. Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2007) discussed “racial primes” (p. 559) through which children absorb voluntary and involuntary race-specific stereotypes within the context of color-blind and race-neutral ideologies. The authors further posited that a result of racial priming is “black misandry,” through which “an exaggerated pathological aversion toward Black men [is] created and reinforced in societal, institutional, and individual ideologies, practices, and behaviors” (Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007, p. 559), to the end that subjugation may be perpetuated. These contemporary ideologies have been reified within the context of scholarly research in a manner reminiscent of the way in which race science first legitimized the concept of Black inferiority in the nation’s earliest universities. Symbolic racism and stereotypes have combined to normalize academic dysfunction among Black men, with the core assumptions of these overgeneralizations being reflected in the overall status of Black men in American society (Howard, 2014; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Strayhorn, 2009).

As a powerful conduit of cultural normativity, American media discourse inadequately focuses on positive aspects of African American manhood, instead perpetuating the *stereotype threat* through which some Black men are thought to internalize the harmful ideologies that hail¹⁵ them toward negative normalization. By accepting these interpellations, Black men become complicit in both their own vilification and victimization in both social and educational contexts (Howard, 2014; Strayhorn, 2009). Noguera says that “there is a connection between the educational performance of African American men and

¹⁵ Blackman, Cromby, Hook, Papadopoulos, and Walkerdine (2008) discuss Althusser’s treatment of “the process of interpellation or hailing” (p.2), through which state apparatuses “create subjects” (p.2) as an ideological work.

the hardship they endure within the larger society” (Fashola, 2005, p, 52). According to Hall (2006):

As a consequence, these males have internalized their objectification, leading to feelings of isolation from not just the educational system but also from society at large. This disconnect can be seen in their underachievement in school, their expressions of anger and violence toward others, and their self-annihilation through drug and alcohol abuse. (p. 2)

In spite of the dysfunction that dominates research findings, however, there are African American men who demonstrate the wherewithal to persist and complete college degrees; men who are determined to rise. Men such as these are the focus of my study.

Summary and Significance

In my study I utilize Critical Race Theory as both a lens and a methodology to deconstruct anti-black discourse. I use CRT to deliberately disrupt, disturb, and displace the master narrative by exploring theories of the origin and evolution of the latter, as well as by divulging certain manifestations of institutional and structural inequity that accompany it. CRT is the lens through which the literature is viewed, critiqued, and applied. Critical race methodology provides the framework through which the counter-narrative data is constructed, and CRT informs not only the counter-narrative analysis of the data, but also analysis of the conceptual streams. I grapple with research and analytical questions intended to reveal the manifestations and methodologies of racism, holistically engaging both data and elisions. In short, the tenets of CRT inform every methodological and analytical decision in my study, helping me to expose the anti-Black master narrative regarding the higher education experiences of African American men by using the experiences of Malik Freeman, David Stokes, and Xavier Barnes as exemplars. I use the creation and analysis of these counter-stories to present nuanced streams of

thought and to recommend programming initiatives intended to improve the rate of higher education attainment for Black men.

By exposing the master narrative, I attempt to dislodge hegemonic discourses, and, in so doing, to ultimately enable a more equitable distribution of educational and social properties. Deficit discourses surrounding Blacks have been a part of the American national identity from the early days of this country, and contemporary events such as the murders and brutalization of unarmed Black men, women, and children by law enforcement officers of all races, and the murder of nine Black worshipers in a historic African American church in Charleston, make it painfully clear that there remains a present and troubling divide in this country. Rather than better integrating racial diversity with the passage of time as liberal thought and efforts toward multiculturalism would imply, a paradox has been created. At once, hegemonic processes have attempted to remove race from consideration through postracial philosophies that privilege economic and class factors and disavow efforts to redistribute properties equitably with due consideration to race and history. At the same time, the dominant society has perpetuated a mutated and nuanced deficit discourse regarding what it means to be Black; a discourse which covertly re-produces race-based methods of oppression. For example, the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia made controversial and racially charged comments during arguments in the *Fisher v. University of Texas* affirmative action case when he opined that Black students are better intellectually suited for less rigorous colleges. In addition to discourses such as that promoted by Justice Scalia, I submit that a particularly virulent form of deficit discourse exists toward Black men in America in light of the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray,

Terence Crutcher, and too many others to name. These discourses replicate and transmit ideologies of Black male inferiority, hostility, and criminality, and reproduce historic inequities and life perils within a contemporary context. These discourses are often implicitly reflected and reified by neoliberal scholarly literature regarding higher education attainment and African American men. As previously stated, these discourses must be affirmatively disrupted if America is ever to authentically and ethically approach the egalitarian ideals it has historically espoused. Critical Race Theory provides a language and a framework to support such a disruption.

Chapter 3

Literature Review:

Higher Education Attainment among African American Men

Contesting traditional methods of scholarship, People of Color's experiences are shared through storytelling, family histories, biographies, chronicles, narratives, metaphysical tales, and testimonies. McCoy & Rodericks, 2015, p.8

In this review of the literature I use a Critical Race Theory lens to examine the research surrounding African American men and *higher education attainment*, which is defined for purposes of my study as completing a postsecondary course of study that culminates in the conferral of an undergraduate degree. I begin the literature review by presenting the master narrative regarding the educational achievement of Black men using traditional deficit-based language to describe the complex constellation of educational challenges they face. I next address the ideological stance that higher education attainment provides a social benefit, and examine how higher education has historically perpetuated inequities based on race. Because degree completion is arguably predicated upon early educational successes, I then present a review of anti-deficit studies related to the P-12 educational attainment of Black children. I then present a synopsis of higher education attainment studies centering Black undergraduate men, and conclude by reviewing studies that specifically use a CRT framework. This review of the literature presents both quantitative and qualitative studies of the experiences of African American men as they pursue and prepare to pursue a college degree. Some of the literature reifies deficit discourses, while other sources attempt to disrupt the master narrative and present anti-deficit scholarship.

In spite of the overwhelmingly negative findings and discouraging empirical odds that stigmatize and stack up against Black men, many of them manage to self-organize and “find ways to survive and, in some cases, to excel” (Fashola, 2005, p. 57). Not all Black men are at risk, although a significant portion of educational research has characterized this population as unmotivated, inherently unable, disengaged, low-performing, and lazy (Fashola, 2005; Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Troutman, 2002; Griffin et al.; Harper & Harris, 2012; Howard, 2014; Kaba, 2005; Mocombe, 2011; Noguera, 2012; Palmer & Maramba, 2011; Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012; Strayhorn, 2009). Underrepresented in educational completion and overrepresented in academic underachievement, Black men have been objectified and bestialized through discourses that simultaneously juxtapose them as dangerous predators and as an “endangered species” (Hall, 2006, p.1). Much of the research, however, has historically failed to account for the ubiquitous, complex, and entangled socio-cultural, economic, and institutionalized challenges that Black men face in pursuing college degrees.

The Complex Relationship between Higher Education and African American Men

There is an extensive body of research dedicated to the study of educational attainment for African American men, much of which promotes the master narrative describing them as at-risk, urban, and poor, and infers that academic achievement among them is an aberration (Hall, 2006; Howard, 2014; Strayhorn, 2009). There remains genuine cause for concern over high unemployment, HIV contraction, and homicide or suicide among college-aged African American men (Cole, 1991; Griffin et al., 2010; Harper & Harris, 2012; Hall, 2006; Howard, 2014; Kaba, 2005; Palmer & Maramba, 2011; Strayhorn, 2009). In light of the alarming statistics that reify negative ideologies and discourses

regarding Black men, positivist research has largely attempted to explain the reasons behind their academic underachievement within the boundaries of stereotypical, essentialist, and monolithic discourses.

Liberal and neoliberal ideologies have explained the failure of Black men to complete college degrees by placing the responsibility squarely and solely on their own shoulders using the colorblind rhetoric of meritocracy. Another school of thought has pointed to *cultural and/or personal* impediments to the academic achievement of Black men, such as a lack of engagement in campus life, a failure to engage with faculty and administrative staff, and low levels of personal responsibility and self-motivation. Problems with cultural identity and self-conception, experiences with racism, and low cultural capital¹⁶ have also been identified as cultural impediments to higher education attainment (Palmer & Young, 2008; Strayhorn, 2010). It is shortsighted at best, however, to fail to acknowledge the intersection between personal, structural, and cultural barriers to higher education completion for Black men. Harper, Patton, and Wooden (2009) pointed more toward *structural* impediments, such as complex admission policies and procedures, and a lack of institutional support systems, as factors that influence higher education attainment. In light of their low degree completion rates, and giving thought to individual barriers to attainment, it becomes appropriate to consider whether higher education attainment actually provides a tangible benefit and whether African American men generally perceive a college degree to be something of value.

¹⁶ Cultural capital is defined “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” (Oughton, 2010, p. 68) which, while not inherently valuable themselves, can be utilized in pursuit of economic capital.

Higher Education Attainment as Ideology

While the research surrounding higher education attainment for African American men is extensive, it is useful to explore the reasons why we care whether or not they complete college degrees in the first place. Some of the research hinges on, and in recent studies has begun to question, the assumption that a college degree is something of both intrinsic and extrinsic value to its possessor; that it in some way betters his life conditions and outcomes (Strayhorn, 2009). The notion of *utility*—the extent to which individuals believe that attaining a college degree is a worthy endeavor—should be examined within a contemporary context to attempt to anchor it in more than historic ideology (Carter, 2008). Such a line of inquiry is worthy of further study in and of itself, but for purposes of this work I have provided a brief exploration of some of the literature related to more tangible values and benefits associated with higher education attainment. In this regard, I argue that college degrees have both substantive and philosophical value.

Harper, Patton, and Wooden (2009) state that “...recent analyses have confirmed that too few African Americans are offered access to the socioeconomic advantages associated with college degree attainment” (p. 389). Furthermore, according to a Carnavale, Smith and Strohl (2013), by the end of the year 2020 more than 65 % of all jobs in America will require education beyond a high school diploma. This report further predicted that, at the current rate of degree completion, by the year 2020 America will be at a deficit of 5 million workers who possess the postsecondary education required to fill available positions. In 2014 the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicated that Black men were unemployed at the rate of

11.3 % in comparison to White men who were unemployed at the rate of 5.3 %. Degree attainment has been consistently associated with both increased earning potential and upward mobility, but research has indicated that even Black men who complete bachelor's degrees earn only 72% of what their White counterparts earn (Kunjufu, 2001). According to another 2014 study conducted by the Pew Research Center, college graduates out-perform non-graduates on “virtually every measure of economic well-being and career attainment” (p. 3), experiencing both higher earnings and lower unemployment rates. Therefore, individuals who fail to finish college are unable to qualify for positions that require degrees, and on average the full-time earnings of those with no degree lag behind the earnings of those with degrees by \$17,500 per year (Pew Research Center, 2014). In addition to unemployment and underemployment, lower levels of education have been statistically associated with welfare dependency, low pay, inferior employment, poor health, and criminal activity; outcomes which disproportionately attach to Black men and which further entrench existing negative social constructions of their identities (Howard, 2014; Palmer & Maramba, 2011).

Current workforce data and future projections, as well as matters of health and social status, are factors which validate higher education attainment as a form of property; the possession of which offers tangible, life-altering value to its possessor. In addition to these beneficent factors, completing a college degree has a measure of ideological utility simply because society confers an elevated social status on those who complete a college degree. Conflicting and inconclusive studies have considered whether academic attainment is valued by Black men who are members of intersectional sub-groups including socio-economic status, sexuality, and gender identification. Wood, Bush, Hicks, and Kambui (2016),

however, found that Black men generally see college degree attainment as a pathway to social, political, and economic advancement. This ideology is consistent with the traditional veneration of education within the African American community; a reverence which is generally perpetuated in spite of the historic exclusion of Black interests and perspectives from the formal curriculum (Strayhorn, 2012).

Replication of Societal Inequities through Education

As early as 1933, Dr. Carter G. Woodson exposed the failure of the American Eurocentric curriculum to serve the educational and social interests of Blacks. Woodson (1998) asserted that the national curriculum served primarily to sustain White supremacy, not to bring parity to the social status of African Americans. With regard to education and hegemonic curricula, Paulo Freire (1970) also asserted that the dominant society in a given culture controls the transmission of knowledge to ensure that education works to the benefit of those in power. Baéz and Boyles (2009) similarly noted that "social science is inextricably linked to dominant political regimes, which use its knowledge to further particular oppressive practices" (p. 26).

In general, Eurocentric curricula provide Black men precious little positive cultural acknowledgement or representation and typically deprive them of social relevancy by ignoring their histories and replicating systemic inequities. In response to social discourses that objectify Black men and render them invisible and/or deviant within educational spaces, African American male students may reject the educational process and product as an act of agency. Such flows of power (resistance) often result in behavioral performances that are interpreted as disruptive, which in turn produce a *discipline and punish* response from educators; the majority of whom are White, middle class women and who neither

understand nor identify with the perspectives of Black male students and who, furthermore, have no conception of what it is to be anything other than White (Foucault, 1995; Hall, 2006; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Cultural misinterpretations and misunderstandings demonstrate the need for counter-stories that challenge the master narrative and shine light on the perspectives of students who have been Othered.

The manifestation of discipline and punish systems in education is exemplified by such practices and policies as academic expulsion and *zero tolerance*. By their very nature—that of mandatory exclusion—the acts of suspension and expulsion increase absence, attrition, and academic failure. According to Ladson-Billings (2011), a 2004 study indicated that Black men made up 8.6 % of the enrollment in public schools but 22% of the expulsions and 23% of the suspensions. Such punitive responses penalize and criminalize school-based misbehaviors and disproportionately attempt to make *docile* (Foucault, 1972) or remove the bodies of young Black males from classrooms; funneling them into the “school to prison pipeline” (Dancy, 2014, p. 476) which channels them from public education into the penal system.

For instance, the proliferation of zero-tolerance school policies in the 1980s and 1990s, complete with drug-sniffing dogs and metal detectors, has met minor infractions (e.g., lateness and dress code violations) with suspensions, expulsions, and arrests, instead of the customary trip to the principal’s office. (Dancy, 2014, p. 476)

According to Dancy (2014), one in six Black high school students is suspended while one in twenty White students faces the same consequence for the same behaviors. Such segregationist and castigatory approaches systematically restrict Black males’ access to education and then blame them for their absence. According to Drazenovich (2012), Foucault asserted that institutions (as representatives of the dominant social class) confine

those individuals whom they reject socially. A CRT analysis of suspension and expulsion practices demonstrates that they effectively re-establish a disproportionate access to educational spaces and resources (properties), similar to that which was historically reserved as an exclusive right of Whites. Thusly, these actions “continually restore... inequality” (Threadgold, 1994, p. 141) by controlling Black male bodies; affirmatively acting to their detriment by depriving, de-motivating and discouraging them from the equitable pursuit of educational attainment (Foucault, 1995; Hall, 2006). These penal approaches to classroom management demonstrate interest divergence by simultaneously confining and excluding Black students and by perpetuating conditions conducive to White privilege and supremacy, in effect, sustaining Whiteness as Property. Such tactics evidence the workings of an invisible reinforcing loop within which many Black students, particularly males, are constrained by way of a cyclical, self-perpetuating social system that denies both intellectual and physical property rights and simultaneously imposes corporal and psychological control—contemporary racism’s insidious way of perpetuating statuses and outcomes attendant to those produced by slavery.

Challenges Presented by the Empirical Findings on Educational Attainment

Given that Black men are disproportionately represented in almost all categories of low achievement, special needs, and academic “failure,” there is a critical need for research that centers their educational experiences and outcomes (Kaba, 2005; Griffin et al., 2010; Palmer & Maramba, 2011). According to Griffin et al. (2010), “58% of Black males fail to graduate from high school with their peers.” (p. 233) In fact, Black men represent the smallest enrollment demographic in both high school and college populations (Griffin et al., 2010; Kaba, 2005; Howard, 2014; Strayhorn, 2009). Two-

thirds of the Black men who begin their educations at public universities and colleges fail to complete their degree within six years, and this figure represents the highest non-completer rate of all race and gender categories (Harper & Harris, 2012). Gove, Volk, Still, Huang, and Thomas-Alexander (2006) noted that college enrollment for Black men was the same in 2006 as it was in 1976, and the American Council on Education (2011) further indicated that Black men of previous generations had a higher rate of graduation than their contemporary counterparts. Research suggests that Black men do not aspire to higher education attainment at rates similar to other demographics, with some studies indicating that aspirations are closely tied to socio-economic status. In essence, there is reportedly a higher incidence of Black men from middle- and higher-income backgrounds who pursue higher education than from lower income brackets (Griffin et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2009).

Despite such alarming findings, some of the data regarding college enrollment among African Americans is disarmingly positive at first glance. According to the 2011 Minorities in Higher Education report of the American Council on Education, enrollment of Black undergraduate students increased by 48.3 % between the years 1990 and 1999. In 2003, 23 % of young Black men went to college, and an increase in male *and* female college enrollment for Black students is thought to be largely due to an equally encouraging improvement in their rate of high school graduation (American Council on Education, 2011; Kaba, 2005). Higher rates of college enrollment for Blacks, however, have not been accompanied by higher rates of degree attainment (Strayhorn, 2012).

A closer look at data which initially seem to bear good tidings reveals them to be problematic when disaggregated and viewed in the narrow light of the higher

education attainment of Black men. African American women outperform their male counterparts in persistence, high school graduation, and higher education attainment, and Black men under-perform virtually every other demographic category in all areas (Strayhorn, 2009). Although the number of Black students attending college is documented to have increased impressively over time, the data further indicates that in 1976, 54.3 % of Black students enrolled in undergraduate programs of study were women and 45.6 % were men, but by 1999, 62.7 % of Blacks enrolled in undergraduate studies were women and 37.3 % were men (Kaba, 2005). These statistics highlight CRT's emphasis on intersectionality, demonstrating how looking at race and gender combined can bring about disparate results between men and women because Black are men disproportionately underrepresented. According to the United States Census Bureau, of the non-Hispanic Blacks who held associates' degrees in 2002, 60.9 % were women and 39.1 % were men. Among those factors cited to explain degree attainment disparities between Black men and Black women are the following:

(1) significant high school dropout and low college graduation rates for black males, (2) high proportion of black males in the United States military, (3) more black females within the total black population than black males, (4) black males entering the workforce at an early age instead of college, (5) the high death rate of college aged black males, and (6) the disproportionately high number of black males in local jails and federal and state prisons. (Kaba, 2005, p. 5)

Brown, Dancy, and Davis (2013) asserted that the American education system replicates inequities for Black male students. Therefore, despite what could be interpreted as forward movement with regard to educational attainment when viewed in the aggregate or through a longitudinal lens, there exist incidences of what Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2007) called "gendered racism," which justify special attention toward the troublesome state of educational attainment for Black men.

Thus far, I have laid the foundation for my study primarily upon deficit-based empirical findings that tend to reify the master-narrative. I have done so in order to enable a more holistic view of higher education attainment for Black men because it is of crucial importance that scholars also apply critical and theory-based considerations to positivist representations. Furthermore, it is imperative that I acknowledge and explicate anti-Black discourse in order to move toward a counter-discursive response. Researchers such as Dr. Shaun R. Harper, Director of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education, have called for a form of scholarship that studies the positive aspects of higher education attainment for Black men by centering experiences and data regarding those who have completed their degrees. My study, thereby, responds to the call for anti-deficit scholarship by privileging the counter-narratives of African American men who have overcome structural, cultural, and/or personal barriers to complete a community college degree.

Making the “Paradigmatic Shift”: Anti-Deficit Frameworks Centering Achievement

Anti-deficit research calls for a reframing of dominant discourses and ideologies and the questions that fuel them. Such a reframing would privilege the strengths and strategies of Black men who have attained degrees, promoting these factors rather than the failures and faults of those who have not. By examining the existence and effect of deficit discourses and paradigms critically, it is possible to shift the discursive focus from personal and cultural inadequacies to strengths, thereby reframing the conversation within the vocabulary of an anti-deficit paradigm (Weiner, 2006). Wood et al. (2016) described the deficit discourse regarding educational attainment as one which “blames Black men, their families and their communities for their

underachievement” (p. 79). In calling for a “paradigmatic shift” Harper (2012, p. 28) acknowledged the continued need for research that identifies the disadvantages and challenges that confront Black men in their pursuit of higher education, but he also advocated a more evenhanded and multi-faceted approach to scholarship which brings a balance of attention to educational attainment strategies and academic successes. To challenge the dominant notions of failure and inadequacy among Black men as collegians, Harper (2012) called for:

... instructive insights from Black men who have experienced college differently—those who actually enrolled, were actively engaged inside and outside the classroom, did well academically, graduated, and went on to pursue additional degrees beyond the baccalaureate. Who are they, and what can they teach us? (p. 6)

An emerging body of research is focused on manifestations of resilience, resistance, and self-organization in marginalized students (Ford et al., 2000; Holman, 2010; Howard, 2014; McMahan, Kenyon, & Carter, 2012). McMahan, Kenyon & Carter (2012) stated that the researchers who do this anti-deficit work “have often expressed that it would be more beneficial to focus on resilience, effective adaptation, coping, and stories of survival among AI [American Indian] youth” (p. 694), and I contend that the same can be said for African Americans as members of another oppressed and historically subjugated racial group. Gardner and Toope (2011) posited that, because of deficit narratives and the various inequities that young people face, it is all the more important to examine how to engage their strengths. Furthermore, they argued that “labeling youth as trouble-makers, deficient, antisocial, low achievers or untrustworthy operates as a form of overt and hidden curriculum in educational contexts” (Gardner & Toope, 2011, p. 88-89). The foundational tenets of the various anti-deficit approaches “emphasize the positive aspects of student effort and

achievement” (Lopez & Louis, 2009, p.1), and incorporate diverse cultural characteristics. Following is a review of selected studies reflecting anti-deficit approaches, beginning with sources related to elementary and secondary education because they serve as a pathway to and foundation for success in college. Following, then, is a discussion of higher education attainment studies centering African American men.

P-12 Building Blocks for Higher Education Attainment among Black Males

Early educational expectations, experiences, and academic preparation have a significant effect on higher education performance and attainment, with what has been called an *achievement gap* progressively widening between Black and White children as they move through elementary and secondary education (Seller, 2001). Davis and Jordan (1994) found that, in general, primary and secondary teachers and counselors verbally discouraged Black male students from attending college more frequently than they discouraged White males. Furthermore, as consistent with a later study by Ladson-Billings (2011), they found that Black males were punished disproportionately and were more frequently expelled from classes for longer periods of time, creating a hostile educational environment for Black students, and particularly so for Black males. Such findings call into question whether the extant disparity is, in fact, an achievement gap to be faulted to the students or whether it is an access gap to be faulted to the institution.

In spite of myriad obstacles along the road to educational attainment, many Black students draw on resistance and/or resilience to find ways to succeed. In a year-long study of nine high achieving Black students at a predominantly White high school, Carter (2008) theorized that successful Black adolescents possess a *Critical Race*

Achievement Ideology (CRAI) which includes, among other assets, a robust sense of self as a member of a Black community, and an awareness of their potential educational and life limitations because of racism. Carter (2008) asserted that CRAI is a form of resistance consisting of inherent intelligences. These intelligences form a “critical race consciousness” (p. 211) which informs student attitudes, beliefs, and actions, and helps them effectively navigate their way to upward social mobility.

In a conceptual work, Burley, Barnard-Brak, Marbley, and Deason (2010) pointed to Black youth resilience, which they defined as “positive adaptation in the face of present or past adversity” (p. 48), as a key factor in the educational success of academically gifted Millennials. They also argued that more Black students would be identified to gifted and talented placements if criteria included “leadership and artistic endeavors” (Burley et al., 2010, p. 52) as opposed to the traditional narrow indices of academic achievement. The authors concluded that teachers need to recognize and encourage the development of student resilience and support student goals.

Other structural modifications cited as improving educational outcomes for African American youth include the utilization of *funds of knowledge* and *culturally responsive pedagogies*. Sellar (2001) utilized critical ethnography to study the lived experiences of Black male high school students and discovered existing funds of knowledge that were useful in understanding and applying scientific principles. Although Oughton (2010) posited that the concept of funds of knowledge is “highly ideological” (p. 64) and that it has been reified without due critical consideration, it has been extensively utilized to challenge dominant and Eurocentric pedagogies. Research has also highlighted culturally responsive pedagogies as a method of addressing

deficiencies in traditional teaching models, with culturally relevant curricula specifically recommended as an approach to improving the overall educational attainment of Black males (Gay, 2002; Howard, 2014; Sleeter, 2011). Critics of such curricula, however, assert that they are also ideologically based and that evidence of their efficacy is anecdotal at best (Oughton, 2010; Sleeter, 2011). Despite the call for more rigorous studies of these concepts, creating supportive learning environments and implementing more diverse pedagogical and assessment practices from primary through secondary education could be reasonably anticipated to lead to an increase in the higher education attainment outcomes of Black males at all levels.

Higher Education Attainment Success Studies

In the largest national, qualitative study of African American male college graduates undertaken to date, Harper (2012) interviewed 219 Black men who completed baccalaureate degrees at one of 42 four-year colleges in 20 states. These institutions included PWIs (Primarily White Institution), HBCUs (Historically Black College or University), and racially diverse institutions, and the research team found several factors common to the success of these graduates; 1) parental/family expectations, 2) engagement with faculty and administrative staff, 3) the ability to pursue their education without financial stress, 4) engagement with same-race, upper class peers, 5) engagement in leadership and “educationally purposeful activities” (p. 15) both inside and outside the classroom, 6) and effective mechanisms for responding to racism and managing “onlyness”¹⁷(p. 16)—a state in which Whites expect Black

¹⁷ Harper, Davis, Jones, McGowan, Ingram, & Platt (2011) define “onlyness” as “the psycho-emotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one’s same racial or ethnic group.” (p. 190)

students to individually represent universal viewpoints and realities for all African Americans. Harper (2012) pointed out that less than one-fifth of the study participants took part in K-12 gifted or academically talented programming, less than half of them took Advanced Placement courses, and some completed high school with grade point averages lower than 3.0. Most participants were, however, actively engaged in leadership roles and clubs or activities in their high schools. Within the context of their own stories, these young men did not identify themselves as superior to Black men who did not attain degrees. Participants overwhelmingly indicated that they were the beneficiaries of the attentions of caring individuals, and that they were exposed to cultural and educational experiences that motivated them to persist. This communal posture is pointedly opposed to the individualistic, up-by-your-own-bootstraps ideologies of the neoliberal master narrative. These young men also reported that peer mentoring was a significant component of their success as opposed to more structured mentorship pairings with non-peers. All participants indicated a spiritual basis, most of which was Christian, and they attributed their success in significant part to divine determination.

In a qualitative study involving 11 underprepared Black male junior and senior students at a public four-year HBCU, Palmer and Young (2008) similarly found the following factors relevant to persistence to baccalaureate completion: 1) the importance of student involvement in campus life, 2) the need for engagement with supportive faculty, and 3) student self-leadership and personal responsibility for success. Other findings pointed to the importance of a cohesive and supportive university community that sustains cultural identity.

Comeaux (2013) conducted a study of faculty perceptions of high achieving Black and White male collegians in which significant findings emerged regarding *campus racial climate* and the subtle ways in which dominant ideologies affect educational experiences and outcomes. The purpose of the study was to examine the role of race in the construction of faculty views regarding successful male students, and findings indicated subtle differences in faculty perceptions slightly favoring White men. Comeaux (2013) also found that by examining how faculty racial viewpoints diminish or contribute to a hostile educational environment, the mechanisms through which Black male intellectual identities are developed and negative academic prophecies are fulfilled can, in part, be revealed. Similar to the findings of Harper (2012) and Palmer and Young (2008), Comeaux (2013) also found that “educationally sound activities” (p.454) and faculty interactions led to positive educational outcomes. Meaningful relationships with faculty can arguably be difficult to develop, however, if faculty has a diminished ideological perception of student capabilities and correspondingly low expectations for achievement. Strayhorn (2012) and Harper and Wood (2016) arrived at similar conclusions in finding that faculty who have been acculturated by contemporary media may have negative perceptions of Black men as pimps, thugs, rapists, and criminals, and these perceptions affect faculty capacity to see these students positively. Similarly, Howard (2014) points to inadequate “racial awareness and cultural ignorance” (p. 18) on the part of teachers and administrators as factors that further inhibit educational attainment for Black men.

In the Comeaux (2013) and Harper and Wood (2016) studies, researchers found that discriminatory, negative, and hostile campus climates discourage campus

involvement on the part of Black male collegians, and that such climates require them to learn to cope with racial hostilities and microaggressions.¹⁸ Comeaux (2013) also found that, while the faculty who participated in the study overall had positive responses to Black and White high achievers, 7 % either directly or indirectly reinforced or referenced the construct of race while simultaneously denying its importance, and there was a slightly larger number of faculty who expressed support for White achievers than their Black counterparts. Several faculty members took deliberate measures to avoid discussing race, demonstrating the ubiquity of colorblind ideology and race-neutrality. Comeaux (2013) further stated;

Too often, race is pushed to the margins without substantive attention because it is seen as taboo. This tendency to overlook or dismiss racial identity suggests that America is postracial, when in fact race remains a prevalent issue in our society. (p. 462)

In addition to more outward and literal demonstrations of hostility such as verbal or symbolic racism, Black collegians must also contend with *racial coding* practices, which are “attempts to subtly play upon Whites’ negative perceptions of Blacks in the United States without explicitly making a connection to race” (Comeaux, 2013, p. 456). Through racial coding, racist ideologies are reified and reinforced via racially charged yet indirect connotations. For example, one may believe that Blacks who are admitted to selective colleges are present because of preferential treatment through affirmative action and that they have an inherently lower level of personal capability than White students who are admitted. In racial coding, the act of denigrating affirmative action as a *policy* neutralizes the indirect and thinly veiled racial code

¹⁸ “Microaggressions are subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously.” (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 60)

within which the intellectual qualifications of Black people are categorically disparaged. Making discussions of race *per se* taboo while perpetuating negative ideologies through racial codes depoliticizes controversial issues, presents the outward appearance of social justice while maintaining Whiteness as Property, and delegitimizes the voices of those who allege oppression.

In general, the higher education attainment experiences of Black men who are pursuing baccalaureate degrees is more extensively theorized than those of their community college counterparts, and Wood (2014) pointed out that Black men in two- and four-year colleges have distinct social and academic experiences and needs. Some commonalities arguably exist between Black men of similar age at two-year and four-year colleges in terms of their P-12 educational preparation, but on the whole there are significant post-secondary distinctions which mandate that generalizations between the two populations not be made lightly. There is a need for more research that acknowledges not only gender and socio-economic intersectionality, but also other forms of diversity among Black men such as the various levels of higher education attainment. In my study I center the counter-narratives of Black men who completed a community college degree; therefore I next discuss the research regarding the higher education attainment experiences of Black men at community colleges.

Degree Attainment in Community Colleges

The majority of Black male collegians, some 54.9 %, come into higher education through community colleges and other public/private two-year colleges, yet the community college population has not been comprehensively studied (Strayhorn, 2012; Wood, 2014). According to the U.S. Department of Education, 48.9 % of Black men leave the community college after three years without attaining a degree or

certificate (Wood & Turner, 2010). Lucas (1996) asserted that, “Two-year colleges have long been touted as agencies for the democratization of opportunity in higher education” (p. 41). Bush (2004), however, posited that the low completion rates for Black men indicate that community colleges have failed to facilitate upward mobility for that population, and he argues that these institutions are, therefore, not effectively furthering democratization. Wood (2012) asserted that the national community college system’s branding as an institution of opportunity is at peril in light of such findings, and he further queried whether the system is meeting a fundamental responsibility to advance democracy (Wood & Turner, 2011).

Profiles of two-year versus four-year students. The literature surrounding anti-deficit approaches to higher educational attainment for African American men indicates that there is relevant variance between factors associated with the success of collegians at four-year colleges and those at community colleges. By interrogating these differences, the need for contextualized studies becomes clearer. In general, 58.8 % of community college students attend school part-time, and part-time students are significantly less likely to graduate than full-time students (Harper & Woods, 2016; Urias & Wood, 2014). Furthermore, some 75.7 % of African American male community collegians are first generation college students as opposed to 22.6 % of their four-year counterparts, which means that these students are likely to be less familiar with or have familial support for higher education processes and protocols than students whose parents went to college (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, and Yeung, 2007).

Community collegians are, in the aggregate, older than the traditional four-year college population, and many of these older students have work and familial obligations

that take priority over their academic pursuits. With particular regard to familial obligations, Black men who attend community colleges are 555% more likely than four-year college students to have dependents, 284% more likely to be married, and 464% more likely to be independent (Harper & Wood, 2016). Similarly, Harper and Wood (2016) found that the three principle reasons why Black men choose to attend community college are work (74%), finances (42%), and familial obligations (30%). In addition, the effect of academic and environmental factors on Black male community college enrollment also plays a role in persistence and graduation.

The role of academic factors. Wood (2014) defined academic factors as informal meetings with faculty, grade point average, withdrawing from courses after the add-drop period, course incompletes and repeats, and changes of major. Wood (2014) found that academic factors play a larger role in higher education attainment for Black men in community colleges than do social factors such as campus involvement and peer relationships. Wood (2014) also found that students who spend more time studying persist at higher rates and that the highest incidences of success are among those who study in groups—yet another demonstration of what is arguably a culture-based communal ethos as contrasted to normative hegemonic individualism (Harper, 2012). In a study of Black male community college graduates from the Texas Community College system between 1995 and 1998, Glenn (2004) found that degree attainment was related to such factors as the students' need to work, their *stop-out* status—in which students are not continuously enrolled toward degree completion—and campus residential status. This study also highlighted that the utilization of academic advising services such as tutoring and graduation planning assistance

promoted degree completion, again pointing to the importance of engagement with academic/administrative staff (Glenn, 2004).

While engagement with faculty might seem to straddle the line between academic and social factors, the research more often treats it as an academic consideration. Studies show that Black male community collegians are less likely than other community college men or Black men at four year institutions to reach out to faculty for academic support. This is problematic in light of findings which consistently emphasize that establishing meaningful relationships with faculty enhances educational attainment (Harper, 2012; Harper & Wood, 2016; Palmer & Young, 2009). Meaningful engagement can also influence faculty perceptions of Black men and play a significant role in minimizing the negative academic impact of “outside forces, such as media portrayals, racial/gender stereotypes, and peer influences” (Wood, 2012, p. 31).

The role of social factors. As is also true in studies related to Black men at four-year institutions, social factors such as engagement in campus clubs is positively associated with community college persistence and graduation. At the community college level in particular, however, involvement with peers is shown to be beneficial to the extent that peer groups and friendships prioritize academics over non-academic endeavors. More explicitly stated, extracurricular activity that is academically related supports persistence and graduation of Black male community collegians while extracurricular activities that are social in nature, such as non-academic group memberships and non-curricular events sponsored by or affiliated with the institution, are negatively associated with completion (Wood, 2014).

Wood and Turner (2010) pointed to the importance of considering not only what Black men can do to improve their own educational attainment outcomes, but also of considering the importance of institutional support mechanisms. Furthermore, Wood (2014) indicated that by considering both personal and institutional factors, deficit approaches are hindered and community colleges are held accountable to their mission. In my study the counter-narratives uncover participant experiences that address the following factors, which are empirically tied to degree completion for both populations: 1) engagement with faculty and staff, 2) participation in educationally relevant activities, 3) family and/or community relationships, 4) meaningful approaches to addressing incidences of racism, and 5) self-management mechanisms such as a strong self-identity, psychological resilience, and personal responsibility. The findings of Wood's (2014) study suggest an intersection between personal/cultural factors such as those indicated above and structural factors addressing issues of policy, pedagogy, and practice, as well as student support and other initiatives.

Bridging Theory, Literature, and Practice

Parker and Lynn (2002) assert that "linking CRT to education can indeed foster the connections of theory to practice and activism on issues related to race" (p. 18). Much of the literature surrounding CRT in Education falls within several general categories which seek to make those connections, including participant experiences, pedagogy and practice, educational policy, and social/distributive justice. Below I have provided a brief review of studies within each of the aforementioned categories.

Participant Experiences

Critical Race Theory has been extensively utilized to examine the experiences of minoritized people in higher education settings. Black students have been noted to center race in their “self-definition” (Carter, 2008, p. 16), and to factor their racial identity into their perceptions of academic achievement, leading to the development of a theory of “critical race consciousness” (Carter, 2008, p. 11). Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) examined how African American students are influenced by and respond to racial microaggressions in the collegiate setting, and Kohli (2015) performed a Critical Race analysis of the reflections and experiences of teachers of color regarding their teacher education programs. In addition to student perspectives, CRT has been applied to other parties to the educational process. Pollack and Zirkel (2013) applied CRT to leadership and change management regarding constituent resistance to equity based change.

Pedagogy and Praxis

Critical Race Theory demonstrates a flexibility that has made both broad and narrow application possible when examining matters of instructional and educational practice. Regarding pedagogical processes, for example, CRT has been utilized as a teaching tool to enhance the development of critical thinking, to cultivate student voice, and to facilitate classroom discussions of race (Knaus, 2009; Martin, 2014). Also in the classroom context, Wallace and Brand (2011) used CRT to examine the cultural responsiveness of public school science teachers, while Lynn, Jennings, and Hughes (2013) explored the concept of Critical Race Pedagogy and radical/oppositional scholarship by examining the instructional influence of Harvard Law School Professor Derrick A. Bell. Wilson (2012) used critical race methodology to examine the motivations, identities, and educational philosophies of

African American pre-service teachers. Additionally, other studies have centered issues related to student development (Bondi, 2012; Tabari, 2013).

Educational Policy

According to DeCuir and Dixson (2004), “CRT implies that race should be the center of focus, and charges researchers [with the responsibility] to critique school practices and policies that are both covertly and overtly racist.” (p. 30) Gillborn (2013) asserted that CRT offers “a distinctive and challenging approach to understanding, and opposing, race inequity in education” (p. 28), and used interest divergence to analyze Arizona legislation banning ethnic studies in public schools. Pollack and Zirkel (2013) used CRT to examine how K-12 leaders might anticipate and address resistance to equity-based changes within their schools, while Khalifa, Jennings, Briscoe, Oleszweski, & Abdi (2014) examined the cultural responsiveness of data-driven decision making processes under the tenets of CRT. Critical Race Theory has also served as a framework for policy analysis in examining educational testing, reviewing disciplinary policies, and evaluating the discontinuation of affirmative action efforts (Winkle-Wagner, Sule, & Maramba, 2014). Howard (2014) asserted that a Critical Race analysis of broad-based educational policies such as zero tolerance discipline, movements to repeal affirmative action, and reductions in the availability of federal financial aid demonstrate an overwhelmingly negative effect on African American men. As a general canon, CRT views contemporary educational policy as a neoliberal mechanism that privileges so-called *race neutral* ideologies (such as meritocracy and individualism) for the purpose of sustaining acceptable levels of inequity and perpetuating Whiteness as Property (Gillborn, 2013).

Social and Distributive Justice

In addition to exploring subject experiences, praxis-based issues, and educational policy, CRT in education has shed light on the manner in which traditional education has perpetuated racism and helped to maintain systems of power and subordination (Lynn & Dixon, 2013; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Osegura, 2005). The rhetoric of colorblindness and race-neutrality perpetuates systems through which Whiteness is normalized. Knaus (2009) asserts that:

As a core function of society, then, education becomes the public process for maintaining the status quo while purposefully not educating large masses (of students of color and low income Whites) that are forced to work as cheap, manual labor. (p. 142)

With particular emphasis on higher education, CRT has engaged issues such as education as a property right (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), curriculum as property (Bondi, 2012), and access to and use of educational spaces and resources (Tabari, 2013). Issues of property inherently raise issues of distribution, and distribution is particularly relevant given that empirical data presents vastly unequal educational outcomes for minorities and particularly for Black men. By foregrounding both history and contemporary lived experiences and challenging the normalization of the White educational experience, Critical Race scholars seek to deepen the understanding of race-based barriers to educational attainment (McCoy & Rodericks, 2015) and promote social justice. With the review of the literature regarding Critical Race Theory in Education, the wheel comes full circle in a blending of the theoretical framework for my study with this review of the literature.

Summary and Significance

In this literature review I have demonstrated the connection between Critical Race Theory and the scholarly literature by using the vocabulary of the theoretical

framework to demonstrate the marginalized status of Black men within the American higher education system. I argue that higher education attainment creates a property interest and tangible social benefit which was historically denied to African Americans. This property interest is a benefit which continues to be inequitably distributed by race, and in my study I propose actions intended to facilitate a more equitable distribution of higher education. Furthermore, I introduce the disproportionately negative higher education outcomes of Black men as a foundation for a discussion of anti-deficit frameworks, summarizing attainment-centered studies of successful Black students from P-12 through baccalaureate degree and extending the application of concepts such as Critical Race Achievement Ideology and resilience to Black men.

Having reviewed the research surrounding higher education attainment for African American men, I believe that the stories of those who have successfully completed college degrees have been too long ignored and cast in a light of positive deviance. By using my study to consider how their higher education narratives intersect with and depart from the master narrative, I add to a growing body of scholarly work that foregrounds anti-deficit counter-narratives of successful Black men who are college graduates. More importantly, I present a counter-hegemonic discourse focused on attainment. By considering my review of the literature in light of the theoretical framework, I derived five assumptions to undergird my study; 1) the American education system perpetuates various forms of racism, 2) the lived experiences of Black men open-up new ways of thinking about and understanding their educational outcomes, 3) social justice demands a more equitable distribution of the educational properties historically reserved for Whites, 4) the ideologies of colorblindness and meritocracy enable and perpetuate educational inequities, and 5)

gender causes Black men to experience higher education in ways that can be distinguished from the college experiences of Black women. The analysis and discussion as well as implications of my study are built upon these assumptions.

Together with the theoretical framework, this review of the literature establishes the scholarly basis upon which I created and analyzed the counter-narratives of three Black men who successfully completed a community college degree. In the concluding chapters of my study I consider educational contexts in light of the tenets of Critical Race Theory to deconstruct and raise new ways of thinking about hidden curricula, agendas, policy, and ideologies related to degree attainment, and to disrupt deficit discourses toward African Americans with particular emphasis on Black men. These curricula, agenda, and ideologies are revealed within the context of the counter-narratives, which were created as described in the following chapter regarding Methodology and Research Design.

Chapter 4

Methodology and Research Design

Treat my words as provisional, not as prescriptive. Take what I say as a source of comparison to think about methods and interrogate them and to reach beyond our methods of today to create the methods for tomorrow. Charmaz, 2016, p. 41

Critical race methodology, as described below, is combined with qualitative and postqualitative approaches in my study to conceptually and theoretically analyze the higher education attainment counter-narratives of three African American men who completed an associate's degree at a community college. I use data gathered through personal interviews to explore participants' lived experiences and to consider the generative tensions between qualitative and postqualitative methodologies, finding that this hybrid approach opens up new and useful perspectives into the following research questions:

- What were the experiences of African American men who completed a community college degree as they pursued higher education attainment?
- How do their counter-narratives intersect with dominant social and educational discourses regarding African American men?
- How are their counter-narrative experiences divergent from dominant social and educational discourses regarding African American men?

Purposes of the Study

By examining data gathered through semi-structured personal interviews and considering the counter-stories in light of the tenets of Critical Race Theory, my study serves both a social justice purpose and a scholarly purpose. In the following section I

describe how my study promotes social justice by disrupting deficit discourses and adding to the limited body of anti-deficit attainment narratives for Black men.

Social Justice Purpose

While the research on the educational attainment of Black men is extensive, the deficit orientation of dominant discourse has yielded little more than a pessimistic illumination of the problems and a possible misappropriation of the reasons behind them. Furthermore, the research is often positivist and geared toward external observation, deduction, and mediation, giving limited expression to the lived experiences of Black men. Leading scholars (Harper, 2012; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Howard, 2014; Noguera, 2012; Wood, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2010) agree that additional scholarship is needed to give voice to the narratives of Black men who successfully navigate the precarious waters of higher educational attainment, privileging their expertise regarding *their-lives-as-subject-matter* and centering what they say and believe about themselves as learners and as social beings. Rather than perpetuating hegemonic discourses and existing schemes of dominance by analyzing what causes Black men to fail in their efforts to attain college degrees, my study takes an anti-deficit approach to inquire into higher education attainment counter-narratives.

Charmaz (2016) asserted that “methodological purism can stifle innovation; methodological integration may enhance it” (p. 47). As a hybrid methodological and analytical framework, I use the data gathered to frame a conceptual analysis, described herein, in which I deconstruct the counter-narrative research texts to explore marginalization, socially and discursively produced silences, and manifestations/disruptions of power and agency, considering how each is produced and re-produced within the

experiences of the men who participated in my study. I then analyze the counter-narrative research texts in light of the theoretical framework by *thinking with* Critical Race Theory (CRT), using its tenets to undergird an analysis of the counter-stories. This hybrid methodological approach gives rise to the scholarly purpose of my study.

Scholarly Purpose

The scholarly purpose of my study is to explore the distinct and generative tensions between qualitative and postqualitative epistemologies. Qualitative researchers question the applicability of postqualitative thought in light of its non-generalizable methods and methodologies and its philosophical defiance of the standards of science-based research, while postqualitative researchers consider traditional qualitative research—with its dependence upon coding and interpretation—a form of positivist data commodification (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Oppositional philosophies (structural v. poststructural) and approaches (the search for sameness versus the search for difference) undergird each methodology. By undertaking my study I enlisted myself as researcher in the role of double-agent in a methodological battle; but through this duality I was able to discover and explore productive tensions, to investigate how each methodology produces knowledge, and to create a more multi-faceted image of how racism worked within the higher education experiences of study participants Malik Freeman, David Stokes, and Xavier Barnes. Creating the counter-narrative ethnographies enabled me to connect culture to scholarly fieldwork (Van Maanen, 2011). Through this hybrid approach, which employed critical race methodology to create counter-narrative ethnographies and then conceptually analyzed them in light of Critical Race Theory, the entire study was framed as a critical discourse and yielded a rich fusion of qualitative and postqualitative observations. Qualitative

methodology opened up the “who, what, when, and where” of the men’s experiences with racism while postqualitative methodology explored the social “why and how.” Both methodologies, therefore, worked in tandem to more fully inform the research questions and to bring about broader and deeper understandings of racism as a complex socio-cultural issue. The hybrid approach can be best understood as a derivative of traditional narrative methodology.

Understanding Narrative Methodology

The exploration of the narrative form as a discourse methodology is helpful as a foundation for understanding the research and analytical methodology designed for my study. Narrative methodology makes possible the gathering and treatment of stories as data and the utilization of narrative as a form of analysis. According to Clandinin (2013), narrative methodology is a relational form of qualitative scholarship that brings researcher and participant into relationship not only with one another but also with the three dimensional inquiry space of temporality (time and history), sociality (people), and place (locations and environments). The idea of the three dimensional inquiry space can be explained as “the need to attend first and foremost to the living out of these complex narratives of experience, narratives that are being composed over time, in a series of places and with both personal and social dimensions” (Clandinin, 2013, p.165). Malik, David, and Xavier live storied lives both as individuals and as members of various social groups, and I acknowledge that the experiences related through their stories are more complex than can be known or represented. In my study, the counter-narrative stories, which Clandinin (2013) would refer to as *research texts*, were created through an asynchronous collaboration between me and the men who participated in my study, and were based upon *field texts*

consisting of the interview data from participant interviews. The resulting counter-narratives were well-suited not only to narrative analysis (referred to as counter-narrative analysis for purposes of my study), conceptual analysis, and *thinking with theory* using the tenets of Critical Race Theory, but they also lent themselves to several streams of thematic analysis.

According to Clandinin (2013), narrative methodology can be described as having realist and constructionist implications, which means that the stories are intended to represent realities as they are interpreted and understood by the participants. Narrative methodology is, however, distinguished from other forms of realist and constructionist scholarship such as case studies and phenomenology in its intent. While the aim of most realist/constructionist research is to seek understanding, explain social phenomena, and represent *truth*, the purpose of narrative methodology is to generate new relationships between the researcher, the participant, and the physical and/or temporal environment. More likely to raise additional questions than to answer existing ones, narrative methodology requires that the researcher trouble ontological and epistemological assumptions. Narrative inquiry is characterized by a tendency to unsettle dominant beliefs and assumptions, which is a trait also shared by poststructural/postqualitative approaches. As one example from my study, Xavier's counter-story tells how he enrolled in college for the primary purpose of receiving Pell Grant money so he could work part-time and spend time with his infant son. According to dominant ideology, going to college to procure federal monies as a temporary source of income is disdained in comparison to going to college to be trained to become part of the workforce. Xavier's story demonstrated, however, that despite the fact that his ideologies did not align with those of the community college in terms of producing himself as a workforce deliverable, he ultimately completed two community college degrees that

enabled him to engage several successful entrepreneurial ventures and to satisfy his own intellectual and social ends. This sort of ideological disruption is another reason why narrative (again, referred to *counter-narrative*, in my study) methodology is well suited to application within the context of my study.

Narrative methodology is similar to the qualitative approaches of phenomenology and case study in its use of experience, and Clandinin (2013) defines *narrative inquiry* as the study of experience as story. A distinctive feature of narrative methodology is that, in addition to *thinking about* or attempting to interpret stories as does the typical realist/constructionist approach, narrative methodology facilitates the process of “thinking with” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) stories and opens up a space for the use of narrative, not only as a form of inquiry, but also as a form of analysis.

The purpose of narrative analysis is to unfold the ways individuals make sense of their lived experience and how its telling enables them to interpret the social world and their agency within it. More often the focus is not on revealing the ‘truth’ of the stories. The approach to analysis is determined by the research questions, the researcher’s epistemological position and his/her lived experience in connection with the research topic(s). (Gill & Goodson, 2011, p. 160)

An extensive autobiographical feature is part of narrative methodology and it requires the researcher to inquire into his or her own positionality to expose “ontological and epistemological commitments” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 89). My positionality as researcher is expressed in the introduction to my study and is manifested within the selection and privileging of certain elements of participants’ interview data within the counter-narrative. Through a reflective and reflexive process which Clandinin (2013) calls narrative analysis—or counter-narrative analysis in my study—field texts evolved into research texts. Counter-narrative analysis occurred recursively throughout my research and analytical process—from beginning to middle and throughout each subsequent visitation of the counter-

narrative—producing an ongoing and evolving articulation that is in a constant state of *becoming*.¹⁹

The power of narrative methodology abides in what Clandinin (2013) described as *stories to live by*, which is a concept through which we “understand how knowledge, context, and identity are linked and can be understood narratively” (p. 146). Stories to live by resonate with the concepts of the master narrative and stock stories, through which the dominant society establishes and maintains its locus of power through the tales it perpetuates about itself (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). As a departure from Clandinin’s (2013) more generic use of the term narrative, in my study I used the term *narrative* to represent the concepts of *master narrative* and *stock stories*, while the term *counter-narrative* describes the stories of the marginalized Other, which are privileged here. Stories to live by can also refer to the counter-narratives of the marginalized Other (Martin, 2014). Examining the various stories to live by through the lens of CRT enabled me to explore and engage with the intersections between identity stories, institutional stories, and social/cultural stories; in other words, to conceptually engage the relationship between narrative and counter-narrative data (Clandinin, 2013; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012).

Borrowing from Clandinin’s (2013) conceptualization of narrative methodology, *narrative inquiry* or data gathering is distinguished from *narrative analysis*, the latter of which may take the form of a thematic, visual, linguistic, or structural examination of experiences. Narrative analysis is born out of narrative inquiry as a thematic or structural examination of experiences, at the point where the “tensions, bumping places, and temporal threads” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 171) between stories make the stories most visible. Stated

¹⁹ “*Becoming* is the movement through a unique event that produces experimentation and change” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 87).

differently, narrative analysis arises out of inconsistency. For example, while David and Xavier told very direct and similar stories of their experiences being stereotyped as *angry Black men*, Malik’s experience with this ideology was much more subtle and nuanced, and brought to bear additional ways of thinking about the purpose and process of labeling African American men as angry. Because CRT focuses on challenging the master narrative and foregrounding the experiences of the oppressed through counter-narrative, I applied Clandinin’s concepts of narrative inquiry and analysis to the study of counter-narratives which were created through the application of critical race methodology, which is discussed next.

Comparative Research Models

| Narrative Model (Clandinin, 2013) | Qual/Postqual Hybrid Model (McKesson, 2016) |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Narrative Inquiry | Counter-narrative Inquiry |
| Participant interviews | Participant interviews |
| Field Texts | Field Texts |
| Interview Transcripts | Interview Transcripts |
| Research Texts | Research Texts |
| Applying Narrative Methodology | Applying Critical Race Methodology |
| Narrative Analysis | Counter-narrative Analysis |
| Qualitative | Qualitative and Postqualitative |
| Findings | Findings |
| Thematic/Interpretive | Thematic/Interpretive, Counter-narrative, and Conceptual |

Figure 1: Comparative Research Models

Critical Race Methodology

Derived from Critical Race Theory, critical race methodology specifically seeks to resist further marginalization of oppressed groups and “intentionally blurs the boundary between theory and methodology as a nuance and a deliberate strategy to

challenge the dominant canon” (Lynn & Dixson, 2013, p. 183). It attempts to demonstrate rigor without becoming prescriptive although its methods for doing so are somewhat oblique, with theory and methodology co-existing as an assemblage in which the latter takes the form of analysis of the counter-narratives of the oppressed. According to Ladson-Billings (2006):

CRT scholars are . . . constructing narratives out of the historical, socio-cultural and political realities of their lives and those of people of color. The job of the chronicle [the text] is to give readers a context for understanding the way inequality manifests in policy, practice, and people’s experiences. (P. xi)

Lynn and Dixson (2013) pose five tenets of critical race methodology that are blended with the core assumptions of Critical Race Theory in my study, further blurring the lines between theory and methodology. The five tenets of critical race methodology are as follows:

(1) recognizing the intersectionality of race and racism with other forms of oppression; (2) confronting dominant ideology; (3) acknowledging the various ways that oppression is resisted; (4) exposing deficit-based research by centering the lived, everyday experiences of people of color; and (5) interviewing from multiple disciplines to analyze race and racism within particular historical and contemporary contexts. (Lynn & Dixson, 2013, p.183)

Translating scholarship into “active resistance against oppression” (Lynn & Dixson, 2013, p. 185) is vital to critical race methodology, requiring that CRT researchers move beyond philosophical and intellectual pursuit and into roles of advocacy. Activism is expressed through giving voice to the oppressed and making their counter-stories known.

Privileging the Counter-narrative

Counter-narratives aim to call ideological stances into question and challenge the stock stories of the master narrative. Ontologically grounded in the assumption that racism will always exist and anchored by an epistemology predicated upon lived experiences,

counter-narrative storytelling pushes against and seeks to dismantle the dominant narrative that normalizes Whiteness, informs hegemonic theory and practice, and maintains status quo. According to DeCuir and Dixson (2004),

Counter-storytelling is a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes. The use of counterstories allows for the challenging of privileged discourses, the discourses of the majority, therefore, serving as a means for giving voice to marginalized groups. (p. 27)

Critical Race Theory is intended to add the lived experience of marginalized people to the body of empirical research to further inform and, where possible, to debunk stereotypes, revise anti-black discourses, and reveal liberal and neoliberal narratives of decline.

By telling their stories in their own words, their counter-narratives allow them to contradict the Othering process, and thus, challenge the privileged discourses that are often found at elite, predominantly White, independent schools. (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27)

I chose to create and analyze counter-narratives (research texts) for each of the men who participated in my study rather than directly analyzing the interview transcripts (field texts), which was a qualitative move to privilege data that was directly related to the research questions. After using critical race methodology as previously described to create the counter-narratives, I then used CRT as the analytical lens through which to view the counter-narratives. This created a hybrid methodology which blurred the lines between counter-narrative analysis and deconstruction, allowing me not only to engage a limited thematic (qualitative) interpretation of the data but also to grapple with the postqualitative concepts of socially produced silences, marginality, agency, and power/resistance.

Understanding Postqualitative Methodology

St. Pierre (2011) wrote of postqualitative research as a methodological approach that

enables a critique of “conventional humanistic qualitative methodology” (p. 611). So in this regard, while Critical Race Theory ultimately criticizes social structures, postqualitative methodology ultimately criticizes canonical research methodologies. St. Pierre (2011) asserted that qualitative research has succumbed to the standards of science-based research, thereby becoming hegemonic and prescriptive and losing its original ability to produce that which is different. Poststructuralism, which rejects static and stable sources of truth and meaning, provides the theoretical basis for postqualitative analysis (St. Pierre, 2011).

St. Pierre (2011) further presented postqualitative analysis as a methodology for disrupting traditional Western/Eurocentric epistemological orientations and rejecting the most fundamental tenets of the traditional research canon. Processes such as validation/confirmability, transferability/generalizability, dependability/credibility, and even some methods of data gathering are refused, and the science-based research methods through which qualitative data is legitimated for the academic mainstream are criticized as hegemonic perpetuations of existing power schemes. As postqualitative methodology pushes back against the traditional research canon, ways of thinking are freed from the constraints and categories imposed by science-based research protocols and different ways of being are opened up. Rather than asking “What does it mean” as is the case with traditional qualitative/interpretive frameworks, postqualitative research asks “How do meanings change? How have some meanings emerged as normative... and what do these processes reveal about power?” (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 617) By questioning power and revealing agency, postqualitative analysis takes an inherently critical stance. In my study, postqualitative analysis took two specific forms: 1) a theory-bound analysis and deconstruction of the counter-narratives considering socially produced silences, marginalization, resistance and

agency, and 2) a conceptual analyses of Angry Black Man Ideology and Discourse and Higher Education Attainment as Compliance and Resistance.

According to Jackson and Mazzei (2012), “The process of deconstruction results in a destabilizing of that which we have unproblematically come to accept...[and it] is a means of exploiting the tensions and inconsistencies with the way things are and the way things have been...” (p.17). Derrida’s (1997) deconstruction theory asserted that all knowledge is partial and contextual and that there is no closure that constitutes truth. Attention is paid to that which is missing from the narrative—the *absent presence*²⁰—in preference to what is visible. Derrida’s (1997) concepts of the absent presence and irruptions—places of inconsistency—bear resemblance and relationship to the bumping places and tensions accounted for within Clandinin’s (2013) concept of narrative methodology.

Scholars/theorists have indicated that returning to the data over and again causes the researcher to attend not only to patterns common to the stories but also to the inconsistencies and uncertainties that produce new ways of thinking and being (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Threadgold, 1994). According to Jackson and Mazzei (2012), in the process of searching for the absent presence and irruptions, we deliberately seek ways to become “tripped up on the loose ends” (p. 31). For example, in a discussion of community college completion as part of a neoliberal agenda, I explore the idea that completing a community college degree is ideologically presumed to be a *good thing* without considering that the workforce development focus of the modern community college system serves to create subordinated workers and perpetuate existing schemes of oppression. Conversely, I also discuss the fact

²⁰ “The absent presence is that which was never there in a physical or ‘real’ sense, but that which is always already there, preceding our speaking and writing . . . [it] is the trace, of which Derrida writes, that haunts our texts and our telling.” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 17)

that research strongly connects certain social benefits to the completion of a college degree, demonstrating both the existence of “loose ends” (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012, p. 31) and the lack of closure or certainty inherent to both narrative and counter-narrative analysis and deconstruction.

The Analytics of Disruption

Based on Derrida (1997), Childers (2012) presented an *analytics of disruption* to confront the *fixity* or stability of subject identifications. Using the analytics of disruption, attention is paid to “what differs and defers” (Childers, 2012, p. 753). In more particular terms, the analytics of disruption is employed as a deconstructive quasi-methodology that privileges inconsistencies, absences, and marginal texts within data. As a specific method of thinking and reading, the analytics of disruption facilitates inquiry into the meaning of terms, signifiers, and discourses, and considers what is produced by them. Childers (2012) asserts:

...I do not “do” deconstruction, rather the intertwining of theory and methodology via an analysis of disruption as quasi-methodology permeates the analytic approach and persuades me to privilege disruptions in the data rather than casting them aside in favor of coherent narratives. (p. 755)

Additionally, as a nuance to what St. Pierre (2011) terms *conventional humanist qualitative methodology*, in which only that which is spoken or written is treated as data, postqualitative research diminishes the criticality of *presence* and allows for analysis of what is absent. This form of analysis also privileges disruption by considering intertextuality²¹ and foregrounding the tensions, aporia,²² and elisions within the data. In

²¹ Intertextuality is defined as “the complex interrelationship between a text and other texts taken as basic to the creation or interpretation of the text.” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intertextuality>

²² Aporia is defined as “A signifier that can have many meanings, but often thought of as a puzzle or conundrum...a paradox” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 17)

other words, the analytics of disruption chooses to privilege that which can be discovered by considering how texts relate to one another and by examining gaps, uncertainties, and logical impasses. Using this approach, data are examined which lie outside or beyond the scope of coherent categorization and which thus cannot be neatly compartmentalized, such as the counter-narrative data regarding Angry Black Man Ideology and Discourse.

Deconstruction via the analytics of disruption enables the same data that is used to interpret phenomena in qualitative methods to be opened up to suggest alternative possibilities and to push against virtually every element of the science-based research canon (St. Pierre, 2011).

St. Pierre (2011) indicated that there are no handy research design frameworks to prescribe postqualitative inquiry. Further demonstrating the postqualitative pushback against methodological rigidity, in *Thinking with Theory* Jackson and Mazzei (2012) affirmatively stated that they "...eschew efforts to triangulate, verify, affirm, confirm, and substantiate, for to do so is to seek 'easy sense'." (p. 31) Jackson and Mazzei (2012) asserted that making *easy sense* of the data is the result of adherence to canonically imposed methodologies which fail to push the current limitations of knowledge, further stating that:

We argue that qualitative data interpretation and analysis does not happen via mechanistic coding, reducing data to themes, and writing up transparent narratives that do little to critique the complexities of social life; such simplistic approaches preclude dense and multi-layered treatment of data. (p. vii)

There exists a productive epistemological tension between postqualitative research approaches such as the analytics of disruption and Critical Race Theory, which I address next.

The Tension between Postqualitative Approaches and Critical Race Theory

In addition to traditional qualitative and postqualitative methodological conflicts, another potential site of discord must be visited for purposes of my study, and that is the

utilitarian tension between postqualitative analysis and Critical Race Theory. Deconstruction is heralded by its practitioners as a way of thinking/reading that is fluid, a process which cannot be *done* (Childers, 2012) but one which already exists and is *always already* in a state of becoming (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). While the borderless parameters of deconstruction release its practitioners from the limitations of positivist thought and accountability, they facilitate this conceptual freedom through the use of esoteric terms and processes which, though accessible to the academic elite, are not so readily approached by those who are not students of philosophy—raising an essential question as to how well postqualitative thought can function in tandem with activism.

Critical Race Theory is a way of thinking that has characteristics of a social movement, and it aims to bring a substantive benefit to the communities it represents and to disseminate the tangible advantages of its insights broadly and beyond the academic audience (Kohli, 2015). The challenge, then, is to figure out how to turn postqualitative thought into social proactivity and response. In my study I have attempted to do so by providing a unified theoretical and practice-based set of recommendations which were created by grafting together the insights availed through the thematic, counter-narrative, and conceptual analyses of a single dataset, centered on a particularized set of research questions.

Research Questions

According to Maxwell (2012), research questions specifically point to what the researcher wishes to better understand, often emphasizing what is not known and exploring the relationship of the questions to each other. The principal research questions addressed in my study are:

- What were the experiences of African American men who completed a community college degree as they pursued higher education attainment?
- How do their counter-narratives intersect with dominant social and educational discourses regarding African American men?
- How are their counter-narrative experiences divergent from dominant social and educational discourses regarding African American men?

In my study I critically examined the relationship between participant counter-narratives and the stock stories of the master narrative with the goal of enabling nuanced, anti-deficit discourses regarding Black male community college graduates. These counter-narratives were based upon data or *field texts* collected from participant interviews.

Methods of Data Collection

I used Maxwell's (2012) Research Design concept to facilitate the gathering of counter-narrative data according to traditional and accepted qualitative methodology. In Maxwell's (2012) model, research *methods* provide information regarding data collection, setting, participants, data analysis strategies, and researcher/participant relationships (ethics) as explicated below.

Collecting the Interview Data

In my study, data were collected through conventional qualitative research strategies using a one-on-one personal interview in order to gather the rich, thick descriptions sought. Based on the findings of Esterberg (2002) I selected a semi-structured interview process for the following reasons:

Semi-structured interviews [sometimes called in-depth interviews] are much less rigid than structured interviews. In semi-structured interviews, the goal is to explore a topic more openly and to allow interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words. (p. 87)

A specific goal of the semi-structured interview format is to more adequately understand the perspectives of the participants by allowing their responses to shape the interview (Esterberg, 2002; Rabionet, 2011). The semi-structured format allowed me to follow up with questions that were unique to the individual stories of each participant, such as David's military experience and Malik's interest in neuroscience, and to thereby develop a richer, more informative counter-narrative that privileges and acknowledges the expertise of each participant regarding the research questions (Burvikovs, 2006; Rabionet, 2011). I conducted a single interview with each participant because my analysis was intended to privilege *concepts* within the data rather than *themes* or patterns that emerged across extensive data sets, although certain themes did come forth from the data and are reflected in the Analysis and Discussion chapter. In addition to privileging concepts over themes, the data resulting from my study is significantly affected by the context in which it was conducted.

Contextual Setting for the Study

College degree completion is currently the subject of much discussion because of issues such as student loan default rates, disreputable and unethical academic practices among some higher education institutions, and the reconsideration of traditional higher education models. My study consists of social, educational, and geographical contexts.

Social context. While the previously referenced issues can increase the risk of failure for college students regardless to race or gender, African American men face even greater risk because they represent the highest non-completer rate of all demographic categories and because they are among the lowest proportions of high school and college students. Two-thirds of Black men who begin their degree studies at public universities

and colleges do not complete them within six years (Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2009). Concurrently underrepresented in higher education attainment and overrepresented in low achievement, Black men are often monolithically characterized as at-risk, urban, and poor, with academic achievement among them being perceived as aberrant (Howard, 2014; Strayhorn, 2009). Failure to complete a college degree has been associated with higher rates of unemployment and criminal involvement as well as with lower rates of pay and decreased life expectancy (Howard, 2014; Palmer & Maramba, 2011, Pew Research Center, 2014). In an effort to understand academic achievement among African American men, much of current scholarship is devoted to quantifying the problem from a deficit perspective, depicting the higher education attainment of Black men in numerical terms that describe what is wrong with, insufficient for, or missing from members of the population or their environments. However, scholars such as Harper (2012) and Howard (2014) have called for anti-deficit research that privileges the counter-narratives of Black men who have successfully completed college degrees. My study responds to this call, placing specific emphasis on the experiences of community college graduates who, according to Wood (2012), are particularly underrepresented in existing research.

Educational context. I am a long-term employee of the North Carolina Community College System, (NCCCS) and therefore, have a professional interest in degree completion within this context. As an African American mother of adult men, I also have a personal interest in degree attainment and have, therefore, focused my research on African American men who have graduated from one of the 58 institutions within the NCCCS system. Originally founded in 1963, NCCCS (formerly the Department of Community Colleges) is the third largest community college system in

the country. In its 2015 Performance Measures for Student Success Report, NCCCS indicated that African American men (based on the 2008 graduation cohort) completed curriculum degrees at the rate of 34%; the lowest completion rate for all ethnic and gender categories.

Because such outcomes have been consistent, NCCCS developed a Minority Male Mentoring Program (3MP) in 2003 to “increase graduation and retention rates among minority males in North Carolina Community Colleges and other institutions of higher learning” (North Carolina Community College System Minority Male Mentoring Program Overview, 2009, p. 1). The aspiration of 3MP is to improve the academic and economic well-being of minority male students, including but not exclusive to African American men. About 82% of 3MP participants are Black men, most of whom represent the State’s low wealth populations (North Carolina Community College System Minority Male Mentoring Program Overview, 2009). The following statement appears on the Minority Male Mentoring Program section of the NCCCS SuccessNC page: “Long term, we need to develop an understanding of the persistence processes of minority male college students and the support strategies that can foster determination in improving their educational outcomes.”²³ This statement identifies a specific need within NCCCS that is addressed by my study.

Geographical context. I am a lifelong resident of the South, and more specifically, the state of North Carolina, therefore I situate my study in this region and state. In 2014 North Carolina had an estimated total population of 9,943,964, 22.1% of

²³ SuccessNC Minority Male Mentoring Program. <http://www.successnc.org/initiatives/minority-male-mentoring-program> (Retrieved January 16, 2016)

whom self-identified as African American only.²⁴ By comparison to the population of the United States, of which Blacks comprise approximately 13.2%, the relatively high percentage of African Americans in North Carolina speaks to the relevance of my study within the geographical context, as well as to the importance of understanding and improving the educational outcomes of Black people for the economic and social welfare of the State and the Nation. My study, therefore, responds not only to the stated educational needs of the North Carolina Community College System but also to the economic viability of the State and the Nation. In an effort to locate participants who would well-represent the demographics and contexts of my study, the following methods were used to identify participants.

Identifying Study Participants

I purposively selected three African-American men who completed associates' degrees at a North Carolina community college during or after the year 2010. The purposive sampling strategy is one in which the researcher chooses participants for the specific perspectives that they offer (Esterberg, 2002). The first recruitment method I used involved the informal assistance of an educational colleague who agreed to briefly describe my study to one or more African American men who graduated from her institution and give them my contact information. One interested individual, David Stokes (pseudonym), contacted me directly as a result of this process to ask questions about to the study, and I sent him a recruitment package which consisted of the Informed Consent Form and the Information and Demographic Survey form, the latter of which requested his name, age, marital status, year of graduation, and program of

²⁴ This figure does not include "Biracial" or "Other." <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/37000.html>

study. The third piece of the recruitment package was a copy of the semi-structured interview questions and protocols.

Because the degree completion rates for Black men are so low I found it more difficult to locate study participants than I had originally anticipated, so I added social media approaches to my proposed participant identification strategy. Two additional participants, Malik Freeman and Xavier Barnes, were recruited by way of a Facebook social media post to my personal page (visible to the public), in which I briefly explained the nature of my study and asked interested persons to send me a private message to request an information/recruitment package. Having worked with Xavier in a prior research project, I messaged him the study information directly and he responded that he was, indeed, interested in participating in the research project. The fourth individual, Tyson Johnson, responded to an identical post to my LinkedIn account. I chose to interview all four individuals, hoping to use all their data but also recognizing that if anything went awry with the data or permissions from any one of the men I would still have three others. I asked all four potential participants to submit the Demographic Information form as a method of confirming their interest in participation, and I gave them each seven days from receipt of the package to review the recruitment information. I then contacted all four men by email to confirm participation and to schedule interviews. The participant pool included men aged 47, 41, 40, and 24 years. Tyson completed his degree in 1998, while David, Xavier, and Malik all completed degrees after 2010.

The interview with Malik occurred through a Facetime video call because of the distance between us, and the other three interviews were conducted face to face with me traveling to conduct two of them. Of the four interviews I conducted, I had to

reschedule two of them to accommodate changes to Malik and Xavier's schedules—rescheduling Xavier's interview three times before actually meeting with him. Each interview began with a personal introduction from me along with a brief explanation of my interest in higher education attainment for Black men. I then reviewed the Informed Consent Form and obtained signatures from the face to face participants. Malik submitted his signed Informed Consent Form electronically prior to the Facetime interview. The electronic interview worked well in terms of the technology used except for a few brief seconds of bad broadband coverage. I explained to each man that the interviews would be recorded and that verbatim transcripts would be created for them to review.

Meet the study participants. In this section, I briefly introduce the men who participated in my study based upon information gathered prior to, during, and after the interview process. I also include excerpts from my own Research Diary Journal. In conducting my interviews, I found that all the men were enthusiastic about the subject matter for my study and that Malik, David, and Xavier were very forthcoming with their viewpoints and experiences. Tyson was equally enthusiastic but was less comfortable in sharing certain information, which resulted in the exclusion of his counter-narrative from the research texts considered in my study.

Tyson Johnson. Forty-seven year-old Tyson directly initiated contact with me in response to my post on LinkedIn to volunteer to participate in the study. He was the most reserved of all the men who participated, and he expressed an uncertainty that his story was relevant to my study. During the interview he made brief reference to time spent in prison but appeared uncomfortable with and only vaguely responsive to general follow-up questions on the topic. It became apparent to me that Tyson was hesitant to discuss his

imprisonment; therefore, in order to act ethically and properly care for his story, I did not pressure him to provide information beyond his level of comfort. With that, I ultimately chose to exclude his counter-narrative from consideration in my study. It would, however, be interesting to do a future study to consider the “meanings of silence” (Denzin & Giardinio, 2016, p. 45) reflected in the data that I do have regarding Tyson.

Malik Freeman. Malik Freeman is a single, 24-year-old man who completed an associate of science transfer degree at a large, metropolitan community college in 2012. The eldest of five children, he was raised by his mother and grandmother. He was actively involved in campus leadership at his community college and went directly to a flagship public university upon graduation. He then completed a bachelors’ degree in biological sciences and has recently applied for admission to medical school. Malik, in my observation, demonstrated the least amount of racialized effect of all the men who participated in my study. By this, I mean that while he was fully aware of and embraced his cultural identity, he was less likely to interpret events through a racialized lens. It would be interesting to study whether this concept might be a generational distinction between Malik and the older study participants.

The following is an excerpt from my research journal sharing my first impressions of Malik:

Malik ...was professionally dressed in a shirt, sweater and bow tie and had impeccably groomed afro-spikes. He was an appealing and well-spoken young man who was an easy conversationalist with a quick smile. We connected right away and conversation flowed naturally. He pondered his responses thoughtfully before responding.

David Stokes. David Stokes is 41 years old. He is the single father of three children aged 13, 14, and 17 years. Retired from the Army, David began his higher education

experience at a local community college and became actively involved in the Minority Male Mentoring Program, in which he still plays a leadership role. Upon completing an associates' transfer degree, he enrolled at a private university where he is pursuing a Human Services degree. He hopes to pursue masters' and doctoral level studies in the future.

It was so difficult attempting to connect with David Stokes to schedule a mutually acceptable time for the interview that I reached out to thank him for contacting me and to indicate that I would seek another participant so as not to impinge upon his schedule, but he persisted that he wanted to participate and we eventually worked through the scheduling problems and met for the interview. David was quite reserved prior to and at the outset of the interview, but as the interview progressed and David felt more comfortable, he became very open and affable. After the interview was completed, David took me on a tour of his work space, showing me the facilities and introducing me to the individuals to whom he had made reference during the interview, most of whom had served as role models for him during his matriculation at the community college.

Xavier Barnes. Xavier Barnes is a 40-year-old father of two whom I knew from a previous pilot study and instructional relationship. In addition to raising their two children together, he and his life partner co-own a clothing design store. Xavier's varied interests also include co-owning a hip-hop music studio and production business, and operating an award-winning film production company. Having completed two associates' degrees and nearly finishing a third, he has not closed his future options to the idea of pursuing a degree in law. Xavier's interview was perhaps the most intense due to his lively and animated personality as well as his particularly pointed views on a variety of topics. Following is an excerpt from

my journal in which I pondered Xavier's sometimes antagonistic relationship with instructors who were White women:

Another possibility is that Xavier was more confrontational with White women than he was with White men. He had a previous social relationship with a White woman, and while the relationship itself seemed to go well enough according to Xavier, it ended due to philosophical conflicts with the White woman's parents—who were not supportive of their relationship. The relationship Xavier had with a Black female instructor was a positive experience with a familial feel, so the question arises; was Xavier's response to the White women [instructors] specific to gendered raciality?

Compensation and Other Factors

There was no compensation for study participants and risk of harm from the research was minimal. Participant confidentiality was maintained by creating a pseudonym for each participant as well as for each person, institution, and geographic location referenced in the interviews, and I maintained a crosswalk of the alternative names as part of my confidential data. Participants reviewed their own transcripts and had the right to withdraw participation from the study at any time during the gathering and initial review of the data. Recordings and original transcripts of the interviews are housed on a secure flash drive and will be maintained for three years after publication of my dissertation. Participants were informed of and agreed to the possibility that additional published materials may result from my study and analysis.

Interview Protocols

All interviews were conducted in private, confidential settings with no one present other than each man and me, and each lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. One interview took place in a closed office space at a community college, one in a private conference room at a recreation center, another in a closed conference space at a community college, and the fourth was conducted electronically in real-time due to the distance between Malik and me. I tested all the technology and recording procedures

for face-to-face and virtual interviews prior to meeting with the participants to assure their sufficiency and functionality. I recorded all interviews using an iPhone app on my personal cell phone, immediately transferred the audio files to a secure flash drive used exclusively for my study, and then deleted the original recordings from my iPhone. These procedures describe not only how I maintained participant confidentiality but also how I utilized standard qualitative protocols and methods of data collection to establish trustworthiness for the data.

Establishing Trustworthiness of the Data

While postqualitative inquiry does not concern itself with the trappings of traditional research, I yielded to qualitative research standards to establish the trustworthiness of the interview data through credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). After producing the interview data as transcripts, I submitted each interview to its respective participant by way of email to allow them to review, confirm, modify, or even withdraw data from the field texts. By ensuring that the data was gathered according to accepted standards of qualitative research practice and by submitting the field texts to the men who participated in my study for review, I established credibility for the work.

Realizing that because I wrote the counter-narratives I privileged my own voice, I used rich descriptions and extensive quotations from the study participants to provide transferability, which considers whether the data may be applied to other situations (Wahyuni, 2012). In determining what to include and exclude from the counter-narrative, I acknowledge that my choices are political, that they are shaped by my own experiences, and that they do not reflect an innocent portrayal of the data. I established dependability, or the capacity to replicate my methodology, by maintaining

a Research Diary Journal to maintain a record of all aspects of the research study. My journal included thoughts about participant narratives, methodological processes and nuances, references to resources and terms I wanted to explore in relation to the subject matter, cited quotations, and notes from conversations with various individuals connected to my research efforts. I made deliberate and thoughtful effort to act in good faith at all times by considering and journaling about ways in which my personal beliefs may have affected the findings. To establish authenticity or confirmability, I made effort to represent the men's viewpoints and perspectives fairly by using extensive quotations (Wahyuni, 2012).

While the research process was relatively smooth and there were no major problems with any participant, the interview with Tyson Johnson, whose counter-story does not appear in this work, was not as comprehensive as the other three interviews. An additional limitation with Tyson's data was that he had completed his degree nearly twenty years prior, which was outside the research parameters for the study. His memories of particular higher education experiences were no longer clear and consisted more of generalities and somewhat vague recollections. For these reasons, although I created a counter-narrative for Tyson, I did not include it as a research text or in the study analysis, discussion or implications.

Creating the Counter-Narrative Research Texts

After conducting initial participant interviews, I provided transcripts to each of them. Each participant reviewed his own transcript for purposes of member checking, and was given the opportunity to modify or even withdraw the interview data from the study. When reviews were completed I solicited minor clarifications from each participant based on additional questions I developed during the initial drafting

process. After receiving this additional information by telephone or email, I finalized the individual counter-narrative stories using critical race methodology, centering the higher education attainment experiences and presenting them as the research texts for my study. It was at this juncture that I recognized the lack of sufficient data for a thorough counter-narrative for Tyson and decided to eliminate his counter-narrative from instant study. I was very disappointed to do so, however, because I believe that Tyson's story is worthy of telling and analysis, although perhaps as part of a different study.

I acknowledge that analysis utilizing Critical Race Theory privileges the counter-stories of the marginalized. I also acknowledge that, by using critical race methodology to create the counter-narratives as described above, I generated a distinct set of data (research texts) for analysis that is separate from the interview data (field texts). St. Pierre and Jackson (2014) said "...we recommend... using theory to determine, first, what counts as data and, second, what counts as 'good' or appropriate data" (p. 715). Thinking with Critical Race Theory and in light of the research questions, then, I chose which pieces of the interview data were included and excluded from the counter-narratives, and I chose the manner in which I represented the data as research texts. The counter-narratives also privilege concepts that reflect my own previously described positionality and research interests. The resulting counter-narrative research texts are, therefore, inherently political, existing first as field texts representing *already-interpreted* data as seen through the eyes of the men who participated in my study, next being re-interpreted, mediated, and represented through my positionality as researcher, and finally existing within the previously described contextual setting (Van Maanen, 2011). Acknowledging the political aspects of the

study design and in the interest of full disclosure, the data presented herein also includes my personal Research Journal Diary, an excerpt from which follows:

As I create the counter-narratives for each participant I consider how I am re-creating the data and making something totally new. While I am making effort to represent the data as it was presented to me, I am conscious that my own positionality and subjectivities play into the creation of the counter-narrative and, hence, become entangled in with the data. So, as I analyze the counter-narrative data I become more a part of the research by not only viewing the transcript data through my personal lens, but also by analyzing the counter-narrative stories as they have already been created through my lens. Hence, my positionality as revealed through my own counter-narrative becomes more important as data.

I began the process of creating the counter-narratives by reading and re-reading the field texts for each participant, one at a time. After several readings, I developed thematic and chronological outlines and crafted participant counter-narratives intended to tell the participant's life story within the context of his educational pursuit and attainment, drafting one complete participant counter-narrative before moving to another. Because the field texts were based on a semi-structured question protocol, there were themes that were automatically common to each participant such as early life experiences and relationships with Black women college students. The interview format also allowed me to follow up with questions specific to each participant so that the stories could take on and reflect the unique persona of each participant. Another excerpt from my journal follows:

As I worked on writing up the second counter-narrative last night I noted a tendency on my part to seek parallels between the stories of the two men, to the extent that I was thinking of how to organize my writing and I was trying to organize the second piece along the same lines as the first. After thinking about the interviews, it occurred to me that I do not need to constrain any story within the boundaries set by another. To do so would be to impede the stories of each participant by privileging the first. I must also make effort not to constrain my telling of the counter-narratives in terms of my line of questioning in those situations where the interview took another turn. In this phase of the work my intent and goal is to *reflect*, not to *defract*, the stories of the participants.

I created the counter-narratives using third person voice to disclose and emphasize that I wrote the stories and not the participants themselves. In an effort to balance the scales of voice within the findings, I used extensive, verbatim quotations from the men who participated in my study to tell their stories in their own words. As excerpted from my Research Journal Diary;

I use extensive quotations from the transcripts of the participants in an effort to privilege more of their voices. I acknowledge that by creating a written counter-narrative I am inserting and in many ways privileging my own voice, so in an effort to represent a more equitable conversation I use as many verbatim statements from participants as possible. I make a concerted effort to give them voice rather than simply giving myself voice with reference to their lives. I believe the tenets of CRT are best served in this manner.

After creating the counter-narrative research texts, I was then positioned to begin the data analysis phase. While some thematic analysis had already occurred intertextually between individual counter-narratives, I chose to begin with postqualitative analytic strategies, giving primacy to the conceptual analysis.

Conceptual Analysis

Conceptual analyses exist as a result of ideas and relationships that come forth from the minds of the co-researchers. These ideas and relationships can take the form of perceptions, or even illusions, which develop into concepts as they coalesce with existing mental constructions (von Glaserfeld, 1972). Because these concepts are constructed within the context of particular “mental operations” (von Glaserfeld, 1972, p. 2), they are not restricted by requirements such as objectivity or “truth.” According to von Glaserfeld (1972),

Adopting the view that the analysis of meaning must, under all circumstances, be closely linked to an analysis of concepts or mental constructs, makes it possible for the semanticist to disregard all questions concerning the objective existence of things and, consequently, also certain questions regarding the truth or falsity of

statements (p.2).

The conceptual analysis consists in a deconstructed review of a series of analytical questions regarding two concepts, which I call conceptual streams, which were developed by combining the “mental operations” (von Glaserfeld, 1972) of myself as researcher with those represented in the field texts and counter-narratives; 1) Angry Black Man ideology and Discourse and 2) Higher Education Attainment as Compliance and Resistance. The concept of Angry Black Man Ideology and Discourse first arose thematically as I moved through the process of drafting the counter-narratives, initially noting that Xavier, David, and Tyson had all directly addressed this concept. The concept of community college completion as compliance and resistance came about at the intersection of my review of relevant literature regarding community college completion among Black men, the connections of myself and the men who participated in my study to the community college system, and my own postqualitative thought regarding the analytics of disruption.

The related analytical questions arose at the intersection of the research, the data, and my own observations of Black men who have either successfully or unsuccessfully pursued higher education at the community college level. Having served as an educational administrator over the course of more than two decades, my personal understandings, impressions, and expectations gave preeminence to the following analytical questions:

- What is the function of Angry Black Man ideology, how is it used discursively within the master narrative, and who benefits from the use of this term as a deficit-based form of gendered-racism?
- How do Black men respond to Angry Black Man ideology, and what does it produce in them and in society?

- How is the angry Black man concept demonstrated within the higher education attainment experiences of study participants?
- How does degree attainment both comply with and resist the perpetuation of neoliberal ideologies within community college education?
- In what ways did their community college experiences marginalize study participants?
- In what ways did participants exercise agency within the educational context?

It is important to acknowledge that certain paradoxes presented themselves within my study, an example of which was the viewing of higher education attainment for Black men simultaneously as an act of resistance and as an act that furthers neoliberal ideology. A second example of paradox exists with regard to presenting relationships with White educators as a form of culturally affirmative counter-space. While deconstructing the two conceptual streams, I simultaneously applied the concept of *Thinking with Theory*, noting that some tenets of CRT, such as the permanence of racism and racial realism, the critique of liberalism, and Whiteness as Property were almost ubiquitous by comparison to tenets such as interest convergence and intersectionality.

Counter-narrative Analysis: Thinking with Theory

According to St. Pierre (2011) there is a need for more “theories [and] interpretive frameworks for analyzing data rather than more and/or better methods for collecting it” (p. 614). Rosiek and Hefferman (2014) contended that, in the absence of sufficient interpretations of social phenomena, description alone is much less useful than sound, theoretical analyses of factors contributing to these occurrences. Rosiek and Hefferman (2014) further asserted that socially produced silences, such as those resulting from deficit-

based discourses, can only be understood within the context of theory;

Qualitative research design is enormously varied, and the variation is not simply a function of different approaches to data collection...it is also a function of different theories about what counts as evidence, knowledge, reality, and the purpose of inquiry. Such theories include phenomenology, postpositivism, symbolic interactionism, critical theory, critical race theory, poststructuralism, feminist poststructuralism, postcolonialism, pragmatism, neopragmatism, and so on. (p.726)

Because of the efficacy of its core tenets and its fundamental commitment to giving voice to the marginalized Other, Critical Race Theory provides a robust analytical framework for counter-narrative analysis. According to DeCuir and Dixon (2004),

In this particular historical moment when attacks on remedies for educational inequity, such as affirmative action, are on the rise, it is essential that we utilize the full power of CRT, including Whiteness as Property, interest convergence, and the critique of liberalism. These particular aspects of CRT are especially powerful because through them, researchers are able to uncover and unmask the persistent and oppressive nature of the normativity of Whiteness, the co-option and distortion of oppositional discourses, and the ways in which policies that are offered as remedies to underachievement and educational disparity may not be in the best interests of marginalized groups, but rather serve the elite. (p. 30)

According to Bryman (2004), qualitative research—which is methodology—emphasizes “the understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants” (p.266)—that “examination” then opens the door to the application of theory. In my study, methodology, deconstruction, and theory are combined as the postqualitative analytical components of the research assemblage. While I did not initially set out to interpret participant counter-narratives in the traditional qualitative sense of *meaning making*, I did interpret their stories through my own positionality as a function of creating the counter-narrative research texts. Furthermore, the interview data itself consists of participants’ own interpretations of the world and, as such, constitutes already interpreted experience. Because the research texts consist of counter-narrative rather than master narrative, the form of

analysis used for my study is referred to as *counter-narrative analysis*. The counter-narrative methodological approach, therefore, is well-suited to the purposes of my study because it facilitates *thinking with* Critical Race Theory. This aspect of the analysis enabled a viewing of the “who, what, when, and where” of racism as seen through the perspectives of the study participants.

To conduct the *Thinking with Theory* portion of the counter-narrative analysis, I re-read each research text and examined its specific discourse in light of 1) the permanence of racism and racial realism, 2) a critique of liberalism and commitment to social justice, 3) counter-storytelling and the lived experiences of people of color, 4) Whiteness as Property, 5) interest convergence and divergence, and 6) intersectionality. These theoretical tenets were not equally represented within each counter-narrative; for example, there was less evidence of perceptions attributable to Whiteness as Property within Malik’s counter-narrative. It would be interesting to conduct further study to question whether this distinction might reflect a generational difference between Malik (24), who is a Millennial, and David (41) and Xavier (40) who are Generation X’ers.

As a recursive analytical move, I went beyond the theory-based examination of the “who, what, when, and where” as represented within counter-narrative experiences and crossed over to the “why and how” through a theory-bound examination of the concepts of Angry Black Man Ideology and Discourse and Higher Education Attainment as Compliance and Resistance. It was at the “why and how” level of analysis that the absent presences took shape more clearly for me, leading me to expand my analysis to inquire into the historical aspects of each concept and to question the ways in which power flows through their creation and perpetuation.

A third level of analysis employed a traditional thematic approach to amplify the

voices of the men who participated in my study with regard to the concepts of community college as a pathway to higher education for Black men and the role of community in their higher education attainment. These ideas are addressed as part of the Analysis and Discussion and Implications, Reflections, and Conclusions chapters. Given the requirement for rich, thick counter-narrative data to support the variety of analytical approaches combined in this hybrid methodological study, the matter of ethics and relationships with participants was paramount.

Ethics, Reflexivity, and Researcher/Participant Relationships

According to Clandinin (2013), narrative data or research texts are co-composed between the researcher and the participants, which often results in the development of intense relationships. These intense relationships necessitate an enhanced ethic in which the researcher is charged with the responsibility to care for the participant's story. It is for this reason that I chose to limit my study to three participants and one interview session, allowing ample time for a one-time collection of rich, thick data that privileges depth over breadth.

I submit that through the interview and follow-up processes with Malik, David, and Xavier, I developed what Denzin and Gardina (2016, p.44) call an "intimate familiarity" with the men featured in my study, I have maintained periodic contact with each of them subsequent to the research in ways such as receiving periodic e-mail updates regarding Malik's applications to graduate school, attending David's wedding as an honored guest, and helping Xavier sample clips from his own audio interview into a studio project. In order to minimize the ethical issues that can arise as a result of relationships between researcher and participant, I established several acknowledgements and protocols before

conducting the interviews. First, I acknowledged that, as an African American, I share a cultural and ethnic identity and familiarity with the men that could facilitate relationship-building and culture-based communication. According to Van Maanen (2011);

Fieldwork asks the researcher, as far as possible, to share firsthand the environment, problems, background, language, rituals, and social relations of a more-or-less bounded and specified group of people. The belief is that by means of such sharing, a rich, concrete, complex, and hence truthful account of the social world being studied is possible. Fieldwork is then a means to an end. (p.3)

Secondly, I acknowledged the potential for ideological differences, such as the distinction between Xavier's non-religious worldview as contrasted to the Christian perspective shared between myself, Malik, and David. Third, the men were younger than me, which opened up the possibility of generational communication issues and set the stage so that I might be seen as a mother- or authority-figure rather than as a co-researcher. The matter of researcher authority and the politics of research might have been further enhanced by my acknowledged role as an experienced educator and administrator (Van Maanen, 2011). I also acknowledged my own maternal inclinations toward Malik during our interview in that he reminded me of my son, who is almost his age, and all participants noted that they held me in great esteem as a Black woman who is a doctoral candidate and educational administrator. So, while those relational acknowledgements did, in fact, exist, they did not appear to impede communication in any perceptible way. As a fourth consideration, I anticipated that there could be gender-based identity and communication differences to navigate because I am a woman interviewing and studying men, but again, no barriers were apparent. Even Xavier, who made pointed references to his disappointments with Black women, acted with great respect toward me and the study I was conducting. In each case, the researcher-participant relationship was functionally formed, even given the initial difficulty connecting

with David and the reservations noted with Tyson. As part of the initial interview process, I introduced participants to the basic tenets of Critical Race Theory and shared my beliefs and motivations regarding my study similar to the following statement of reflexivity.

Reflexivity

Pillow (2015) discussed how researcher reflexivity works together with participant data. One interpretation of the purpose of reflexivity is for the researcher to acknowledge that she or he has become part of the representation and to consider how she or he has influenced the participants. In confirming my own previous acknowledgements of my influence within my study, I offer the following statement of my beliefs in disclosure of what I shared with the men who participated in my study prior to their interviews. I further acknowledge that by sharing my own beliefs, and because I held the respect of study participants, my views had the capacity to further color the interview data. I assert, however, that the study data demonstrates that the men who participated in my study are highly intelligent and independent, socially adept and historically informed, and that each of them is unquestionably capable of interpreting his own experiences and advocating his personal ideologies.

What I believe. As an African American mother and educator, I believe that higher education degree attainment has the ability to positively affect Black men by enhancing their life possibilities in terms of employment, social status, and quality of life. I also believe that race and racism play a role in the educational outcomes of Black people generally, and particularly so for African American men, often doing so in harmful ways that perpetuate schemes of racial oppression. In addition to my personal beliefs, I subscribe to the tenets of Critical Race Theory and I believe that they provide a robust theoretical and methodological framework through which to explore the

experiences of African Americans.

Summary and Significance

In this chapter I detailed the hybrid research methodology designed for my study and elaborated upon the analytical design, the strength of which is that it enabled me to juxtapose thematic, counter-narrative, and conceptual analysis in one holistic process. I again acknowledge the productive tensions between qualitative and postqualitative methodological approaches in that qualitative privileges voice and postqualitative privileges theory. I point to the breadth and depth of thought made possible by engaging these frictions as evidenced by the discussion of Angry Black Man Ideology and Discourse. Despite what initially appear to be disparities between the methodological epistemologies; through this study I satisfied both the social justice purpose of presenting counter-stories to disrupt hegemonic discourse, and the scholarly purposes of exploring the production of knowledge through a hybrid research method. Based upon this methodological discussion, the following chapter consists in the counter-narrative research texts of study participants Malik Freeman, David Stokes, and Xavier Barnes, who were briefly introduced above.

Chapter 5

Counter-Narrative Research Texts

Through the formation of counterstories, of those stories that document the persistence of racism and other forms of subordination, voices from the margins become the voices of authority in the researching and relating of our own experiences.

Martinez, 2014, p. 33

These ethnographic counter-stories—these tales that challenge the stock stories of the master narrative—serve quite literally to “document the persistence of racism” (Martinez, 2014, p.33) by revealing the hidden vestiges of institutionalized race-based oppression in a society that claims to be postracial. Through their interview transcripts or *field texts*, Malik Freeman, David Stokes, and Xavier Barnes (pseudonyms) relay their experiences with higher education attainment and shine an expository spotlight on racialized acts that might otherwise remain veiled and unseen. These stories detail the “who, what, when, and where” of racism, and in doing so, they give evidence of and substance to various manifestations and effects of racial oppression that are otherwise easily dismissed and denied.

By combining the field texts of the men who participated in my study with my own positionality and research preferences, the counter-narrative stories or *research texts* presented in this chapter were formed as an asynchronous act of collaboration. I acknowledge that by creating the counter-narrative stories in light of my specific research interests, my positionality becomes part of the data assemblage. I, therefore, utilize extensive and detailed quotations from the participants to authenticate the counter-narrative research texts. The counter-narratives remain, however, political representations of lived experiences in that I selected data for inclusion and exclusion based upon my positionality, theoretical viewpoint, and research intent.

As marginalized members of society, I assert that the men who participated in my study emerge as voices of authority with regard to racism through the counter-narratives, which were created from field texts obtained through a single, semi-structured interview inquiring into their higher education attainment experiences as Black men. Additional data included one set of follow-up questions solicited from two of the participants and the transcript of one public access video. I read the field texts and considered them in light of CRT and the research questions. To privilege and make prominent those participant experiences which specifically informed the questions, I then formed the counter-narratives using critical race methodology, the principal tenets of which are reiterated as follows:

(1) recognizing the intersectionality of race and racism with other forms of oppression; (2) confronting dominant ideology; (3) acknowledging the various ways that oppression is resisted; (4) exposing deficit-based research by centering the lived, everyday experiences of people of color; and (5) interviewing from multiple disciplines to analyze race and racism within particular historical and contemporary contexts (Lynn & Dixson, 2013, p.183).

A methodological tension exists within the choice to center the men's voices because *thinking with* CRT privileges the stories of the marginalized, while postqualitative methodology avoids such privileging. This tension reveals itself within the analytical treatment of the counter-narrative research texts, which makes extensive use of verbatim quotes to privilege participant voices. An additional source of data exists in the form of my own Research Journal Diary, which I maintained to document my research process. I intentionally chose not to include excerpts from my Diary in the counter-narratives in order to more unilaterally represent the voices of the men who participated in my study.

Following are the counter-narratives of Malik Freeman, David Stokes, and Xavier Barnes; three Black men who completed one or more associates' degrees through a North Carolina Community College System institution since the year 2010. I submit that their

stories represent a powerful counter-hegemonic and discursive pushback against racism in higher education and in society.

Malik Freeman

For me...getting to...community college and doing that summer Bridge program where they were telling me that I literally could do anything that I wanted to do and that I had the resources and the knowledge to do it, I never doubted myself after that.

Malik Freeman

One day he will be referred to as Doctor Freeman. This is Malik Freeman's hope and confident expectation. At 24 years of age, Malik is currently employed as a clinical research coordinator for a metropolitan hospital. This position was a very good fit for him after he completed his bachelors' degree in biological sciences with a concentration in integrated physiology and neurobiology from a leading North Carolina public university. After completing his transfer degree at his local community college, he spent three years at one of the nation's highest ranking producers of STEM graduates. Since graduating from the university, Malik has taken off a year from his studies to prepare himself for the MCAT. He plans to apply to both medical and graduate school this summer but notes that "medical school is the ultimate goal." Malik's specific aim is to become a neurosurgeon, but he had a different goal as a youngster.

Growing Up

The eldest of five siblings, Malik was raised by his mother and maternal grandmother. He lived his earliest years with his mother, who was then raising him and his two younger brothers as a single parent. With subsequent changes to the family constellation, Malik later lived with his maternal grandmother for several years until he entered middle school, at which time he returned to his mother's home.

I have four younger brothers and one younger sister. I come from a single parent home with just my mom raising my two younger brothers, her two younger sons. I was raised by her, but I was also raised by my grandmother. Some of my life I lived with her [my grandmother].

Malik's father has been consistently absent from his life and the two of them talk occasionally but "not too much. He's not very involved in my life. I'm trying to work on that. I'm trying to work on that connection." Education was more a priority to his grandmother than to his mother, but Malik was always a self-motivated student and felt it important to set a good example for his younger siblings.

Secondary Education

While he has always enjoyed school, Malik's high school years represented a time of shifting in his personal and academic life.

I guess there was a lot of transitioning in my life that I was dealing with, family and things like that, and just finding out who I was as a person. I didn't really come back into myself until my senior year. I would say was when I really started to get more involved in school again.

He originally attended a predominantly White high school. The summer prior to his senior year, Malik read the book *Gifted Hands* and was personally inspired by the story of neurosurgeon, Dr. Ben Carson. It was after reading Dr. Carson's autobiography that Malik decided that he wanted to become a neurosurgeon rather than a veterinarian, which had been his previous life goal. That same year Malik transferred to a predominantly Black school that inspired him to raise his life expectations.

Two totally opposite spectrums. However, [in the predominantly Black school], those were some of the smartest kids I've ever seen in my life, just the amount of scholarships and endowments that they got our senior year, they got over a million dollars' worth of scholarships...Honestly I can say that being there just inspired me. The people at that high school, they have a lot of pride. A lot of their family members went to that high school and just seeing them like, "I know that I'm going to college afterwards. It's not a choice." I was like "Man, these people are doing that. I want to do that."

Because he experienced a lot of physical and family transitioning during his high school years Malik graduated with a grade point average of roughly 2.7, which was hardly

sufficient to garner direct admission to a highly competitive program at a top public university in pursuit of a professional degree in medicine. Malik's standardized test scores were also insufficient to get him into his chosen career track, in fact, he needed remedial math. Many of his high school advisors encouraged him to go immediately from high school into one of the state HBCU's, but Malik knew that he "wasn't ready for that yet." He wanted to go immediately to college, however, so he applied for a new scholarship opportunity designed to enable graduates of his high school to attend the local community college, and he was selected as a member of the first scholarship cohort. "I received a scholarship called the Meecham Scholarship. That paid for, I think it was a \$1000 or \$2000 scholarship that covered basically most of my expenses at community college, so I didn't have to pay for anything." The Meecham scholarship was tied not only to curriculum courses but also to existing academic and individual support mechanisms in the community and at the community college, including the summer Bridge and Minority Male Mentoring programs.

I didn't really feel prepared and the community college, they offered me a scholarship and they also had a summer Bridge program that allowed me to take [remedial] classes in the summer. Aside of that, they also provided support and mentorship... [I realized that] community college was probably the best bet for me. I believe [the summer Bridge program is] open to any graduating high school student. You don't even have to go to [the community college] afterwards. It's just for the summer. If you're planning on going to any other university in the fall, then you can, but it's more so just to give you a heads up or get you prepared for college level upper classes... You would take one or two classes, whether that be a reading class or a writing...based upon where you [placed] on the test...[Y]ou would also take a class outside of that which focuses on, I guess, not making you into a leader, but just trying to strengthen those skills that make you great.

I'm thankful for that summer Bridge program because it instilled so much more in me than just knowledge of math and reading, but also knowledge of myself and also of my community.

Completing the summer Bridge program gave Malik the skills and confidence he needed to begin college level work the following fall.

Community College Experience

When Malik entered his first fall semester at the local community college he had completed the required remedial math work through the summer Bridge program and was ready to enroll in college level courses. “[Bridge] caught me back up to college level, which I’m very grateful for, because I don’t know where I would have been without that class...” The terms of the Meecham scholarship required that recipients participate in the campus Minority Male Mentoring Program (3MP). The 3MP was a very active part of campus life and it was run by Janet Taylor, a Black woman who was very committed to the idea and application of mentoring. Malik is firmly convinced of the value of the mentorship he received through the 3MP. “I had that mentorship there to be able to have programs that actually wanted to cater to people who were actually trying to get somewhere.”

Malik did not know exactly what to expect from the community college in terms of educational experience when he first arrived, but he was quickly and pleasantly surprised.

I was actually surprised by the quality of education, just because, I don’t even know if this is still a stigma, but for us it was, “Oh, you’re going to [community college]? Why are you going there? You’re not going to be able to make it out.” Even one of my advisors, a college advisor from high school was like, “You don’t need to go there. People don’t transfer. Go to a four-year school.” I was like, “I’m going to go. I’m going to make it.” She was like, “People don’t make it out.” When I was coming [to the community college for the first time], I was thinking this was going to be...I don’t know. I didn’t really know what to expect.” When I got there, everybody was just so helpful. I was like “I don’t understand what everyone was talking about, this stigma that was going around.” It’s a really good school, I love that school to death...One thing that always resonates with me when I think of community college... we talked about that stigma and it really inhibits a lot of people from just even trying.

Relationships Within the Educational Settings

Malik overlooked the stigma that he perceived to be related to attending a community college and involved himself in campus life, becoming engaged with faculty, staff, and student organizations. He established relationships with educational professionals and peers that extended beyond his academic endeavors. Malik described his first meaningful relationship with a post-secondary instructor as one which developed between him and a Bridge program instructor during the summer before he enrolled in the community college.

I was blessed to have a really awesome instructor who really cared for her students. I still keep in contact with her now...she was telling us what she was going through and how she was dealing with it and how she was trying to strengthen those skills for herself. I think that made it real for everybody. Everybody was able to identify with her...That's what got everybody through it.

Malik described his experiences with faculty at the community college level as also overwhelmingly positive. He attributes these positive experiences and his ultimate community college success to caring individuals and strong relationships and "...being able to sit down with them and talk to them about my goals, and what they're currently doing and what I plan to do and how we can make the experience at that community college better..."

He added the following with reference to his instructors:

All of them just wanting to make sure that, first mentally, that I'm healthy, that I know that I have people that I can talk to about my mental health, what I'm going through outside of class because, of course, school is only one aspect of your life. I've had plenty of conversations with them.

Malik found an unparalleled sense of community and belonging in his community college environment. He described an Academic Success Course that he completed during his studies as follows:

...we had one [Academic Success Course] specifically for minority males and our professor was a Black male who worked as an administrator at the school. Every morning, we would come in and there would be a quote and we would spend about 30 minutes just talking about the quote, hearing everybody's thoughts. We would speak freely, because that was the type of environment that we had. I never felt restricted to talk about myself or how I think the world sees me or how I see the world. Any time that we spoke about something, we always made it a point to mention the Black male experience, just because we saw that that is something that has been dwindling, or course, at community colleges and schools, period. Then, going beyond that, what could we do to fix that or what could we do to improve the situation. I was very comfortable talking about both with anybody, honestly. Again, the community was just so strong and...I still have not experienced anything like that, even when I went to the University.

Malik spoke at length about the positive relationships he had with faculty at the community college, and related several stories giving evidence of his experiences.

For the most part, the rest of them, at least dealing with faculty members and students, all of my faculty members were wonderful, maybe minus a few, but all of them I had wonderful interactions with. They were all very open, all very willing to help me in any way possible, recommendation letters. Just a lot of stuff. I've never witnessed anything or experienced anything like it before with people who were so genuine, who wanted to do things outside of just going to class. One of my English teachers, she was a poet and she would invite all of her students to her poetry openings and things like that. It was just a really great community.

Even [an] interaction with [a] professor [who] thought that we [a group of three Black students and one white student] had cheated with [some] cheat sheets, even that was one small encounter, but I've had other encounters with [the instructor] where he passed on knowledge and wisdom afterwards. I've been able to have conversations with him.

When asked to talk about whether he had any academic experiences with faculty, staff, or peers that demonstrated racism, Malik chronicled the following incident, which is referred to in the quotation above:

There was maybe one particular experience. I was taking a summer class...statistics. It was my last summer before I had to transfer to [the university]. I was taking it with a friend who I had taken a summer class with before and we met another friend and we had a study group. Our study group, we would meet literally every single day to do work. We were basically a family and I still keep in contact with them. When it came to our test, we were able to create a cheat sheet. What we would do is everybody would jot things down on the cheat sheet. We would take turns like, "you

want to write this, you want to write this.” And when it was test day we would make copies and we would all have the same cheat sheet because we all worked on it together.

There was one test that came up, and I don’t even know how the professor found out, but it was a group of four. There was a White male, then there was myself, and then there was two other people, a Black female and another Black male. He [the professor] automatically assumed that the White male had done all the work and that we had copied off of him. We were just like, “No, we all worked on this collectively. We’ve been working all summer together on it. We’re a family.” We were all rubbed the wrong way with that because we had been doing this from the beginning of the semester and why would you automatically assume that? The reason [the professor] assumed was because he [the White student] made really good grades, but I also made really good grades. Like I said, we all studied together, so all of our grades were good, so it shouldn’t have been “He’s making better grades than them, so he’s automatically doing it.” That’s why it didn’t really make sense for him to assume that [the White student] was doing all the work.

In spite of a few barely remarkable events that Malik thought were attributable to negative racial perceptions, he felt that his community college education was marked by caring people who wanted him to succeed and he felt free to express his perspectives as a Black man in social and educational settings.

I don’t know if I just had a rare experience to where I just had some really great professors and really great faculty members and really great community. For the most part I thought my education was amazing and I felt real prepared when I transferred [to the University] and I felt like I knew how to talk to different people.

Mentoring

Malik referred frequently to the positive effect of various mentorships he experienced at the community college, most of which occurred under the auspices of the Minority Male Mentoring Program. The environment that the 3MP and the community college created was so supportive of Malik’s particular needs and abilities that he rarely had reason to consider or confront issues of race, although he did acknowledge that some matters are more easily understood by those who share a common cultural context.

I had a lot of Black men and women that were a part of my journey when I was at my community college. I don't know, it was just a very strong sense of community. Honestly, I didn't think about race too much, just because I had that system, I had that support. It was never anything that really crossed my mind...we had conversations, we would speak openly about [race] and, of course the purpose of the program was minority male mentoring, so anytime it came to that we did, of course, state the obvious that some of us don't have resources that others have or some of us are perceived differently than some of us, but, at the end of the day, again, they instilled in us that we can do anything that we want to do and that they're going to back us in doing that. I think that that was the strongest thing for me, was knowing that, regardless of what's happening outside of my family, the mentoring program, those are people that I can always go back to who will always understand me... [because] at the end of the day, there's certain things that I can relate to more so with some people than others.

I would definitely say quite a few people who were involved in the Minority Male Mentoring Program, again, we would sit down and just talk. We wouldn't have to be talking about anything. We could be talking about the future, we would just be sitting there and talking. They would just pass on wisdom to us. This would be from Black men, Black women, my peers, and just being in that environment was great. I think the numbers [of Black men who graduate from his community college alma mater] have gotten a lot better just because the more support the program is getting, the more attention it's getting...a lot of other community colleges and schools around the country are trying to get more programs catering to people like me, because they see that those [Black male degree completion] numbers just aren't there. I think that the numbers are definitely improving, however when I graduated I was pretty much the only one from [my] class who graduated who actually transferred to another university.

One of my mentors, his name is Enoch, he's from Africa I believe he's from Ghana...he was the one who told me about self-branding...he's a very big thinker, just about philosophy and everybody's role and the next steps. We would just sit down, literally for 30 or 45 minutes, just talking about where Black men are at in the world at the moment and where we would like them to be. We would talk about issues in Africa and about how we could solve things there, about the projects we could do here that would help them there and just even about the men that were in the program itself and how we could help them.

Speaking particularly of Janet Taylor, the coordinator of the local 3MP, Malik says
“I went to her plenty of times. I have cried on her shoulder quite a few times about family, about my love life, about classes. She's just been a very integral part.” Malik's involvement

with 3MP was only one of the ways in which he engaged with his community college campus.

My gosh, that's what made it so great. I was a part of the Minority Male Mentoring, but I was also a part of student government. I joined that my first semester there, surprisingly. It was either student government or get a job...I applied for student government and ...lo and behold, I got the position and ever since then, it took off. Everything took off. I became a senator. I was involved with, not just things around campus, but administrative things. I got to meet with the president of the college. We were helping with student safety and student success....I got a lot of great opportunities, a lot of great speaking opportunities. Also, I would say that's where a lot of my support came from were the organizations that I was a part of, people who just really wanted to make sure that you were successful. The great thing about that was that all of the clubs and organizations that I was involved in, they all were interconnected somehow with other people, so again it was still all one big community, all with the same goal, which was student success. That was our aim. That was our endpoint, was increasing student success...I was also a part of the international honors society called Phi Theta Kappa.

Black Men Attending Community Colleges

Malik advocated attending community college in situations similar to his own or when circumstances otherwise make it the best course of action. Even though he was encouraged by high school counselors to attend a public university right out of high school, Malik discussed why he believed that doing so would not have been in his personal best interest, stating that in his experience, the university system expected students to enter with a particular set of qualifications.

...if you're at a college or a university, they know that you already have the knowledge, the resources to make it, but if you're at a community college, you don't know what people are working with, in a sense, or what they are trying to get to. I think it's a lot harder to try to reach out to those people [who don't have the expected knowledge and resources] and actually to try to get them to stay in the classroom. I think that if you're successful at that, then...if you know that you're that person that needs to be pushed or who is trying to discover exactly what they're doing or where they're going in life, I think community college, that would be great for that. I would definitely recommend [going to a community college]. Why? It's just because going to a community college is a lot different than going to a public university or college, just because the environment is different.

One of the ways in which his community college experience was different from his university experience was in terms of diversity. Because he attended a large, metropolitan community college, Malik felt that he was able to build relationships with people who were different from himself.

You have people coming in from different backgrounds, different ages, different ethnicities. It's just a different group of people that you wouldn't ordinarily get to interact with going to a regular college campus. I think that was what empowered me the most, because I wasn't in a classroom with [just] people who were around my age.

I would say that campus was probably one of the most diverse campuses that I've ever been on. Even student government, it was small. Any race, any religion was just about there, which was the most beautiful thing. Again, it was a family. We would come in there [and] we would all go to classes. After the day of work, we would go into the student government offices and sit down and do homework, that's what we did. We would jam, listen to some music, hang out, go get food, come back, do some more work, go to the library. Again, this is with White, Black, Indian, Asian, Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Jewish, anything that you could think of. That's how it was and that's what I knew. All of my friends, very positive community. We all took pride in the work that we were doing...I honestly spent more time there because I was still living at home, so I would catch the bus to school and from school. I would get to school maybe 8:00 or 9:00 and I wouldn't get home until 8:00 or 9:00, so I spent most of my day, just about every day, at school with my friends, studying in the library, with faculty. They really became my second family...I would definitely say, just get involved. I probably wouldn't have been as successful if I didn't get involved because it exposed me to so many different people. Then, talk to professors.

Even within the context of an overwhelmingly positive community college experience, Malik spoke of remedial coursework as both a necessity and a barrier to higher education attainment. He indicated that many of the young Black men who began their community college studies with him have not yet completed a degree because they were required to complete nearly two years of remedial work prior to taking college level courses.

...it's just that they're [Black men] not finishing. I've seen that a lot. A lot of them get discouraged by the remedial classes. I think that that's maybe one of the stigmas that needs to be changed, is maybe not even calling them the remedial class...A lot of people [say] "I could just study for the test and get past it," but you need that stuff. I wouldn't be where I am if I didn't take those classes because you need that

foundation in order to keep learning more or to get to those higher level courses. I think that was the biggest thing that hurt a lot of the guys, that and I would say, just dealing with their personal lives. That seemed to be the biggest things. Not being able to find that balance between life and school. I've seen a lot of guys and a lot of friends who just weren't able to do it because you're at school, but you also have to go to work or if they had kids and things like that.

In the context of remedial studies, Malik spoke of yet another stigma that attaches to some community college students and affects Black men. Unlike the status-based stigma that discourages higher-performing college-bound students from enrolling in community colleges, an enrollment stigma attaches to community college students who are determined to require extensive remediation. In Malik's observation, this stigma often interferes with persistence and completion.

...they get so caught up in what other people are thinking and judging them that they can't even focus on their self and their goals. I always say, at the end of the day, you're going [to the community college] to get an education and to better yourself, and that's how we all should see it. A remedial class, it says "remedial," but it's there to help you. It's there to help build you, so take pride in it. If you have to take it, then take it and make sure that you do well at it.

Black Women in Community Colleges

As far back as his high school days, Malik noted that the Black women who were his friends seemed to have a tighter grasp on both their current and future educational plans.

I would say, which is really funny, even being in high school, the [Black] females were always more put together than the guys were. Even going into the community college, it was pretty much the same. You would see the girls, they were the ones going to the library to go study, in class taking notes, things like that, while the guys were more so not so observant, not so attentive. [Black males] would go sometimes to go study. It was always funny because we had the Black male mentoring, however there wasn't a female component and a lot of the girls there were very upset about that. In my head I always thought "You all are already good. You all are already strong. You have the support. You're confident." I'm thinking, "The Black men, we need help. We need the help."

When asked whether Black men or Black women had the highest graduation rates among members of his community college graduating class, Malik was quick to point out

that the women graduated at higher rates than their male counterparts and were more intentional with their studies, also showing a greater awareness of career choices and pathways.

Definitely more Black females. You know what? They seemed to have their goals in check, but I feel like some of the guys, they were in school because they felt like they needed to be. They didn't necessarily have a goal, while the females, they knew what they wanted to do. They wanted to go into education. They wanted to go into dental hygiene. They wanted to go into medical technology. They already knew that stuff. They knew the classes that they needed to take. They knew the organizations that they needed to be a part of. They knew everything, but the guys, that's what they lacked... We had guys that were still trying to figure out where they wanted to go, what they wanted to do. They didn't even know how to register for classes. They just really needed a lot of support. To think about it now, I didn't realize how much energy it would actually take to give somebody that much support. They definitely needed that. I needed that, too. Just somebody to talk to; make sure my classes were going right. I would definitely say the females were [more prepared], they definitely had it going on. [The Black females] just always seemed so strong.

Personal Strengths

When first asked to identify the personal strengths that he believed helped him persist to complete a college degree, Malik was pensive. After reflecting for a few moments on this question that he appeared not to have given much thought to previously, he spoke of "self-branding."

Strengths. Strengths. Honestly, I would say self-branding. It's crazy, but I just learned to take self-pride in myself and what I did, what I was doing. That was [what] one of my mentors, he really stressed that just because, like he said, people see what you give them, so I just tried my best to make sure that I was always putting forth my best effort...self-pride. If you at least walk like you know it, then nobody's going to mess with you. That's what I've learned, just showing that pride and showing that confidence. Even if you don't know just being willing to step out, ask somebody for some help. That is the biggest thing. So many of the guys did not want to ask for help at all. They would come to me and I would be like, "Did you do this? Did you do this?" They'd be like, "No, man." I'm like "Why? I don't understand. If you want to get better, you just simply have to ask somebody. If you can ask me, then you can ask anybody else."

...I'm not tooting my own horn or anything, but I've always had people complimenting me on just my professionalism and how well I keep myself up. It's

funny, because we do have some Black women that work here [at the medical center], and someone was like, “I just love it when you come around here because it just shows them what a Black man is supposed to look like.” I was like, “You know what? I never thought about that, but I see what you mean...just being able to put a presence to let it be known that, again, we’re capable of doing anything. We don’t just stop at certain levels. We can do anything we want to do.

Malik is also deeply dedicated to the concept of giving positive resources back into his community and his family, and he has such a broad sense of what family means that the two terms often coincide within his self-talk—which I define as how one defines, describes, and identifies oneself and her or his personal sense of reality. Now that he has completed not only his community college degree but also a bachelors’ degree, Malik senses a need to simultaneously continue moving along his own personal trajectory but to metaphorically *go back* to help his family and community navigate the pitfalls of the educational system.

Everybody has their own set of responsibilities or have goals that they’ve set to accomplish in this world and in this community. It’s not my part to judge them on that or to make them feel bad about that, but it’s my part to encourage them and to make them know that I respect them and that I appreciate the part that they have played in this community...

All [that going to college] was for me was just doing what I was supposed to do and doing what I wanted to, which was being involved and going to classes and making good grades. Not making good grades because I felt like I had to, because I wanted to. Being able to help somebody else realize their potential and wanting to get there...this is not for me and I don’t do this [just] for myself. I also do it for my other family that’s outside. I also do it for my friends who are struggling, trying to get through the system. Even since [high school] I’ve always tried my best. If there was any way possible, if I could go back and help those people, then I would. That’s been my goal now. That’s what I’m doing ... as a Black man who isn’t represented well in just about any discipline you can think of, that’s my job. My job is to represent myself well, not only just for me, but for other Black males out there who aspire to get to this position.

Synopsis

... my mother’s youngest son just started college...Prime example of someone that I’m still trying to continue to inspire and who’s inspiring me. I just try to keep all of that in mind.

While Malik Freeman embraces the value of diversity in all aspects of his life and had many positive experiences with educational professionals and students of all races and religions during his community college studies, he distinctly experienced the world not simply as a young man but as a young *Black* man. Then and now, he endeavors to present a constructive and confident image of his demographic. Malik is a bright, motivated young man with an exceptional sense not only of his own future, but also of the collective well-being of others. Rather than demonstrating the sense of entitlement and self-centeredness that is often anecdotally attached to young people of his age, Malik has embraced a communal philosophy of being positively involved in the lives of others. Because he has had no role models to serve as professional mentors in his quest to become a neurosurgeon, he is committed to becoming a role model for others regardless to their life locus or goals. Higher education attainment has helped Malik to discover and pursue his own potentials as well as to value and promote those of others.

David Stokes

It all ties to identity, education, and also what does it mean to be a Black person in America and the things you can and cannot do... Unfortunately, it's [racism] still going on. There's things that, if we [Blacks] do, it's not going to be a slap on the wrist.

David Stokes

David Stokes speaks with the conviction of an old-school preacher to the relevance that identity, education, and personal belief/support systems have on various forms of attainment, including higher education. These are, unfortunately, key components which he believes are missing from the lives of many young African-American men today. A 41-year old single father, part-time professional employee, program mentor, licensed minister, and baccalaureate student who is also a United States Army veteran, David successfully navigates a variety of disparate and demanding roles, and by his own admission wears “a lot of hats.” After he and his wife divorced nearly 13 years ago he decided to raise their now 17, 14, and 13-year old children alone. Over the years, the fact that he had very little physical or financial support presented numerous challenges as he worked and attended college, but he “figured how to make it all work.”

David currently works part time at Pflander, Inc., a non-profit medical group where he serves as a developmental therapist for at-risk teens with cognitive and post-traumatic stress disorders. He holds a second part-time position at Barrett Community College, his alma mater, in which he serves as recruiter and retention specialist for a program associated with the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) Minority Male Mentoring Program (3MP) initiative. He is also attending Chatham University, where he is pursuing a double major with hopes of graduating in 2017. In his time out of the classroom and off the clock he works with the young people of his church as a youth minister.

Beliefs and Philosophy of Life

David believes that identity for African Americans is closely tied to one's sense of the history of Blacks in America and one's knowledge of personal ancestry. Not being in touch with these things, in his estimation, diminishes one's capacity to develop an awareness of culturally- and historically-based strengths and weaknesses. Understanding America's past within the contexts of his own family history made things start to "click" for David as he tried to understand *how things work* in society.

The system is made to keep you trapped. As a matter of fact, let's go all the way back to the 1890's... When it came down to land, it [the law] was written for Caucasian people, foreign people, predominantly if they had white skin you was entitled to buy and purchase land... What that did was create wealth that accumulated over the years for White people, Caucasians... My people don't have land. They was taken off their land. My people come from Seminole Indians and runaway slaves. We was . . . never conquered and that was something I was happy about... You need to go ahead and rewrite y'all's history books about Christopher Columbus and put the right person there. You need to re-write the whole history book about who was the first Americans and what they [Europeans] did to them.

As to what keeps him centered and focused in spite of societal disadvantages, David's self-talk centers around his beliefs in his Christian faith. David said "The more I understood what I was reading, especially when it pertains to the scriptures, the more I understood who I was." He also subscribes to the concept of "mindfulness," which he described as an ongoing process through which one becomes "less automatic with your actions and your thoughts." He identified an additional personal strength by saying "I guess [I'm] ambitious, determined. I'm not going to listen to no naysayers..."

Growing Up

David's educational persistence and success is particularly inspiring in light of the fact that going to college was never a priority for his family during his youth, nor is it of particular importance now among members of his extended family. "As for having a family

to push me to college, I didn't have that when I was in high school, I didn't have that in the military, and I don't have it now." The Stokes family has been long and widely known for their musical talents. David described his family as performers such as "musicians and preachers, dancers and singers," noting an additional proclivity toward entrepreneurial ventures but placing no particular emphasis on education. The eldest of nine children, David was born in the North Carolina piedmont but moved with his parents and siblings to a metropolitan city in the central part of the state when he was a teenager. His mother and her brother were musicians for a national gospel recording artist who lived in the area, and David traveled with them to concerts in many places across the country. As he recalls it, most of his time as a youth was spent either in church or "getting in trouble."

To be good where I was in Granville, which was a low income community neighborhood with high crime, I became a little thug and I had to become a little thug because it granted rite of passage for my family to walk the streets without being harassed. The guys in the neighborhood would help my mother with the groceries when I wasn't there and they made sure she was protected from any other outside or harmful people. It had its benefits but I had to do bad things to keep those benefits. I didn't do it because it was convenient. I wasn't doing it because it was the in-thing, the popular thing. I saw what was happening to other families who was not in it [a gang] and it wasn't very good...I hated that—that I had to do that. That almost brings me to tears. Thank God I'm here...After being jumped on and beat up a couple of times I heard them say, "Well if you was in with us you wouldn't have to worry about all this." That just registered with me. I said "Well, I got to be in."

Between the ages of approximately eleven and fourteen, David lived the double life of a church boy and a street thug, finding himself obliged to take on the later role to protect his family. "I've learned to kind of adapt, well, survive the environment that I'm in—adapt if I need to become a shark. If I need to become a goldfish, I'll be a goldfish."

When he went to high school David took on part-time work at a fast food chain restaurant, and as soon as possible after graduating he entered the Army National Guard to escape the street. He enjoyed his time in the Guard so much that he decided to activate his

service and go into the Army full-time. While serving his military term David married and became father to three children. He spent a total of eleven years in service to his country, with three tours of duty in Germany and eleven months in Bosnia. David noted that the Bosnia tour was particularly bad. “They was trying to do the equivalent to what Hitler did, ethnic cleansing. Horrible, it was really horrible. I’m glad I still got my right frame of mind.”

Single-Fatherhood and Rearing Children

During his first four years of military duty David worked as an engineer, and his remaining years were spent as an air traffic controller. These assignments provided him a very comfortable income and benefits with which to start and raise a family. During his enlistment, however, his marriage fell apart and ended in divorce. David was awarded full custody of the children, which forced him to choose whether to parent them himself or continue his military career.

The military is not really keen on a single father with kids. Your first priority, no matter how many times they say family first, is military first. Family preferred, but military first... It was rough... My oldest was in kindergarten and my youngest two were 1 and 2 in Pampers...

Family members advised him to designate relatives to raise the children and continue his career with the Army. Others told him “It’s best to take those kids and put them into foster care and just pay the foster care fees and retire and spend your life and career in the military.” David chose to parent his children himself, however, and returned to the city he was born in as a divorced single father. If he had stayed in the Army, David would have been able to retire this year, and while that fact lingers in his mind, he affirmed his choice to rear his children. “I had to take care of my responsibilities ... There’s no testimony if there is no test.”

In David's experience "there is no structure, there's no financial help, there's no real assistance" for a single father in his particular situation, and he described the difficulty of applying for public housing for his family, noting that his application is still pending after more than a year.

I had on my [professional] attire. She [the government worker] looked at me like *Who do you think you are?* Then some of the paperwork I already had given her, she was shuffling through it, it was all unorganized. She said "You've got this . . . I don't see this." I said "Ma'am, it's right there." She finally saw it.

As his children grow older, David empowers them by teaching them to take care of one another, to act as young adults, and to be mature thinkers. He instructs them on the nuances of navigating a hostile society as African Americans, acquaints them with the consequences of their color, and teaches them what is left out of mainstream history books.

It starts—the brainwashing starts. The removal of your identity. It all starts in kindergarten. I don't know what they're teaching in kindergarten now nor do I what is taught in elementary, middle school, or high school. But if I'm judging by the content that I've seen, what my kids have brought back from their studies, I have not seen them but one time bring back something in their studies that resembles and looks like them and its Martin Luther King across the board. There's so much more our Black women and men have done...

He has particularly emphasized Christianity and education to his children as pathways to a good life, instructing them not to be consumed with the idea of earning lots of money too early or to the exclusion of other things. Regarding his 17-year old daughter, he says "She's talking about she's wanting to get a job at a place like where you could have designer clothes or whatever. She worked getting minimum wage and [she's] trying to save up for a car." David consistently encourages her to go to college, telling her that the "stuff will come [and] education is the way you're going to get there."

Higher Education Experiences

When David first left the military to make a new life for himself and his children, he utilized the G.I. Bill to pay for his higher education journey. He was approximately 35 years old when he became interested in attending Chatham University.

My first thing was Chatham [University]. Faith, service, and leadership. That's the embodiment of what the institute provides. That's the core. There's not a lot of universities that I know of that you can go and the instructor says, "let us pray" and "in Jesus' name" and to talk about Christ and share our beliefs without any repercussions and stuff like that.

In spite of his attraction to Chatham University's core values, David soon realized that Chatham was not the place for him—not at that time. He needed to complete a number of developmental and transfer courses to qualify for admission, and he found out that he could do the required course work at the local community college and save money at the same time.

I just wanted to get to Barrett to get my few classes over with so I could get to Chatham. It didn't happen [that way]. There was a lot of developmental classes to be taken and I was very smart with it. Barrett Community College, one credit hour back then was ...no more than thirty dollars because I remember paying only \$600 and some change for 12 credit hours. One credit hour at Chatham at that time was like \$390.00. I did not meet their requirements. I needed an English 111, 2 maths, and a religious course and a cumulative at least 12 credit hours. Then I could transfer over to them...

David enrolled in the developmental courses he needed to complete at Barrett Community College, and there he met a woman he would "never forget." Her name was Jessica O'Quinn, and she was a staff advisor. One of many African American women who positively influenced David during his matriculation at Barrett, she showed him that he could complete an associates' degree there and save money by comparison to Chatham University. Even though David took Jessica's advice, he initially considered it something of a setback because he was so attracted to the core values represented by Chatham University.

With Jessica's encouragement, however, he soon became involved in extracurricular activities that positively changed his view of his situation, and ultimately changed his life.

After doing the developmental classes and also doing the classes I needed to transfer, I got into a program called TRIO. I worked at TRIO for a while too, it's a mentor program... The program is designed to provide services for students who are, quote-unquote, "at risk" of not achieving success by providing them the resources and the mentoring that they need to graduate...

David acknowledged that in addition to preparing him for higher level learning, his early experiences at Barrett helped him develop a skill set that even his military experience had failed to provide; soft skills. He described himself as "in a shell" when he arrived at Barrett.

[I] Didn't really need to talk unless there was a reason to talk to get a point across, to get things done. As far as this chit-chatting and talking and whatever, which is seen as soft skills, as people skills, I'm still working on it... Because of who I was, I was in a shell, and Barrett needed to bring me out of it so I could really flourish when I got to Chatham, if that makes sense... It needed to happen here [at Barrett], at this level. There's a lot of people here who care. There's a lot of people who are here who will push you to get out of that shell and there's a lot of people who are here that provided a lot of structure for me that I did not have. I don't think that I would have gotten that at Chatham...

Soft skills, I didn't know what that was. I had no idea. Interpersonal communications 101. I had learned that, as an air traffic controller, I could take a paragraph of instructions and get it out in one sentence. Talking to a person face-to-face, if it wasn't an interesting conversation, it was probably going to be one sentence.

David credited the strong Black women role models who were acting in advisory capacities with many of the organizations he participated in at Barrett with helping him develop his capacities and skills for leadership. He felt that he would have a fair chance in whatever endeavor he pursued under their mentorship, while he initially thought that he might have had to fight racial stereotypes if he engaged with organizations that had White advisors.

I was in the [Minority Male Mentoring] program... I was the vice president of the student government association. I was a student ambassador at Barrett College. I was in [a] national honors chapter... I was the chairman of the [college's council of clubs] ... [and] I would use parliamentary procedure.

While engaging in all the above listed activities, David also worked full-time at the United States Post Office in a nearby metropolitan city. When he first took on his full-time position at the Post Office he had switched from day courses to night classes, and this worked well until he had completed all the courses that were available in the evening. David had to choose whether to move to online courses or to go back to Barrett during the day. For David, "education was key" so he gave up his \$62,000 annual salary to go return to day classes and complete his degree. This was quite an adjustment for himself and his children because they had become accustomed to the comfortable lifestyle his civil service provided, but David stood by his choice to resign and pursue his studies, and he maintains that he is the better for it.

I had to discover who I was at Barrett Community College, which brought me out of my shell. The military didn't bring me out of my shell. The Post Office didn't bring me out of my shell. Working at [the fast food chain] didn't bring me out of my shell. Playing sports did not bring me out of my shell. What brought me out of my shell was education...

David recites a list of names of Black women who were part of the staff of Barrett Community College who affected his life for the better. In addition to Ladonna Johnson, David also named Lynn Dellinger, who was the TRIO program coordinator, and Jessica O'Quinn who was his TRIO advisor. He also noted a relationship with a White man, a faculty member named Bill Bergen, as a positive influence. He says of Bill, "He saw me as different. He called me by my first name when I first got to class. He said 'Ladies and Gentlemen, this is David. You're never going to meet another guy like him. He's going to be famous one day. He's going to be something'." For Bill to make these statements about

David without really knowing him told David that the positive reputation he had established with other instructors had preceded him.

David did, however, have a few negative interactions with faculty at Barrett that seemed to be racially motivated, but he acknowledged that some people believed that he may be “just seeing things” in a racialized way. David countered that argument by referring to *The Thomas Theorem*, which he defines to hold that “What we perceive is what we believe...the situation that one finds oneself in is real, it’s real in its consequence,” and he specifically described a few situations in which racism affected his experiences as a student. One situation involved an instructor who chose to single David out in front of the class for having some incorrect information, requiring him to see her after class without requiring the same for several White students who were in an identical situation.

She single-handedly pointed me out in front of everyone else like “You, I want you to come here after class because I’ve got something to say to you.” I was like, “I’m not the only one who got it wrong. You had plenty of other people to call out. I feel like you really set me apart. I wanted to say “I feel a little bit, kind of intimidated by you—not scared—but I’m intimidated because if you’re doing this right now in front of everybody, what are you going to do to my paper behind my back?”

As another racialized incident, David remarked about a faculty member whom he perceived to engage differently with White students; not in terms of *what* the instructor communicated to them but in term of *how* he communicated with them.

...people will say ‘You’re just seeing things’ but if you had a recorder and you would record it and hit the play back, let’s just count up the positive interactions and engagements and the eye contacts and the pushing of assistance [to one] versus the other one. Let’s weigh in on that. They would have some tangible evidence with some numbers...

I saw how he [the instructor] interacted and engaged with Caucasian versus those who were Black. If you was Caucasian, he would talk to you [White students] like it’s normal but if you was Black it was like, you know [making a distorted face] the facial features would just really say “I don’t like how you’re talking... There was an assignment that was to be turned in and there was a complication with the website, it

was down. Not only did I...could not turn it in via email but there were five others who had the same problem. I was one of the Black individuals who had the same problem. As the two females go up there, who are Caucasian, and begin to plead their case, he's like "Okay, there's no problem. Just send it to me later on." When I came to plead my case, oh it's "see me after class."

The above-described situation is one of several that David reported to college administration, saying that "Being quiet...is something that's hard for me to do when I know I'm being scrutinized without cause, and if I am I know it's because of my skin." Regarding the incidences of racism that he personally encountered, however, David summarized his experiences as follows:

I saw it every now and then with those who really didn't know me. As the instructors began to know me, to know what I represent, their bias began to drop. The one thing I had going for me was that I knew who I was and I had experience...

When he graduated from Barrett Community College he was singularly honored by its senior administrative staff. The president and a vice president had a special recognition plaque made for him, and the college ran a front page feature article in the local paper with a color photo of him after his commencement.

Furthering His Education

After completing his associates' degree, David achieved his goal to be admitted to Chatham University, where he is currently pursuing a bachelors' degree.

I graduated with an associate of arts at Barrett Community College. I'm attending Chatham right now, double major in human services and criminal justice. I should have graduated this year but due to life complications and other things, sadly it breaks my heart but still I must charge on. I may graduate in 2017, next year. And I really wanted to be done this year and move forward, I really did. There's a lot of job openings that I would've been slotted in and would have been the perfect fit with nice compensation because I have to provide.

Of his current student status and experience at Chatham, David said "At my university, if I go to an instructor I've had before, they're excited to see me in their class.

‘Oh, that’s David right there’.” When he completes his bachelors’ degree, David intends to pursue a masters’ degree and ultimately to work toward a medical, psychological or philosophical doctorate. “I do believe I have the skill set to do [the work] but I want that documentation saying I completed this.”

Higher Education Attainment among Black Women and Black Men

David recalls that he was one of “just two or three” African American man to graduate the year he completed his associates of arts degree, and while he did not remember exact numbers he indicated without hesitation that there were more Black women in his class than Black men. David also observed a different set of social dynamics with Black women as students, indicating that some of them dressed in clothing that was too tight and that they came across as “a little bit controversial...and really loud...” in a way that reflected rudeness, abrupt conversation, and unpredictability. David indicated that the more negative actions of some Black women students led to correspondingly negative perceptions and beliefs about them. He indicated, however, that there were Black women students who dressed well and conducted themselves appropriately.

Based upon what he learned in a positive psychology course, David attributes some of the difference in the graduation numbers between Black men and Black women to their respective support systems.

I’ve learned in my positive psychology class for most parts if they’re married [men] they receive a lot of their emotional coaching from their spouses—from their wives. Wives or women—they receive a lot of their emotional coaching and stuff from their friends and families. That being said, it depends on what woman is in that man’s ear. Or it depends on what he’s using as his guide, what’s his ambition?

Minority Male Mentoring and Attending Community College

During his tenure as a student at Barrett, David participated actively in The Minority Male Mentoring Program on his campus, an affiliate of the North Carolina Community College System's Minority Male Mentoring Program [3MP]. The purpose of the 3MP is to retain minority male students and help them graduate and transfer to universities. Because men are statistically in the minority in terms of college enrollment, the 3MP at Barrett College is open to all men. Furthermore, Barrett's 3MP is open to women, so anyone who wishes to participate is welcomed to join after completing an application process. The focus of Barrett's 3MP is mentoring; helping students become successful in academics and in life. Being exposed to this group as a student ignited a passion in David to share that powerful and life-changing mentoring experience with other students, and after he graduated he was able to return to Barrett in a part-time leadership role with their 3MP as a mentor and recruiting/retainment specialist.

It's a combination of everything I can throw at these guys—ladies and gentlemen—to open up their horizon so they can see themselves, see their strength and their weaknesses, to see if they're a team player or not...With my military background I have a whole laundry list of things that I can use to build team working skills. Coping skills with the development portion of [my] therapy [work], creating that self-awareness so they can realize who they are in the grand scheme of things and where they belong...What that's going to do is position them for life...I want them to know what they can work on the become better...

In his professional capacity with Barrett's 3MP, David has set new attendance records for total number of attendees and guests, strategized new recruitment techniques, and increased membership by over 50%. He would love to take on a full-time role with Barrett's 3MP if the future allows because he has learned through his own experience what it takes to succeed in higher education, and because he sees the clear benefit of mentoring

students to help them address the individualized issues that get in the way of higher education attainment.

These individualized issues are what determine whether community college is the best route for any student, including Black men. David believes that the student's circumstances must be evaluated to decide the best approach to higher education attainment; to discover the best pathway to successful completion.

There's...a lot of factors that go into that. Age and experience—huge. The difference between coming right out of high school or being in the military 11 years and coming out. I kind of knew a lot of my strengths and weaknesses but really *didn't* know, I had not been out of that shell yet. I think the education brought me out of the shell with experience tagged along with it. Some might be brought out of their shell with no experience. Because of my dynamics, it was totally different...If I could do it all over again I would still go the military route because it brought me a whole different perspective.

Synopsis

When I have a direction that I want to go and I believe the direction I'm headed is the right direction, I'm going.

David Stokes' is mission-driven, motivated, and resilient. He has taken the twists and turns of his life in stride and kept stepping—continuing to climb higher. Based on his own lived experiences he concluded that higher education attainment was of paramount and life-changing importance to him and to the accomplishment of his goals, and he passionately and professionally shares his vision of the power of education with his children, with his mentees, and with anyone who is open to pursuing self-awareness and personal change.

Xavier Barnes

Every time a Black person, a Black man, tries to stand up for himself, I call it war. It's not me saying that I'm declaring war. It represents war, because if I'm standing for me, it's anti-damn near everything y'all are doing...If we're at war, then I'm on the front lines.
Xavier Barnes

Xavier Barnes is a true polymath; the quintessential self-made Renaissance Man. An open and affable fellow who readily engages conversation, his passion *at the moment* involves him in several successful and mutually supportive artistic ventures. Over the course of time his efforts to gain employment repeatedly slammed him against the proverbial brick wall, so he decided to “put [his] own thing together.” Among his ventures, Xavier co-owns a fashion design enterprise with the mother of his two children, whom he proudly refers to as his “fiancé for life.” He is also CEO of a recording studio/record label that he co-owns with his brother, where he is currently producing for five local hip-hop artists. A third business venture is an award-winning film and photography enterprise which he also co-owns with his brother. While his current entrepreneurial endeavors are quite diversified, Xavier primarily describes himself as a filmmaker. He is quick to state, however, h’that’s really where I am *right now*,” making it clear that he has no qualms whatsoever about going another direction if the future suggests an interesting and productive change of course.

Life

Xavier’s willingness to engage new vocational possibilities is closely tied to a personal life philosophy that revolves around critique, inquisition, message, and volunteerism; a philosophy which has defined him since his childhood. Xavier was one of four children, three of whom were boys and who were raised by their mother and grandmother after the unexpected death of their father when Xavier was 13 years old. His father’s death gave birth to an existential quest within Xavier; an arduous search for

someone who could show him how to function as a Black man in a world which he discerned at an early age to be built upon White supremacy. While he had uncles nearby, they were busy most of the time and this left Xavier to the recourse of finding his role models among members of the extended community. The only Black men who were visible and available to him were members of his mother's church, which he and his siblings attended regularly if involuntarily. After many unsuccessful efforts to engage with these men, most of which resulted in what Xavier considered to be useless condescension and "down talk," these men unequivocally lost his respect and engendered his deep disappointment. At 18 years of age he found himself still asking "what do men do?" and feeling "marginalized ... from older Black men," sensing that he wanted more for his life than he saw in the lives of the role models he had watched since childhood.

I'd always give men, especially Black men, a lot more respect than they deserved ... because I felt I was let down by Black men and stuff. My daddy wasn't around. My uncles were there but they were working minimal jobs. I was like, 'I want to do more than that.'

From his youth Xavier had been a solid student and he was always an avid reader. Education was never presented as a priority in his home in that his mother was not particularly attuned to or engaged in the children's academic work. Xavier changed his grades a few times before showing them to his mother just to be sure he would "make her happy" and to assure that she could be proud of his grades and maintain an air of respectability.

Her thing was just to make sure we weren't being bad. Education was like 'Go to school, come home, do your homework'. It wasn't like 'I'm going to check your homework'. It was like 'Yeah, I got it, Mama.'

Right out of high school, Xavier made his first attempt at higher education, registering for classes at the local community college along with some of his young friends

who did most activities together as a group. Xavier and his friends also attempted to take on activist roles in the community to push against the racism they saw and experienced, but they found themselves ill-equipped for the task and unaware how to execute their agenda for social change.

White Supremacy

Xavier was by his own confession anti-White in some regards, and very much anti-establishment, and he had read enough to convince himself not to allow anyone to “steer” what he thought, so his first foray into higher education ended quickly in a tactical retreat. For a number of years after leaving college he worked at various short-term jobs ranging from janitorial work to waiting tables, all the while reading voraciously and indulging a particular predilection for conspiracy theory. He shared a compelling story describing how he first came to his own conceptualization of White supremacy and then later became intrigued by conspiracy theory.

I dated a White girl for a long time...Her daddy was a preacher...I pulled from that [experience] a lot dealing with White people. It was a situation where they don't want her with no Black dude... I even ended up getting a job at her father's church as the janitor...I'm in there every day at their church cleaning...The dude that don't want me [speaking of the preacher who didn't want Xavier dating his daughter] hired me, and I think that he was doing something. I think it was a weird game of, “I'm going to put you in a place where my daughter can see that you ain't nothing'.” I think that's what he was doing...This is a two building, two big buildings that I'm cleaning, The library was over there, I'm reading all these Christian books for hours every day. I clean up real quick so I can hurry up and read. I read the entire Bible at this job. Read that and all these other loads of books. I started grabbing up the spiritual readers. This is when I started becoming an avid reader. It's a big deal, I pulled from this a lot. This is where it all turned, because my thing was proving to this White man that *I'm equal to you, Homey. I don't care if you're sitting in here with all this, and this, and this. You're still a man. Your daughter loves me, so you got to deal with me.*

In spite of the fact that Xavier and his girlfriend were aware that her parents were not in favor of their relationship the couple continued to date, and Xavier made efforts to

become acceptable in her parents' sight by becoming more knowledgeable of and engaged with their spiritual beliefs.

I'm going to show them I'm the best Christian. I was walking the walk and talking the talk, still doing my street stuff, but they didn't know that. I was putting on the face and what not. I'm like, "Look lady [speaking to his girlfriend's mother], I love this girl. I don't know what's the resistance. I believe in Jesus and everything. Y'all are people of God." This lady said, "Son, I don't have to let you date my daughter to go to Heaven. I'm like, "You're sitting here saying that you're going to discriminate against me. Shouldn't you love me as your brother?"

According to Xavier, "The real Blackness was me dating that White girl." Her parents remained intractable throughout the year and a half the young couple dated and saw no incongruence between their racial beliefs and their religious claims. Xavier and his girlfriend remained together until she went off to college, at which time he concluded "We got everything against us, girl" and they parted ways. His life-long experiences with religion converged with the extended encounters with his girlfriend's family to further inform his conceptualization of White supremacy. This assemblage of incidents led Xavier to explore and be fascinated by the church library's section on conspiracy theory, and he reflected that this was how he became "educated in that church."

I started coming upon conspiracy books... This was appealing to me more than religion and everything... I went to the conspiracy section and lost my mind. I loved it... I was just blown away by the whole game that was being played, the duality of life. I learned it right there [in the church library].

Higher Education

Along with janitorial service and other legitimate lines of work, Xavier maintained a second string of tax-free income until a life-change made him decide to return to higher education.

I was in the street. I'm making money. I needed to make money. Not no crack or nothing like that, but a little marijuana or something. I got bored with that and my

kid was on the way. I was at a job and got laid off. I'm like, 'Really? My back is against the wall, well I'm gonna go to school.'

By the time he reached 28 years of age, Xavier was about to become a father, and he knew that the time had come for him to steer himself toward a life course that would be more meaningful and productive for himself and his growing family. Xavier characterized his decision to return to higher education as "accidental"; he didn't go back to college on the normal college-to-workforce trajectory, and he never wanted to take up the typical vocations.

By the time my kid was coming I was 28. I was a little older. I had been around and I'd seen a couple of things. Been in a couple of different states and what not. Community college was like, 'Let me just try that and see what happens'... I don't know who I talked to, but just from them having a conversation [with me] we're just like, 'You ever thought about being a lawyer? You seem really. . .' I was like, 'That's what you just gathered from that [conversation]? Then I'm going to do that. Let's do the paralegal, or let's do that. I fell into it mostly. I wasn't like 'I need to get to college to get educated'. I was never like that. I think there was a check coming. I was like, 'Let me go over here and get this Pell.' I didn't even know about Pell grant [before going to college]. Once I heard about it, I'm going to college. Pell grant brought me to college. That's what it was.

Xavier enrolled in the paralegal program and didn't expect very much in the way of academic challenge or engagement, but to his surprise he encountered faculty in his program of study who were impressed with him, who engaged his penchant for debates, and who encouraged him to push his limits.

Mr. Landis, White man, was...he was awesome. He was impressed with me. He was like, 'Dude, if you DON'T go and be a lawyer'...because I'd be in there like, 'Hold on, Mr. Landis' and he was like 'That's a good perspective'. He'd break it down. He'd be like, 'That's a great question' He'd be so impressed and I was impressed by his being impressed. I'd go sit in his office and just chop it up.

Another member of program faculty, Mr. Abernathy was also a White man who encouraged and guided Xavier as he reached toward potentials he had never previously imagined.

Mr. Abernathy was my advisor. We were right there in paralegal class on racial discrimination. I was *text book* doing everything it said to do with the EEOC [to represent myself in an employment discrimination claim] . . . He helped me all the way through that thing and I was like, ‘Wow’...

Xavier won his pro se discrimination claim against a previous employer with Mr. Abernathy guiding him all the way through the hearing process, but the responsible company shut down and was able to avoid paying out most of his damages. Even so, “it felt good” to win the case and he was grateful for Mr. Abernathy’s direction. Xavier had relationships with Mr. Abernathy and Mr. Landis that he considered to be more akin to friendship. He also had very positive relationships with a Black woman who was an instructor and a Black man who was an administrator, both of which engendered feelings similar to kinship or community.

I was trying to be friends, because I was a little older [than the other students in the program]. I didn’t want to go hang out with the kids. My friends was the faculty.

Unfortunately, some of Xavier’s interactions with instructors were not positive. He had a run-in with Ms. Vaught, an English teacher, which revolved around an issue of race. In response to a comment Ms. Vaught made in class, Xavier expressed the opinion that, from the Black perspective, her comment demonstrated White supremacy. Ms. Vaught took offense and told him “you can’t grandstand in my classroom!” Xavier rejoined that she told students they could express themselves in her class. The situation escalated when Ms. Vaught raised the palm of her hand to Xavier and turned her face away.

‘See me after class.’ I was in her office, I said, ‘I don’t know if you know what this [replicating Ms. Vaught’s earlier gesture toward him] means in my community, but you told me to shut the fuck up, I felt so disrespected and you will never treat me like that again’. I was like, *Uh uh, lady, no don’t ever...* She was like *Black man, I’m nervous and scared in here now. You’re intimidating me in my office now.* She went to the dean and turned it into this thing...the dean...was all leaning in on her side, looking at me like I was the problem.

Xavier expressed his belief that that Ms. Vaught felt intimidated in her classroom; faced by what she interpreted to be an angry Black man in a closed environment. Xavier admitted to raising his voice for the purpose of assuring that Ms. Vaught understood that the issue he raised was real, that he was not a child and should be addressed as an adult, and that he was in her class to learn. While there was never a complete meeting of the minds, eventually the situation was defused and both Ms. Vaught and Xavier apologized to one another.

A second negative encounter occurred with another White woman who was a faculty member, Mrs. Kennedy. At first Xavier was impressed by her critical thinking and expression, and he was interested in engaging critical discourse with her as was his habit with his other instructors. In an effort to befriend her, Xavier presented her with a copy of a DVD discussing a governmental conspiracy theory related to the tragedy of the World Trade Towers. Mrs. Kennedy rejected the video as well as its line of reasoning and would not engage Xavier at any level of critical discussion.

There was no argument. I thought we were getting ready to get into this thing. I think that she was mad, because a Black man that came in there with some information that was really important to point a finger at White people for being wrong and dirty and all this . . . I didn't even go to her office no more, it wasn't the same. I don't know, she started looking at me like, 'I think he hates White people.'

Overall, however, Xavier indicates that he liked his instructors and that they were some "really cool people." He enjoyed his learning experience and especially appreciated it when his instructors asked him "Xavier, what do you think of this?" and when they engaged him in conversation in and out of class. His expectation for instructor performance was high and he maintains that he "made them teach [him]." He once told Mr. Abernathy "I paid you for these classes...I'm the boss in this situation if you really want to look at it," to which Mr. Abernathy magnanimously replied, "Yeah, I get what you're saying."

Xavier completed his associates of applied science degree in Paralegal Technology and decided to enroll in some additional courses. Financial aid was much more plentiful during those years and he was able to pick and choose among courses based solely upon personal interest.

I called myself a professional student after a while, after I graduated paralegal...For [a] whole year ... I got to choose all the classes I wanted to. By the time a whole year was up, I said, 'Let me see what I'm close to.' I saw that I had taken a lot of communication classes and I was one class from a communication degree. I was like 'Really? I'm getting ready to get his degree?' That was me just choosing the classes that I thought would be interesting. It was like, that's communication? That speaks me, that says me, that was really cool.

Not only did Xavier complete a college transfer degree in communications, he continued to follow his interests while financial aid remained at his disposal and came very near completing an associates' degree in Digital Effects and Animation Technology. After completing all the curriculum courses that held his interest, Xavier decided to put his educational pursuits to rest just four courses short of attaining his third degree, which he has no current desire or intention to complete. If he ever returns to education, he will pursue a different course of study to explore other interests.

As for more education, give me some law because I'm trying to find a way to merge the political aspect and artistic thing, to where it's like, artistically it was beautiful and it was a good message. That's where I am at on that. Yeah, an 'alchemy' kind of thing is what I like to say. Just something you never would've put together that worked...I delve into everything. I mean there's so many things. I'm in political, racial, music, just every aspect of everything.

Black Men and Community College

While Xavier clearly found a path to educational success through the community college, he is not quick to recommend that route as a general recourse for Black men in general because he sees the decision to attend college anywhere as very nuanced. Having his

own experience with an earlier attempt at earning a degree right out of high school, he is conscious of a variety of factors that work toward higher education attainment.

Some dudes ain't built for this. They're really not built for this. I graduated high school in '93. Came straight over here in '94 and all of us dropped out. Everybody I knew dropped out...Where did everybody go? What just happened?

During his second time around in the community college more than a decade later, Xavier was conscious of being older than most of the other Black students on campus and he was determined not to let the younger kids "kick [his] butt." He knew that they were looking at him as an example and he didn't want to let them down. "I'm about community. I'm about sharing. I'm about education. I'm big on not competing." Xavier was also very aware of the economic challenges the younger students faced that hailed them away from their academic pursuits, and he knew the sacrifices they would have to make to attain their degrees.

You're going to have to sacrifice. Then it was always food, with other kids, they'd have them little tickets [EBT food vouchers]. I'd buy tickets from kids, I knew what it was. "Here man, just bring me the tickets" and I'd buy it. It's basically just giving them money. I know I was helping a lot of kids. Some kids coming to me like clockwork on Mondays...They need some gas money...I see the little dudes out trying. I respect that. I love you for trying. I know what it...if you come to me obviously you're close to leaving...

When Xavier graduated with his first degree, he distinctly remembers that only one other Black man, a life-long friend, graduated with him. He said of himself and his counterpart, "We holdin' it down for the boys." A few Black women graduated with him as well.

Black Women

Xavier vaguely remembers that "there were a few Black girls" who graduated at the same time as himself and his counterpart. His impression of Black women was not much

more positive than his ideas of older Black men. He viewed the persona that he saw represented among Black women as in some ways threatening to him and other Black men because, in his experience, Black women have generally tended to compromise their identities in order to meet with less resistance from Whites. In doing so, Xavier sees the concessions that he believes Black women have made to cause themselves to be viewed as less of a social threat to Whites as pushing Black men further into the margins.

[Black] women turn into White women. It blows my mind sometimes...when I see any kind of Blackness coming out of a Black woman I'm like "Sister!" Just shallow, very shallow. My experience...it's almost like they're willing to smile and be less of a threat, like really to just "I'm cool" . . . It's a survival thing. They're doing what they got to do to survive. I'm like *Your survival is making it harder on me.*

Xavier expressed his beliefs that the entire system is designed to take care of Black women, particularly those who are single parents, and that the law offers protections for everyone except Black men.

I think Black women get it a little easier on a lot of levels. They pretty much are taken care of if they kick us out. They can get the benefits, the housing and there's rules. You can't have a man around the house. It's like, "Wow." Then this child support thing. It's all supporting women. I know there's situations where a man could be stuck with the baby. Everything is just supporting...I see it as a breakdown of the Black family. That's how I interpret that. It's like, *Let's keep them weak and let's keep them in a place of not togetherness, not unity* . . . Man, it seems that's a racial law.... The laws, they're not made to keep a Black down, they're made to lift a White man up, lift a White lady up and assist a Black lady. They were never for me.

Xavier saw African-American women as having for the most part forfeited an authentic Blackness and as having accepted social assimilation in exchange for inclusion. He also saw that forfeiture as having created an expectation that he, as a Black man, should perform in like, compliant fashion, which is something he adamantly refuses to do.

Synopsis

That's where the alchemy comes from, it's got to be something different. Its' got to be some new thing. I feel like I'm trying to create something. A new movie, new

wave of music, new wave, just new. Doesn't have to be a hot thing, but just as long as it sparks somebody to be like 'I don't gotta do it like this?' No, no, please stop doing that. You're just mimicking. Everybody's walking around like zombies to me, slavin'.

Xavier Barnes lives unapologetically as a Black man in what he sees as a patently White Supremacist society. Wherever he goes and whatever he does, he purposes to represent his authentic Black self intentionally, without hesitation, and without qualification, in order to add his unmasked perspective to the world mix. A self-described socialist who doesn't "really rock with religion," he lives his life according to his own interpretations, constructions, and boundaries. Higher education attainment for him was always a means to an immediate end—first, it allowed him to have the money he needed to leave the street income behind, next, it allowed him the time he needed to spend with his young son, then finally, it allowed him to pursue artistic and academic endeavors that satisfied the many facets of his intellectual curiosity. By no means will Xavier allow education to package him as a workforce deliverable and set a particular path for his life; rather, he will engage with the alchemy that creates something different.

Summary and Significance

Within these counter-stories live the higher education attainment narratives of three Black men who defied the master narrative, representing the one-in-three African American men who persist to complete a community college degree through an institution within the North Carolina Community College System. These counter-narrative research texts present a counter-hegemonic discourse because they tell stories of success that defy anti-Black narrative representations of academic achievement and college graduation among African American men. They defy stereotypical notions in that, Malik, for example, not only completed his community college degree, but his academic performance was so strong that he went on to graduate from a top STEM university with aspirations to attend medical school. David and Xavier both exemplify Black men who are raising their children, who are leaders in their families and communities, and who prioritize giving something back into their neighborhoods.

The counter-narratives support the key assumptions of my study, demonstrating, for example, how the American education system perpetuated racism through classroom management and pedagogical practices. The lived experiences of the men who participated in my study open up new ways of thinking about and understanding their educational outcomes by revealing hostilities and challenges they perceived and faced, as well as by showing how they addressed and overcame them. The demand for a more equitable distribution of the educational properties historically reserved for Whites is a fundamental tenet of social justice theory, and is generally reflected in the men's notion that education provides a mechanism for their upward social mobility (Young, 2011). While the idea that colorblindness and meritocracy perpetuate educational inequities was not raised within the

counter-narratives, these ideas are addressed at the macroscopic level in the Analysis and Discussion chapter. The counter-narratives also indicated that gender causes Black men to experience higher education in ways that can be distinguished from the college experiences of Black women, for example, in terms of their respective levels of preparation for and commitment to college level studies and persistence to graduation.

The research texts exist for the purpose of illuminating the research questions regarding the higher education attainment experiences of African American men who completed a community college degree. They also demonstrate both intersections with the master narrative (e.g., the lack of an adult male presence in their homes as children) and divergence from the master narrative (e.g., persistence to degree completion). In the Analysis and Discussion chapter which follows, I view the counter-narrative research texts in light of qualitative and postqualitative methodologies which include thematic, conceptual, and counter-narrative analysis. In this manner, I establish not only a context within which to analyze the subject of higher education attainment for Black men, but also to study the hybrid research methodology utilized in my study.

Chapter 6

Analysis and Discussion

So the work of post-coding analysis cannot be neat, tidy, and contained. Furthermore, it cannot be easily explained either during or after analysis. It certainly cannot be replicated because it is emergent and experimental.

St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 717

My study is designed with two purposes. The first purpose, which is focused on social justice, is to disrupt the master narrative by providing a counter-hegemonic discourse to challenge the anti-Black narrative surrounding African American men in higher education and society; seeking to make visible, problematize, and disempower manifestations of racism. This purpose also responds to the scholarly call for research centering the counter-narrative stories and voices of Black men who have completed college degrees (Griffin et al., 2010; Harper, 2012; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Howard, 2014; Kaba, 2005; Noguera, 2012; Palmer & Maramba, 2011; Wood, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2010). The second purpose of the study, which is addressed in the Implications and Conclusions chapter, has a scholarly intent which is to explore the productive tensions between qualitative and postqualitative research. The research questions were as follows:

- What were the experiences of African American men who completed a community college degree as they pursued higher education attainment?
- How do their counter-narratives intersect with dominant social and educational discourses regarding African American men?
- How were their counter-narrative experiences divergent from dominant social and educational discourses regarding African American men?

The analysis and discussion takes a broad view of the participants' research texts by viewing them from both qualitative and postqualitative perspectives; engaging thematic, conceptual, and counter-narrative considerations in light of Critical Race Theory.

Distinguishing Conceptual and Counter-narrative Analysis

Conceptual analysis differs from counter-narrative analysis in that the former takes a broad, philosophical view of specific concepts as they are developed between the researcher and participants, while the latter breaks data apart, views it, and then discusses it within a theoretical framework. The purpose of conceptual analysis is not to isolate unique and universal truths or to consider them in light of pre-established tenets, but to deconstruct a multiplicity of *possibilities* as is consistent with postqualitative analytical processes. By contrast, counter-narrative analysis yields itself to both thematic and theoretical applications. In this light, the counter-narrative analysis is bounded by the following tenets of Critical Race Theory: 1) the permanence of race and racial realism, 2) a critique of liberalism and a commitment to social justice, 3) centering the lived experiences of people of color and counter-story-telling, 4) Whiteness as Property, 5) interest convergence, and 6) intersectionality.

The analysis and discussion begins with an analytical journey down two conceptual streams: Angry Black Man Ideology and Discourse, and Higher Education Attainment as Compliance and Resistance. The angry Black man theme arose among three of the four men who participated in my study and also resonated with my experiences. The second stream arose at the intersection of the men's encounters as students in community colleges and my experiences as a long-term employee of the community college system. In that conceptual space, the idea of examining the effect of neoliberal ideology on the mission and function of

community colleges arose. Both conceptual streams are viewed in light of Critical Race Theory, the literature review, and the analytics of disruption. Also presented is an analysis of the counter-narrative research texts with attention given to instances of social silencing, marginalization, and resistance and agency. In addition, thematic matters such as the personal attributes of the men who participated in my study, the formation of cultural counter-spaces, and the role of African American women in the degree attainment processes are also visited.

In my study, conceptual and counter-narrative approaches are merged together in a nuanced, hybrid framework which also blends analysis with discussion. In this manner, the study creates a mixed and holistic assemblage of ideas rather than a neatly categorized collection of monolithic components. Due to the entangled nature of this assemblage and in light of the methodological choice—the refusal—to artificially constrain or break the analysis into prescriptive categories, a unified and multi-faceted consideration of the counter-narratives is enabled, allowing for a less regimented engagement with the data, as exemplified by the treatment of Angry Black Man Ideology and Discourse.

Angry Black Man Ideology and Discourse

As I read and re-read the field texts (interview data) and began to form them into counter-narrative research texts, two conceptual streams began to flow from participant responses to the interview questions *as themes*, the first of which was the idea of Angry Black Man Ideology and Discourse. According to Charmaz (2016), “coding [or the identification of themes within the data] gives us an initial step into theorizing” (p. 49). In addition, the concept of Angry Black People resonated with my own experiences as an educated and forthright Black woman, in that I have often found myself beginning sensitive

or poignant conversations with the disclaimer “I am not angry...” in an effort to disarm the stereotypes. Xavier and David spoke directly of the negative connotations attached to being perceived as an “angry Black man,” which Wingfeld (2007) described as “a middle-class, educated African American male who, despite his economic and occupational successes, perceives racial discrimination everywhere and consequently is always enraged” (p. 205). While this definition is useful in the context of my study and was operationalized within the particularized context of Wingfeld’s (2007) study of educated Black men, I argue that the label “angry Black man” is by no means restricted to those who are educated and successful, and that it is, therefore, appropriate for application to the experiences of undergraduate Black men who have not yet attained “economic and occupational successes” (Wingfeld, 2007, p. 205).

To push against the anti-Black master narrative and offer up a counter-hegemonic discourse, this analysis focuses on anti-deficit counter-narratives, showing how the men who participated in my study successfully engaged with or resisted hostile ideologies and discourses and persisted to attain their higher educational goals. The counter-narratives also give evidence to the efficacy of Angry Black Man Ideology as an example of hegemonic *stories to live by*—social scripts which, in this instance, marginalize African-American men, silence their voices and act as a mechanism of control (Clandinin, 2013). Counter-narrative analysis allows us to engage the relationship between the master narrative and participant counter-stories. In this discussion I considered the following questions: What is the function of the term “Angry Black Man” as ideology? How is it used discursively within the master narrative? Who benefits from this deficit-based form of gendered racism? How do Black men respond to this ideology; what does it produce in them and in society? How is the

concept of the angry Black man demonstrated within the higher education attainment counter-stories of study participants?

Simultaneously an ideology and a discursive move, the mythology surrounding angry Black people both reinforces the master narrative as it relates to African American inferiority and perpetuates existing sites of oppression by discrediting, marginalizing, and then silencing voices of social dissent. As ideology, the angry Black man concept diminishes the role that American history has played in fueling their anger, stigmatizing those who are thusly labeled and deeming their anger unjustified, unworthy of attention, and suspect. By dismissing the validity of their grievances, Angry Black Man Ideology absolves the dominant society of responsibility to acknowledge or redress racial injustices. As a discursive move, the angry Black man concept has the capacity to produce performances of silence in those who do not wish to be negatively perceived, and to tacitly affirm the dominant society's tendency to fear Black people. Furthermore, the angry Black man concept perpetuates Whiteness as Property by denying the same freedom of response, speech, and activism enjoyed by Whites, perpetuating a subservient and apologetic position for those who are thusly restrained and acting as a method of controlling spaces and ideas. This idea is specifically expressed in the classroom experiences of two of the men who participated in my study.

David Stokes described the restraint and self-defensiveness he felt compelled to demonstrate in an instructional setting in the following scenarios as recounted in the counter-narrative research text:

...she single-handedly pointed me out in front of everyone else like "You, I want you to come here after class because I've got something to say to you." I was like, "I'm not the only one who got [the answer] wrong. You had plenty of other people to call out. I feel like you really set me apart. I want to say I feel a little bit, kind of

intimidated by you, not scared, but I'm intimidated because if you're doing this right now in front of everybody, what are you going to do to my paper behind my back?"

A second instance occurred outside the educational setting while David was applying for housing for his family. He found himself in a situation in which a White woman who was an intake worker, for no reason apparent to him, was treating him in ways that seemed rude and dismissive. David felt constrained to respond in a courteous manner in spite of her rudeness to him so that he would not negatively affect his chances of being qualified for a home.

I had on my [professional] attire. She [the government worker] looked at me like *Who do you think you are?* Then some of the paperwork I already had given her, she was shuffling through it, it was all unorganized. She said "You've got this . . . I don't see this..." I said "Ma'am, its right there." She finally saw it.

David's story demonstrated two types of response to Angry Black Man Ideology. In the situation where the instructor pointed him out in class, David felt intimidated and did not trust the instructor's objectivity. His observation was that she identified him to be in the wrong solely because of his race. This perception speaks to the permanence of racism in that, whether in the instructor's intent, in David's interpretation, or both—race is the salient factor. In the second instance involving the White woman who was a government worker, the White woman held power over a resource that David needed for his family, and the range of potential responses available to him as a Black man was limited by his perception of how he *should* respond in order to get what he wanted; how he might respond without having his actions interpreted as anger and resulting in punishment. This situation exemplifies Whiteness as Property in that the intake worker had the power of property disposition with regard to housing—the ability to grant or deny David access. Instances such as these illustrate how African American experiences and performances have been and

continue to be significantly regulated by race, and how race-based disparities have so permeated our social institutions that many acts of racism have moved just far enough beneath the surface to escape clear detection, recognition, and accountability.

Wingfield (2007) found that many Black men felt unable to express anger in professional settings because of their fear of being stereotyped as angry and, consequently, experiencing some degree of punishment or loss of privilege. This fear acts as a mechanism of both active and passive control that is exercised through the process of labeling. The act of labeling preempts certain challenges that Black men might pose to privilege and oppression, acting as a discursive tool that enables the dominant society to sustain existing schemes of power, privilege, and absolution at the cost of authentic and nuanced discourses which might advance social justice as they arise through the voices of the marginalized. Within the specific context of education, Gardner and Toope (2011) spoke of the labeling process as one which “operates as a form of overt and hidden curriculum in educational contexts” (p. 1).

Malik made no comments specific to Angry Black Man ideology, but he shared his sense of responsibility to represent himself well and in contrast to social stereotypes, not only for his own benefit but also for the sake of Black men who aspire toward goals similar to his own.

That’s what I’m doing...as a Black man who isn’t represented well in just about any discipline you can think of, that’s my job. My job is to represent myself well, not only just for me, but for other Black males out there who aspire to get to this position.

Malik’s statement speaks of his perception that he needed to represent himself in a certain way because he was viewed as a representation of all Black men. In this regard, Malik’s story pointed to symbolic racism as described by Comeaux (2013), in that a monolithic,

oppositional view is often held about Black men by the dominant society. His story also spoke to “onlyness” (Harper et al., 2011) through which one individual is involuntarily designated a representative a large category of people.

Angry Black Man Ideology is a discursive move of interest divergence which substantiates the marginalization of African American men. Through the lens of dominant discourse, this ideology implies that Black men neither recognize nor appreciate concessions already made by the hegemony; concessions for which the dominant society wishes to be acknowledged. This ideology maintains the binary White/Black relationship and facilitates the continued hyper-valorization of Whiteness (Bell, 1992; Guinier, 2004). The discursive prohibition against Black men’s anger implies that other demographic groups have the freedom to express emotions that Black men do not. Exemplifying this idea, American Idol singer Frenchie Barnes was quoted to say “I love Joe Biden. He’s the angry Black man that President Obama can’t be.” In many cases it is socially acceptable if not applauded for White men to express disagreement or anger while it is almost unilaterally not so for Black men. This unequal distribution of responsive options unveils a shrouded manifestation of Whiteness as Property.

Xavier Barnes also discussed occasions in which he believed himself to be perceived as an angry Black man by faculty members during his community college studies. One particular incident involved a verbal confrontation which occurred after Xavier perceived that he had been treated disrespectfully by an instructor:

‘See me after class.’ I was in her office, I said. ‘I don’t know if you know what this [replicating Ms. Vaught’s earlier gesture toward him] means in my community, but you told me to shut the fuck up, I felt so disrespected and you will never treat me like that again’. I was like, *Uh uh, lady, no don’t ever...* She was like *Black man, I’m nervous and scared in here now. You’re intimidating me in my office now.* She went

to the dean and turned it into this thing...the dean...was all leaning in on her side, looking at me like I was the problem.

A second incident involved an instructor who had reacted to a conspiracy theory video that Xavier shared with her in anticipation that they would have a critical discussion of the content.

There was no argument. I thought we were getting ready to get into this thing. I think that she was mad, because a Black man that came in there with some information that was really important to point a finger at White people for being wrong and dirty and all this... I didn't even go to her office no more, it wasn't the same. I don't know, she started looking at me like, *I think he hates White people.*

Xavier's experiences illustrated a third response to Angry Black Man Ideology. In both instances, he chose a more confrontational approach to managing the situation. The following is an excerpt from my Research Diary Journal:

Xavier had a conflicting relationship with two of his White female instructors. In both instances, the relationship between him and the instructor began on a positive note with him confessing to admiring some intellectual quality of the instructor. After he attempted to engage the two instructors in debate, however, those relationships dissolved into confrontational situations. Xavier surmises that these instructors were intimidated by his presentation as an "angry Black man" and one who they probably thought "hates white people." While Xavier had confrontational conversations with White male instructors, there were no reports of those conversations degrading along confrontational lines.

At the conclusion of both events Xavier perceived that he was seen as "the problem" and as someone who "hates White people." He admitted to genuinely being angry about his treatment in both situations, however, one must ask, should the fact that a Black man is genuinely angry automatically invalidate his views? Would an individual of a different gender and/or race reasonably anticipate the same response and consequences if he or she were to respond in kind? Under what circumstances and in what ways can African-American men express anger and be perceived as credible?

Each of the counter-narratives either directly or indirectly addressed some aspect of Angry Black Man ideology and Discourse. David demonstrated the restraint with which he felt compelled to operate in situations wherein others might have felt at liberty to respond in more direct or confrontational ways. Xavier's story illustrated the difficulty of establishing positive relationships with faculty when anger is either real or perceived to be a threat by either faculty or students. While Malik did not share experiences directly related to Angry Black Man Ideology, his comments about the necessity to "represent [him]self well" speak to his perception of the need to conduct himself in a normative manner so as not to impede his own progress or that of other Black men. Angry Black Man Ideology and Discourse are manifest within the counter-narratives of the men who participated in my study and demonstrate one powerful mechanism through which classroom and social control is maintained.

As indicated previously, Angry Black Man Ideology ignores and effectively annuls the role that American history has played in the development of the psyche and situation of African Americans. Critical Race Theory, however, promotes a holistic view of oppression which includes and analyzes historical context. During slavery and the Jim Crow era, anger demonstrated by Black people was interpreted as an unacceptable response to their forced servitude and as a danger to White people. Anger was consequently punished by such acts as permanent separation from families, physical beating, and lynching. The master narrative of that time reflected a Dangerous Black Man Ideology, through which African and African American men were almost unilaterally framed as a physical threat to the lives, properties, and interests of White people.

With the eventual abolition of slavery and the overturning of Jim Crow legislation, Angry Black Man Ideology arose to replace Dangerous Black Man Ideology. Under this nuanced ideology, Black men were re-framed as inherently and unreasonably enraged because of the historical treatment of their ancestors. Both Dangerous Black Man Ideology and Angry Black Man ideology subjected African Americans (men and women) to corporal and psychological control that prescribed acceptable behavioral responses and preserved the benefits of Whiteness as Property.

After slavery and Jim Crow it was no longer openly acceptable to singularly and corporally punish Black people for demonstrations of anger, so the psychological and identity realms became the primary sites of control and oppression. Through stock stories that perpetuate the belief that angry Black men automatically bear incompetent witness and are to be feared and controlled, the dominant society maintains supremacy and perpetuates social outcomes that were originally attached to Dangerous Black Man Ideology, slavery, and Jim Crow. While it is no longer acceptable to whip and lynch Black men to punish their perceived anger, it is remarkable that many of the Black men who have died questionably at the hands of law enforcement or regular citizens were subsequently probed for and portrayed by the media as having had rebellious, criminal, or questionable backgrounds; as if to retrospectively justify their violent demise through racialized, misandric ideologies that cast them, again, as a threat. In essence, an *angry* Black man is still a *dangerous* Black man, so escalated physical responses to perceived threats from them are substantiated by deficit-based ideologies that serve to justify hegemonic extremes and absolve institutionalized racism.

Higher Education Attainment as Compliance and Resistance

As discussed in the literature review, the rate of higher education attainment for Black men is the lowest of all gender and racial categories (Griffin et al., 2010; Harper & Harris, 2012; Howard, 2014; Kaba, 2005; Strayhorn, 2009). The low completion rate correlates to high unemployment, low wages, and a host of other social disadvantages. As a higher education entity, the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) places priority on degree completion and offers a program initiative intended to increase the number of Black and other minority men who attain a degree. The analysis presented here is intended to engender nuanced thinking around the idea of community college degree completion as a social justice work as well as an economic venture, and the analysis responds to the following questions: How does degree attainment both comply with and resist the perpetuation of neoliberal ideologies within higher education? In what ways did their community college experiences marginalize study participants? In what ways did participants exercise power or agency within the educational context?

The Ubiquity of Neoliberal Ideology in Higher Education

From the accountability measures demanded by No Child Left Behind to performance based funding for colleges, neoliberalism and the audit culture have colonized the nation's educational system at all levels. The community college in particular has been heralded as "Democracy's College" by its proponents because it makes higher education more affordable for all; particularly so for marginalized groups who might not otherwise be able to pursue degrees (Ayers, 2005). Bush (2004), however, charges that, based upon the low completion rates for Black men, community colleges have failed to deliver the democracy they espouse. Largely missing from the discourse surrounding higher education

attainment in community colleges is an examination of the community college's core ideologies and how they have shifted over time. By examining this ideological shift, I engage with the *absent presence*, and in this light I next briefly engage Childers (2012) concept of the *analytics of disruption* to deconstruct the rise of neoliberal ideology within the community college.

According to the American Association for Community Colleges, in its earliest years the community college focused on liberal arts education and community needs. During the Great Depression, community colleges began to offer job training in response to widespread unemployment, and this focus expanded after World War II with the return of veterans who qualified for educational funding and retraining under the GI Bill. The social movements of the 1960's led to the creation of a national network of community colleges and brought about dramatic increases in enrollment across the nation. Today's community college system, however, has shifted from the ideology which originally promoted liberal education and community needs to one which privileges global market factors and workforce development (Ayers, 2005). Ayers (2005) posits that neoliberalism has transformed community college students from individuals with specific needs and capacities within their communities into transactional units whose purpose it is to meet the demands of business and industry. Given the benefits allegedly realized by business and industry when an employment-ready individual attains a college degree, the question arises whether the concern over low graduation rates for Black men indicates a systemic concern for their social well-being or whether it more accurately reflects an agenda to produce them as workers for the benefit of business and industry.

Arguably, the community college system shifted its focus to reflect the changing needs of American society and as the community colleges have taken on the business of facilitating advanced capitalism they have incorporated and reproduced economy-driven ideologies. Those ideologies, in turn, drive institutional missions and curricula. While there are multiple references to social justice ideals such as “open[ing] the door,” “minimizing barriers” and “improv[ing] the lives and well-being of individuals,” the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) mission statement also reflects a profound influence of market-driven ideologies through multiple references to education that facilitates workforce development. The mission statement is as follows:

The mission of the North Carolina Community College System is to open the door to high-quality, accessible educational opportunities that minimize barriers to post-secondary education, maximize student success, develop a globally and multi-culturally competent workforce, and improve the lives and well-being of individuals by providing:

- Education, training and retraining for the workforce including basic skills and literacy education, occupational and pre-baccalaureate programs.
- Support for economic development through services to and in partnership with business and industry and in collaboration with the University of North Carolina System and private colleges and universities.
- Services to communities and individuals which improve the quality of life.²⁵

Despite mission language that acknowledges matters of social justice, the strategies that measure mission implementation are workforce and performance driven. In the same manner that neoliberal market-based ideologies tend to drive modern day community college missions, those missions drive the creation and implementation of programs of study. This means that market factors determine both what will be taught and how it will be taught. In the current climate, which mandates that community colleges produce graduates or “completers” as part of institutional performance measures, student success is measured

²⁵ NC Community Colleges Creating Success. <http://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/mission-history>. (Retrieved January 22, 2016)

in significant part by the number of individuals who finish their prescribed programs of study. Stated connectively, success is measured by the number of transactional units (Full Time Equivalents or FTEs) who enroll in, remain in, and ultimately complete curricula which are largely proscribed by business and industry to supply their need for workers. The premise underlying the concept of degree completion is that completers have been prepared by the community colleges to enter the workforce as useful and productive employees, or to enter senior institutions to be further prepared for the same. As Freire (1970) and Baéz and Boyles (2009) contended, the transmission of education is controlled by the ruling class in a manner which ensures the furtherance of its own goals, and the dominant society will see to the ultimate advancement of the capitalist regime to perpetuate existing schemes of power, concurrently perpetuating existing oppressive practices. In this regard, it could be argued that community colleges have a part in replicating societal inequities by facilitating the mass production of subordinate workers. A primarily democratic community college system might, instead, prioritize global citizenship and facilitate student efforts to flatten the distribution of wealth. Consequently, it could be further argued that the 34% of Black men who enroll in North Carolina's community colleges and persist to degree completion are in some regards acting in furtherance of a neoliberal agenda that perpetuates historical schemes of social dominance. This thinking pushes against traditional and neoliberal ideologies which unilaterally promote higher education attainment, suggesting that we consider alternative possibilities. Because Critical Race Theory operates in critique of liberal and neoliberal agendas by advocating the promotion of social justice, I assert that community college degree completion could be critically examined as interest divergence on the premise that the dominant society perpetuates its locus of power by churning out subordinate

workers to sustain an advanced capitalist regime. Because the nation's community colleges are in the business of creating subordinate workers to meet the needs of advanced capitalism, and because advanced capitalist ventures are primarily owned by members of the dominant society, it might also be argued that the American community college plays a role in the perpetuation of Whiteness as Property by facilitating the maintenance of historic power schemes of privilege and supremacy within business and industry.

By promoting a society in which higher education is the gateway to employment, as is becoming the more and more case in this country according to the literature, education takes the place of race as the gatekeeper to prosperity. This enables a self-proclaimed postracial society to contend that institutionalized racism is not the problem; that the problem, in fact, is the lack of the capacity to complete a college degree—a claim which tacitly perpetuates the myth of Black inferiority. In light of the empirical data indicating that Black men enroll and graduate from college at the lowest rate of all demographic categories, prohibiting employment based on “higher education” status becomes a racial code, facilitating policy and practice that perpetuates the oppression of African Americans and substantiating one of the epistemological assumptions of this study which is that the ideologies of colorblindness and meritocracy enable and perpetuate educational inequities.

As a nuance to the assertion that degree completion complies with the neoliberal agenda, however, correlations previously discussed in this study also argue that college graduates realize significant social benefits by completing a degree; among them being increased economic stability, lower incidences of criminal activity, and longevity (Howard, 2014; Palmer & Maramba, 2011). In this view, the goals of the dominant society, as represented by the college completion agenda, are being met simultaneous to the goals of the

marginalized population, as represented by the social benefits accruing to Black men as college graduates. This point exemplifies how, by benefiting both the dominant and subordinate groups, interest convergence might offer one way forward toward greater social justice. Critical Race Theory operates in critique of liberal and neoliberal agendas by advocating the promotion of social justice, and moving the needle from neoliberalism toward social justice represents a move toward privileging the individual or group rather than privileging of economic factors. While interest convergence as described above benefits those Black men who complete their degrees, I next examine whether the neoliberal completion agenda perpetuates or possibly even furthers the marginalization of students who fail to persist to graduation.

Marginalization

Young's (2011) definition of marginalization, which is particularly compelling in light of the community college's focus on workforce development, is as follows:

Marginals are people the system of labor cannot or will not use...Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination. (Young, 2011, p. 53)

The men who participated in my study presented various narratives of marginalization or being *Othered* during their higher education experiences, demonstrating my epistemological assumption that the educational system perpetuates various forms of racism. While Malik quickly remembered an incident in which he felt singled-out because of his race, he was equally quick to indicate that his overall experience at the community college was affirming and positive.

I don't know if I just had a rare experience to where I just had some really great professors and really great faculty members and really great community...
There was one test that came up, and I don't even know how the professor found out,

but...it was a group of four. There was a White male, then there was myself, and then there was two other people, a Black female and another Black male. He [the professor] automatically assumed that the White male had done all the work and that we had copied off of him. We were just like, “No, we all worked on this collectively. We’ve been working all summer together on it. We’re a family.” We were all rubbed the wrong way with that because we had been doing this from the beginning of the semester and why would you automatically assume that? The reason [the professor] assumed was because he [the White student] made really good grades, but I also made really good grades. Like I said, we all studied together, so all of our grades were good, so it shouldn’t have been *He’s making better grades than them, so he’s automatically doing it*. That’s why it didn’t really make sense for him to assume that [the White student] was doing all the work.

Remarkably, David had a similar experience in a writing class. He went further to describe the often intangible ways in which he felt marginalized both within and outside the educational context, substantiating the assumption that social justice demands a more equitable distribution of educational resources through the following, previously referenced incident:

She single-handedly pointed me out in front of everyone else like “You, I want you to come here after class because I’ve got something to say to you.” I was like, “I’m not the only one who got it wrong. You had plenty of other people to call out. I feel like you really set me apart.” I wanted to say, “I feel a little bit, kind of intimidated by you—not scared—but I’m intimidated because if you’re doing this right now in front of everybody, what are you going to do to my paper behind my back?”

...people will say “You’re just seeing things,” but if you had a recorder and you would record it and hit the play back, let’s just count up the positive interactions and engagements and the eye contacts and the pushing of assistance for White students] versus the other one [Black students]. Let’s weigh in on that.

They would have some tangible evidence with some numbers...I saw how he [the instructor] interacted and engaged with Caucasian versus those who were Black. If you was Caucasian, he would talk to you [White students] like it’s normal but if you was Black it was like, you know [making a distorted face] the facial features would just really say “I don’t like how you’re talking” ...There was an assignment that was to be turned in and there was a complication with the website, it was down. Not only did I...could not turn it in via email but there were five others who had the same problem. I was one of the Black individuals who had the same problem. As the two females go up there, who are Caucasian, and begin to plead their case, he’s like “Okay, there’s no problem. Just send it to me later on.” When I came to plead my case, oh it’s “see me after class.”

Xavier described two particular situations, previously expounded upon in this chapter, in which he experienced marginalization in classes taught by White women with whom he thought he had previously established a good rapport. In one instance an instructor refused to engage his discussion in class while another refused to engage his discussion in her office, both instances left Xavier feeling de-centered and misunderstood. In addition to being marginalized by White women on more than one occasion, Xavier stated his perception that Black women have the capacity to act in ways which either overtly marginalize or tacitly support/promote the marginalization of Black men by the dominant society, supporting the assumption that gender causes Black men to experience higher education in ways that can be distinguished from the college experiences of Black women.

[Black] women turn into White women. It blows my mind sometimes...when I see any kind of Blackness coming out of a Black woman I'm like 'Sister...' Just shallow, very shallow. My experience...it's almost like they're willing to smile and be less of a threat, like really to just "I'm cool..."It's a survival thing. They're doing what they got to do to survive. I'm like *Your survival is making it harder on me.*

Despite their sense of being marginalized, each study participant found ways to deliberately re-center himself and pursue his personal goals while simultaneously and successfully meeting the demands and standards of the higher education system, again demonstrating resilience. One example of this re-centering process is made visible through a particularly striking show of resistance in which Xavier strategically managed to bend the higher education processes to accomplish his own ends while simultaneously complying with the completion agenda. When he enrolled in community college to complete his first associates' degree, Xavier's primary purpose was not to gain an education but to get access to additional income through Pell Grants so that he could spend time with his infant son. Prior to experiencing a period of unemployment, completing a college degree was of

secondary concern to Xavier at best, because he did not care to become part of “the system.”

In fact, he actually considered higher education somewhat suspect.

I didn't want a degree before because education made people uppity... I was in the street. I'm making money. I needed to make money. Not no crack or nothing like that, but a little marijuana or something. I got bored with that and my kid was on the way. I was at a job and got laid off. I'm like, “Really? My back is against the wall. Well, I'm gonna go to school.”

Xavier was able to enroll in college and receive financial aid through the completion of two consecutive associates' degrees, and he had begun to taking courses toward a third degree before federal regulations changed and the money ran out. In addition to pursuing higher education to facilitate his desired lifestyle, Xavier challenged neoliberal ideologies by pursuing his studies for the intellectual challenge they presented rather than for the purpose of becoming an employee in business or industry. While his use of the financial aid system to support his other motivations might seem to support stereotypical views of individuals abusing the educational system, I counter that Xavier utilized the system to accomplish his particular purposes rather than allowing himself to be *produced* as a transactional unit for advanced capitalism. Xavier's creative exploitation of the system demonstrates the assumption that the lived experiences of Black men can open up new ways of thinking about and understanding their educational outcomes. He utilized his educational funds to complete two degrees, each of which advanced social, intellectual, and economic purposes in his life even though they did not strictly align with contemporary neoliberal motives to supply workers for business and industry. For example, Xavier used his knowledge of the legal system to successfully represent himself in a claim of racial discrimination. He used the knowledge gained from his transfer degree in communication on a daily basis as a music producer and community activist, and he used the knowledge he gained from digital

animation and effects courses to pursue an award-winning career in film production. Thus, Xavier employed the very mechanisms of the community college's completion-driven system to turn his acts of higher education attainment into entrepreneurial acts of resistance and to push against the idea of supplying the demands of advanced capitalism.

Resistance and Agency

Because of low completion rates, stereotypes, and various social stigma that plague Black men in higher education and in society in general, the act of persisting and successfully navigating a system that is in many ways hostile to them is, in itself, an act of resistance which pushes against the expectations and ideologies of the master narrative. Similar to Carter's (2008) findings regarding Critical Race Achievement Ideology as demonstrated in academically successful African American high school students, study participants demonstrated a set of cultural intelligences which included a robust sense-of-self as a member of the Black community (cultural identity) and an awareness of the possible life limitations imposed by their race (Palmer & Young, 2009). Furthermore, participants demonstrated what Carter (2008) defined as "critical race consciousness" (p. 211) in which they center race in their personal self-definition and factor that identity into their ideas of academic achievement. According to Malik:

One of my mentors, his name is Enoch. He's from Africa. I believe he's from Ghana...we would just sit down, literally for 30 or 45 minutes, just talking about where Black men are at in the world at the moment and where we would like them to be.

Similarly, David stated the following:

We need to understand what it means to be Black in America. There's things you cannot do. Unfortunately, it's still going on. There's things that if we do [them], it's not going to be a slap on the wrist.

And, finally, Xavier said the following:

Every time a Black person, a Black man, tries to stand up for himself, I call it war. It's not me saying that I'm declaring war. It represents war, because if I'm standing for me, it's anti-damn-near-everything y'all are doing. I'm about community. I'm about sharing. I'm about education.

As represented by these comments, study participants recognized the potential limitations imposed by their race and found ways, some of which are discussed below, to take control of their educational outcomes, thus personifying the concept of higher education attainment as resistance and demonstrating Critical Race Achievement Ideology.

The men who participated in my study further exercised agency within the context of higher education by pursuing, establishing, and maintaining positive relationships with educational professionals. The literature speaks to the particular importance of establishing relationships with faculty as one of the key academic factors in promoting higher education success (Harper, 2012; Harper & Wood, 2016; Palmer & Young, 2009; Wood, 2012.) In establishing these relationships, students overcame a personal disadvantage which, by prohibiting the formation of positive relationships with faculty, is associated with lower academic achievement. Research indicates that the formation of positive relationships with faculty and staff, along with higher levels of personal responsibility and motivation, are integral to degree completion (Comeaux, 2013; Harper, 2012; Harper & Wood, 2016; Palmer & Young, 2009; Strayhorn, 2012). Malik spoke of the strong relationships he established with a variety of educational professionals, as well as with other students.

I had a lot of Black men and women that were a part of my journey when I was at my community college. I don't know. It was just a very strong sense of community. Honestly I didn't think about race too much, just because I had that system, I had that support...

...I was involved with, not just things around campus, but administrative things. I got to meet with the president of the college. We were helping with student safety

and student success.... I got a lot of great opportunities, a lot of great speaking opportunities. Also, I would say that's where a lot of my support came from were the organizations that I was a part of, people who just really wanted to make sure that you were successful.

Similarly, David spoke of the strength of relationships the he established with several Black women administrators who encouraged him to pursue his full potential. He also established strong and successful relationships with diverse students and administrators.

I was the vice president of the student government association. I was a student ambassador at Barrett Community College. I was in [a] national honors chapter...I was chairman of the [college's council of clubs] ...When I graduated I was on the front page of the [local news] paper and Barrett [Community College] was really proud of me, so much so that the president and the vice-president got together and they created a plaque for me.

Similarly, Xavier described several positive relationships and safe spaces that he established with faculty members, observing that he intentionally reached out to them in an effort to establish friendships, as demonstrated by the following statement:

Mr. Landis, White man, was...he was awesome. He was impressed with me. He was like, 'Dude, if you DON'T go and be a lawyer!'...because I'd be in there like, 'Hold on, Mr. Landis' and he was like 'That's a good perspective.' He'd break it down. He'd be like, 'That's a great question' He'd be so impressed and I was impressed by his being impressed. I'd go sit in his office and just chop it up...I was trying to be friends, because I was a little older [than the other students in the program]. I didn't want to go hang out with the kids. My friends was the faculty.

Forming Counter-spaces

While relationships with educational professionals involved a racially diverse network to one degree or another for all participants, David and Malik specifically formed positive relationships within racial and gender affinity groups. By contrast to Xavier, who attended a rural community college with extremely limited minority faculty and staff, David and Malik both attended metropolitan colleges which employed a significant number of professional faculty and staff who were People of Color.

Despite this difference, perceptions of racism, whether slight or significant, were successfully managed by each study participant through the effective creation of counter-spaces. Schwartz (2014) described counter-space as a concept derived from Critical Race Theory as a corollary to counter-narrative.

Often created in same race settings, counter-spaces affirm a marginalized group's life and racial experiences (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) and normally these same race groups are within majority "other" race settings. They can be physical places of meeting, or emotional spaces of voice, resistance, and healing. (p. 113)

While research indicates that many Black men hesitate to ask for help to navigate the educational system, two of the men who participated in my study spoke extensively about the support system they entered into by participating in their college's chapter of the Minority Male Mentoring Program (3MP). In addition to facilitating the formation of positive relationships with Black educational professionals, these programs facilitated the formation of effective accountability-based relationships with other Black men. Malik discussed a college success course that was especially designed for minority men:

...we had one [Academic Success Course] specifically for minority males and our professor was a Black male who worked as an administrator at the school. Every morning, we would come in and there would be a quote and we would spend about 30 minutes just talking about the quote, hearing everybody's thoughts. We would speak freely, because that was the type of environment that we had. I never felt restricted to talk about myself or how I think the world sees me or how I see the world. Any time that we spoke about something, we always made it a point to mention the Black male experience, just because we saw that that is something that has been dwindling, of course, at community colleges and schools, period. Then, going beyond that, what could we do to fix that or what could we do to improve the situation. I was very comfortable talking about both with anybody, honestly. Again, the community was just so strong and...I still have not experienced anything like that, even when I went to the University.

Malik further described the general environment created within the mentoring program as follows:

I would definitely say quite a few people who were involved in the Minority Male Mentoring Program, again, we would sit down and just talk. We wouldn't have to be talking about anything. We could be talking about the future, we would just be sitting there and talking. They would just pass on wisdom to us. This would be from Black men, Black women, my peers, and just being in that environment was great.

David attributed a significant portion of his personal growth, higher education attainment, and subsequent success to his experience with the 3MP at his college.

[I] Didn't really need to talk unless there was a reason to talk to get a point across, to get things done. As far as this chit-chatting and talking and whatever, which is seen as soft skills, as people skills, I'm still working on it...Because of who I was, I was in a shell, and Barrett needed to bring me out of it so I could really flourish when I got to Chatham, if that makes sense...It needed to happen here [at Barrett], at this level. There's a lot of people here who care. There's a lot of people who are here who will push you to get out of that shell and there's a lot of people who are here that provided a lot of structure for me that I did not have. I don't think that I would have gotten that at Chatham...

He was, in fact, so positively affected by the 3MP and those who administered it that he returned to Barrett to become a part-time administrator for the program after he completed his associates' degree.

I work as a Minority Male Mentoring recruiter and retention [specialist]. I advise the guys in the program and I'm also a minister, licensed minister... It's a combination of everything I can throw at these guys—ladies and gentlemen—to open up their horizon so they can see themselves, see their strength and their weaknesses, to see if they're a team player or not...With my military background I have a whole laundry list of things that I can use to build team working skills. Coping skills with the development portion of [my] therapy [work], creating that self-awareness so they can realize who they are in the grand scheme of things and where they belong ... What that's going to do is position them for life...I want them to know what they can work on to become better...

There was no Minority Male Mentoring Program and literally less than a handful of Black faculty and staff at Xavier's community college. Admitting that he had struggled early in life to understand how Black men act and "what men do," Xavier created a different type of counter-space in which he pursued and developed self-affirming relationships with two

White men who were members of his instructional faculty. In addition to Mr. Landis, he spoke of Mr. Abernathy as follows:

Mr. Abernathy [a White man] was my advisor. We were right there in paralegal class on racial discrimination. I was *text book* doing everything it said to do with the EEOC [to represent myself in an employment discrimination claim] ... He helped me all the way through that thing and I was like, 'Wow'...

The fact that Xavier's closest relationships were with White male faculty expands the idea of cultural counter-space and demonstrates that it can exist outside of racially homogenous environments. Given very limited access to Black professionals on his campus, Xavier successfully adapted by creating a safe place to express and affirm at least some of his racialized experiences; a place where he was able to establish relational space and find the support he needed to confront and overcome incidences of racism.

Communal Ethos

Much of the research on cultural responsiveness suggests that certain ethnic groups demonstrate a communal ethic, which is contrasted to the Eurocentric, pro-individual ethos upon which American culture is based (Gay, 2002; Harper, 2012). Study participants consistently expressed counter-hegemonic paradigms and spoke to the idea of holding high standards for themselves, not only for their own benefit but for the purpose of serving the needs of others. Malik spoke of setting an example for his younger brothers and consistently referred to his peer and mentoring groups as his "family," frequently discussing the importance of encouraging others as he was encouraged himself. As he described his community college experience, Malik was firmly situated within a number of support communities that both contributed to and benefited from his experiences and presence. David was so profoundly affected by the community established through the Minority Male Mentoring Program that he returned there after graduating in order to pour back into

students with needs similar to his own. In addition to his work at the community college he is actively engaged in works within the broader community as a minister. Xavier expressed that he is “about community” as demonstrated, in part, by his supportive interactions with younger community college students. Furthermore, he shared his vision of a world where community volunteerism runs the economy rather than money. The communal sensibility expressed by study participants articulates a counter-hegemonic discourse that contradicts the individualistic, self-supreme ideology typical of the dominant, neoliberal American culture, and each participant found ways to live out and convey his philosophy in ways that supported his efforts toward higher education attainment. For the most part, the men in my study were also significantly supported in their completion efforts by very strong relationships with Black women.

The Influence of African American Women

Malik and David spoke of particularly strong relationships with Black women. As a youngster, Malik was raised by his mother and grandmother in his father’s absence. When he began his community college studies he spoke of affirming relationships with Black women, both as his peers and as his instructors. He further indicated that he currently maintains a number of friendships with Black women who graduated with him. Xavier was also jointly raised by his mother and grandmother after the untimely death of his father. Although he was often negative in his expressions toward Black women in general, Xavier spoke of one Black woman faculty member with whom he developed a very positive and supportive friendship that continues to the present time. David spoke very positively of relationships he developed with African American women who were members of the professional staff at his community college. Many of the women served in advisory roles

that were in some way connected to the 3MP on his campus, and he indicated that it was a Black woman who encouraged him to develop his “soft skills” and his leadership potential. In the experiences of all the men, the formation of positive relationships was predicated upon their perception that their lives were deemed to be of value by those with whom they interacted. Xavier expressed his childhood desire to have someone who could show him how to live successfully as a Black man, and he also spoke of racist situations involving White women instructors and staff at his community college; however none of the men in my study demonstrated any reluctance to receiving mentorship, guidance, or instruction from African American women.

Summary and Significance

In this analysis I addressed two conceptual streams, 1) Angry Black Man Ideology and Discourse and 2) Higher Education Attainment as Compliance and Resistance. Both discussions presented corresponding questions concerning power and agency as evidenced within the counter-narrative research texts. I explored the analytical questions in light of existing literature, which revisits an interpretive and qualitative form of analysis, while simultaneously “plugging [the data] in” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 2) to the tenets of Critical Race Theory by *thinking with theory*, which is a form of postqualitative analysis. In this regard, theory and counter-narrative data are placed at parity, neither being privileged over the other, and a more comprehensive view is enabled.

The men in my study experienced occasions in which they were required to resist dominant discourses and neoliberal agendas as exemplified by the discussions of Angry Black Man Ideology and Discourse and Higher Education Attainment as Compliance and Resistance. Participants also addressed instances of marginalization within the education

setting, with Malik, David, and Xavier all describing their responses to situations in which their academic ability and or integrity was challenged, in their perception, on the basis of their race. The men who participated in my study demonstrated what Carter (2008) referred to as *achievement as resistance* by persisting in spite of hostile educational incidents and by exercising agency in the formation of curricular and extra-curricular counter-spaces and communities in which they felt free to express themselves as Black men; Malik and David effectively through their associations with the Minority Male Mentoring Program and Xavier through autonomously established relationships with key men and women who were members of faculty and staff. Based upon this Analysis and Discussion of the counter-narrative research texts in my study, I next address Implications, Reflections, and Conclusions surrounding the work.

Chapter 7

Implications, Reflections, and Conclusion

There is in this world no such force as a person determined to rise. The human soul cannot be permanently chained. W.E.B. Dubois

The above quotation, first introduced on the dedication page of my dissertation, bears repetition at the conclusion. One hundred forty years after the Emancipation Proclamation and one hundred thirty-seven years after the enactment of the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution, African Americans still face and fight the remnants of institutionalized racial oppression in virtually every social arena. Higher education is no exception, and while the number and percentage of African American men seeking a college degree has improved from both macroscopic and historic perspectives, for reasons discussed throughout my study it is incumbent upon higher education to critically examine how the rate of degree completion for Black men can be improved. In an effort to move this examination forward and into action, I have privileged the voices of three Black men who persisted to the completion of a community college degree. Within their counter-narratives resides a broad range of insight related to their higher education attainment experiences as well as to their broader social encounters as Black men in America.

The counter-hegemonic discourse asserted in this study is juxtaposed against the anti-Black, deficit-based master narrative. It pushes back against the stock stories of failure and lack of capacity that have been predicated upon a range of theories from the historical presumption of the inherent inferiority of African Americans to contemporary schemes of colorblindness, individualism, and meritocracy. These counter-narratives represent what can become a growing and evolving body of robust, anti-deficit research that acknowledges the

expertise of Black men in designing their own intellectual and social advancement. My study was based upon the following research questions:

- What were the experiences of African American men who completed a community college degree as they pursued higher education attainment?
- How do their counter-narratives intersect with dominant social and educational discourses regarding African American men?
- How are their counter-narrative experiences divergent from dominant social and educational discourses regarding African American men?

In responding to these questions from a qualitative perspective, the counter-narratives privilege how Malik Freeman, David Stokes, and Xavier Barnes overcame challenges, how they experienced identity and community, and how they addressed both overt and covert instances of racism as they persisted to graduate from a community college. From a postqualitative standpoint, the counter-narratives demonstrate social silencing and marginalization as well as resistance and personal agency. Furthermore, they shine a light on new ways of thinking about how racism manifests in policy and how the tenets of Critical Race Theory can be applied toward viewing higher education at the community college level.

While postqualitative researchers shun methodologies that make “easy sense” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 31) of the data, in this chapter I put my qualitative findings to work to offer research-based implications intended to help society move forward in the practice of social justice. By combining qualitative and postqualitative approaches, I assert that the *easy-ness* of sense-making has been countered by holding traditional qualitative findings up recursively to the light of theoretical analysis and insight. In this vein, I offer

recommendations for policy makers and educational professionals, as well as for community partners who provide support, programming, or mentoring to those Black men who are pursuing or preparing to pursue a community college degree. I also reflect on postqualitative and *thinking with theory* discussions to consider what might come next or even *alongside* in this movement—in other words, how a momentum and a work toward social justice might be sustained and carried forward. In addition, I present implications for scholar-researchers who are interested in exploring what might become visible within counter-narrative data as we view complex social issues through the consolidated lenses of qualitative and postqualitative research. I begin by presenting recommendations for Black men who are contemplating a community college degree or those professionals and community members who wish to assist these men with higher education attainment. Note that while specific recommendations are broadly categorized below, they are fluid and bear upon each other.

Recommendations for Increasing the Success of Black Men at Community Colleges

In addition to conceptual and counter-narrative analysis, certain thematic matters, including communal ethos and personal strengths of the participants, offer valuable insights into higher education attainment for Black men in community colleges. Although my study was not initially intended to include traditional thematic analysis, I would be remiss to ignore such useful although serendipitous disclosures. The following recommendations, therefore, represent a non-delineated assemblage based upon a combination of thematic, counter-narrative, and conceptual analysis findings.

Academic, Environmental, and Individual Proficiencies

Malik, David, and Xavier felt that the decision to attend a community college was their personal best course of action in seeking a college degree. Each of them, furthermore,

was of the opinion that attending community college can be a good choice for other Black men if that decision aligns with their individual circumstances. While the literature review discusses personal, structural, and cultural *impediments* to degree completion, I discuss academic, environmental, and individual *proficiencies* based on an analysis of the skill sets that Malik, David, and Xavier employed as they moved toward the successful completion of a college degree. Academic proficiencies include a set of skills requisite to the intellectual aspects of degree completion, while environmental proficiencies relate to the physical and economic aspects of higher education pursuit. Individual proficiencies, then, address social and relational issues that must be managed in tandem with academic pursuits.

The men who participated in my study demonstrated academic proficiencies including the capacity to enter and persist in college level studies, leadership within an academic community, a positive sense of their personal capacities, goals and opportunities, and the ability to prevent stop-out status. Through the summer Bridge Program for high school graduates and the Minority Male Mentoring Program (3MP) for men in community colleges, academic support was bundled with leadership and personal success opportunities to support persistence to degree completion. Within the context of my study, stop-out status was observed to be frequently a consequence of extensive developmental pre-requisites. Therefore, mechanisms such as the summer Bridge Programs should be studied further to explore their potential for reducing the delay and deterrence caused by developmental requirements. I also recommend that further study of Minority Male Mentoring Programs (3MP) be conducted across the state of North Carolina with the goal of establishing models of success and expanding the program's availability to more of the state's 58 institutions. Initiatives such as targeted, population-specific study skills courses should also be studied to

consider their potential for promoting persistence and completion, along with implementing culturally responsive pedagogies designed to incorporate and validate lived experiences, such as Xavier's experience in learning how to prosecute his own employment discrimination case within the broader context of a course on civil litigation.

Environmental proficiencies demonstrated by the men who participated in my study included learning to navigate the complex structures within the higher education system, establishing positive relationships with faculty and educational professionals, and developing financial literacy sufficient to understand how to fund their educational pursuits. Malik and David felt that the community college provided more supportive environments and communities than existed at their senior institutions, and all three men spoke of the financial advantages of obtaining a less expensive gateway degree and then pursuing a four-year degree at a senior institution. Training and professional development sensitizing educational professionals to the expressions and ramifications of the anti-Black master narrative could facilitate the formation of more positive and affirming relationships between faculty or staff and Black men. Educational institutions, policymakers, funding sources, and professionals might improve the likelihood of higher education attainment for Black men by providing greater and more simplified access to financial resources sufficient to support the various facets of their educational and related pursuits, and by providing programs and personnel who specialize in helping Black men understand how to meet the combined challenges of degree pursuit and personal life management.

Among the individual proficiencies demonstrated by the men who participated in my study were their abilities to manage the intellectual and financial stresses of working while attending college, managing family/relational dynamics effectively to avoid stop-out status,

and establishing culturally affirming counter-spaces. For example, David and Xavier spoke of the advantages of attending college while living in their home town and of being able to simultaneously uphold their responsibilities to their partner and/or children as they pursued higher education. Interventions aimed at assisting Black men in developing or enhancing individual proficiencies might include the systematic facilitation of counseling/mentoring relationships with experienced individuals and/or peers who can co-create strategies for success and encourage accountability, as well as facilitating and supporting curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular opportunities for affirmative cultural expression.

In addition to the recommendations discussed regarding each of the foregoing proficiencies, I further recommend professional development in cultural responsivity for educational and administrative professionals as a means through which to further enhance the academic, environmental, and individual proficiencies of Black men attending community college. Furthermore, enhancing the presence and efficacy of certain personal strengths and attributes that were self-identified by study participants could further increase the likelihood of degree completion.

Personal Strengths and Attributes

Malik, David, and Xavier self-identified to certain individual attributes which they believe moved them forward in their quests to attain a college degree, including a strong sense of cultural identity, professionalism, self-respect and self-branding, belonging and contributing to a literal or figurative community, possessing or developing formal and informal leadership skills, developing critical thinking and communication competencies, and developing the capacity to make short-term sacrifices to attain long-term goals. The counter-narrative research texts show how participants each demonstrated these traits to

varying degrees, and I assert that Black men's capacities to complete higher education degrees can be increased by creating educational and/or social initiatives designed to increase the potency of these traits.

What My Study Has Produced

In addition to the more interpretive findings of my study as discussed above, the productive tension between the social justice/activist focus of Critical Race Theory and the philosophical emphasis of postqualitative studies was discussed earlier in my study. This tension is reflected in the contrast between Critical Race Theory's privileging of the voices of the marginalized through counter-narrative stories and postqualitative methodologies' privileging of theoretical analysis within the counter-narratives. As earlier stated, counter-narrative analysis makes visible the *existence* of racism by telling the stories of those who have been Othered and experienced oppression, while *thinking with theory* makes visible the *production and perpetuation* of racism through these same stories. Critical race methodology enables us to display the "who, what, when, and where" while *thinking with theory* enables us to see the "how and why." I assert, therefore, that what appears at first glance to be a friction between the two approaches can actually bring forth a more holistic view of racism—simultaneously revealing what it looks like through the eyes of the marginalized (the microscopic lens) *and* theorizing power relations within racist contexts (the macroscopic lens). Whereas the application of Critical Race Theory and critical race methodology privilege the telling of counter-stories for the purpose of exposing racism, *thinking with theory* privileges theory-bound analysis within the context of those same counter-narrative expositions for the purpose of dismantling racism—which is the ultimate purpose of Critical Race Theory. This nuance demonstrates the strength of combining

qualitative and postqualitative methodologies to make racism visible through counter-stories while dismembering it theoretically.

A Hybrid Methodology

The combination of qualitative and postqualitative methodological approaches engages the counter-narratives at the levels of both practice and philosophy. The anti-deficit counter-narrative research texts I created for my study bring to bear the expertise of Black men in charting their own course to success, empowering them to move the needle further in the direction of social justice. While I could have simply analyzed the field text (interview) data, creating counter-narrative research texts is consistent with the tenets of Critical Race Theory and doing so enabled me to add to the limited body of research available regarding Black men and their community college experiences. With reference to analyzing the research texts, I assert that using a blended qualitative/postqualitative methodological approach supersedes the more monocular, one-sided view enabled by either methodology alone, allowing a richer and more robust engagement with the data.

It is important to state that utilizing this hybrid methodology is by no means a pre-scripted path, and that my process may represent more of a fluid scholarly exemplar than a replicable methodological process. While I knew from the beginning of my study that I wanted to combine qualitative and postqualitative approaches, the mechanism for doing so evolved and became visible as the project moved forward. From the data gathering phase through the analysis, I was serendipitously discovering ways in which the data could play together to produce new thought. Because the hybrid approach is very rhizomatic and inclusive, I assert that it enables a more expansive viewing of racism and that it has the

potential to produce more robust and broadly informed initiatives. One of my final Research Journal Diary entries states:

For the last month or so I have been focused on concluding the research and writing process. It is remarkable to me how organic this whole process has been. While I knew from the outset that I wanted to use a hybrid methodological approach, I really had no idea how I would actually do it. In fact, if I had realized how unpredictable and learn-as-you-go this process would be I would not likely have undertaken it—I would probably have opted for something simpler; an approach that would allow me to make “easy sense” of the data. There were times as I was making my way through the research and analysis that I wasn’t sure I had a handle on what I was trying to do or how I should do it. Having completed the project now, and having gone back to read and update the full body of work, I’m glad that I took the more challenging approach. I believe I have arrived at some findings and recommendations which can be of use in promoting social justice.

By considering how qualitative and postqualitative methodologies affected the production of knowledge within the context of a single data set, I explored ways in which these seemingly philosophically opposed approaches can be used together to enable a more multi-faceted analysis. In this process I leveraged the advantages and strengths of both qualitative and postqualitative scholarship and also grappled with the respective weaknesses. By gathering the data and co-creating the counter-narratives with participants according to traditional protocols, I was able to establish a body of data which lends itself to ongoing analysis and opens up new possibilities with each re-telling, as is the nature of both narrative inquiry and analysis (Clandinin, 2013). With this openness to re-telling and re-consideration, the counter-narrative data produced in my study are similarly open to additional conceptual analyses based upon other thinking which might arise as I or other researchers consider the data in the future or in *thinking with* other theories and theorists.

By engaging a Critical Race Theory-bounded analysis of the research texts, an analysis of racist concepts within the counter-narratives was enabled. (See Figure 2: Analytical Flowchart below for a synopsis of the analytical process). First, thinking with

Critical Race Theory enabled an examination of Angry Black Man Ideology, a social custom and way of thinking that operates as a form of discourse and control. Second, and similar in its results to the process of applying critical race analysis to items of policy and practice, *thinking with* Critical Race theory in my study opened new ways to think about the intersections of Malik, David, and Xavier’s counter-stories with contemporary community college mission, policy, and educational practices—thus providing a mechanism for addressing a disconnect and bridging the gap and between lived experience and

Determined to Rise Analytical Flowchart

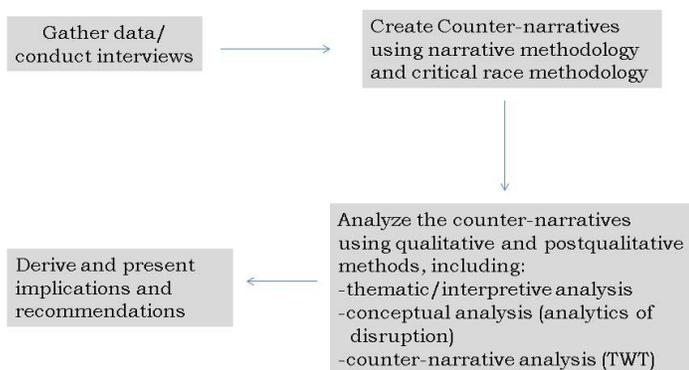


Figure 2: Analytical Flowchart

In terms of the application of my findings, I acknowledge that the current neoliberal climate privileges positivist, science-based-research and numerical accountability, deeming such approaches to be clear-cut, objective and often incontrovertibly directive. Within the present audit culture, therefore, I anticipate resistance to my findings from many who are in positions of authority regarding policy and practice, expecting that they may find it undesirable to engage the messiness and multiplicity of what could be added to the discussion through the introduction of lived experiences. Recognizing the role of education

in the transmission of culture, however, I would further recommend that academic professionals be more widely trained to gather and use counter-narrative data to help develop and implement anti-racist frameworks and culturally responsive pedagogies, and to undergird a shift toward social justice as a counter-weight to the preeminence of economic factors.

The Absent Presence: Analyses of African American Women

As I conclude this study it is appropriate to honor and recognize the most apparent *absent presence* in this study, Black women. My study is focused on the higher education attainment needs of Black men, however as a Black woman, I must clarify that the challenges faced by Black men are not entirely removed from the realities of their sisters, mothers, daughters and wives. Society in the aggregate tends to focus on the many perils facing Black men without giving equal attention to those of women like Tanisha Anderson, Yvette Smith, Miriam Carey, Shelly Frey, Darnisha Harris, Melissa Williams, Alesia Thomas, Chantel Davis, Rekia Boyd, Shereese Francis, Alyana Stanley-Jones, Tarika Jones, Alberta Spruill, Kendra James, and 92 year-old Kathryn Johnson. These are Black women who were killed during law enforcement encounters, but whose names have neither been recited nor martyred. While we resource state and federal initiatives such as the Minority Male Mentoring Program (3MP) and My Brother's Keeper (MBK), we have no corollary supports for Black women in education. The counter-narratives of the men who participated in my study indicate that Black men are at times left with the perception that Black women are either self-sufficient and do not need support, or conversely that most of the social services and support systems available are more readily accessible to women. These perceptions and inferences are equally problematic. They exist as stock stories that have the

power to constrain Black men and Black women to places of competition and antagonism, and to perpetuate oppression through the age-old strategy of division. During and after slavery, African Americans were divided by a pigmentocracy built upon Whiteness as Property, in which light skinned Black people—those who looked more like White people—had access to greater privilege and status. This hierarchy made it easier to sustain hegemonic systems of oppression. We must remain critically conscious and deliberately guard against allowing gender to become the new site of division, breach, and self-regulation.

Conclusion

In summary, I submit that combining thematic, conceptual, and counter-narrative analysis, as has been the outcome of my study, enables a broader, more robust and multifaceted view of the complex problem of racism in higher education. In this context, I have recommended a variety of proficiency-based and attributional themes around which I believe programming can be designed to help prepare Black men for success at community college degree completion. I assert that these findings can be used to create teacher education and professional development opportunities for instructional and administrative professionals within higher education. In terms of the more philosophical implications, I posit that by disseminating the data, analysis, and recommendations of my study, a counter-hegemonic discourse can arise to generate meaningful discussions and to further inform social activism toward the eradication of racism in higher education and society in general.

I maintain that the findings of my study can be utilized to help policymakers comprehend community college degree completion in terms of social justice as well as through the lens of market demands. I also believe that the hybrid methodological approach used for my study stands as an example of ways in which scholars might “reach beyond our

methods of today to create the methods for tomorrow” (Charmaz, 2016, p. 41). Finally, as a mother, educational administrator, and member of a broader social community, I anticipate that this research will inform my own future work by establishing a practical and scholarly foundation upon which I may work as an agent for change toward improving the lives of African American men, the stability of American families, and the state of American society.

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Appendices

- A. Invitation and Demographic Information
- B. Informed Consent
- C. Semi-structured Interview Questions
- D. Research Diary Journal Guide

Appendix A

INVITATION AND DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Hello,

My name is Leslie McKesson and I am a doctoral candidate at Appalachian State University. For my dissertation I am studying the higher education experiences of African American men who completed a two-year degree at a North Carolina Community College during or after 2010. This study will consist of a semi-structured interview, during which I will ask participants various questions about degree completion. Because my study calls for the application of Critical Race Theory, I will be inquiring specifically into racialized experiences.

If you are interested in participating in this study or if you have questions that you would like to ask me before deciding, feel free to call me at (828) 403-8160 or contact me by email at lm1158@appstate.edu. I will be happy to provide a copy of potential questions for your review, noting that the interview may or may not be limited to the questions that I will provide. I will arrange to conduct the interview at an appropriate location near you. The purpose of this study is to provide positive counter-narrative that focuses of degree attainment for Black men.

A brief demographic survey is attached that will provide basic information related to my study. Participants will be described in the study as they self-identify to the categories indicated on the survey form, and they will be known by a self-selected pseudonym. All information gathered during this process, including contact information, will be held in strict confidence and no identifying information will be shared with anyone.

If you are interested in participating in this study please complete the information below and return it to me at lm1158@appstate.edu or by postal mail at P.O. Box 129, Morganton, NC 28680-0129. Thank you for considering taking part in this important project.

With best regards,

Leslie McKesson

Survey Questions

What is your Name? _____

What is your age? _____

What is the best way to get documents to you (circle email, postal mail or fax) Please provide that information below:

What is your telephone number? _____

What is the best time to reach you by phone? _____

What type of associates degree did you complete and what year did you complete it (ex., college transfer, business administration, etc.) _____

Which community college did you graduate from? _____

Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title: Determined to Rise: A Conceptual and Counter-narrative Analysis of the Higher Education Attainment Experiences of Three African American Men

Investigator: Leslie Dula McKesson

Purpose of the Research: You have been invited to participate in interviews conducted by Leslie McKesson as part of a doctoral dissertation through Appalachian State University. The purpose of this study is to conduct Critical Race Theory and poststructural analyses of the counter-narratives of African American men as related to the completion of their undergraduate degree(s).

Procedures: You have been invited to participate in the study because you have persisted to complete a college degree. As part of the study, I will interview graduates of degree programs at various institutions within the North Carolina Community College System. During the interview, I will make an audio recording and take field notes of what I see and experience.

Benefits and Risks: There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this observation. It is hoped that this study as a whole will help expand our knowledge about how the participants think about their relationships with higher education systems. There are no expected negative effects of participating in this interview.

Anonymity and Confidentiality: You have a right to privacy and you will not be identified by name or other identifying features. Neither the interview field notes nor any transcript excerpts will contain any personal identifiers. Audio files and notes will be securely stored and only I will have access to them. The information gathered during the interview(s) may be combined with information from other interviews designed to explore the experiences of African-American male community college graduates. This will result in a report of the study findings and will be published as my doctoral dissertation. Results may also be used for future scholarly publications.

Compensation: There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

Freedom to Withdraw: You can choose whether or not to participate in this interview and can withdraw at any time prior to analysis of the data. Even if the interview has already begun, you have the right to withdraw your consent and I will cease the interview. There will be no penalty for withdrawing from the study.

Subject's Responsibilities: Your only responsibility as a participant in this interview is to share your perception and to answer the questions posed.

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

Subject signature

Date

Should you have any questions about this research or its conduct, you may contact:

Leslie Dula McKesson, 828.403.8160, lm1158@email.appstate.edu

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Brandy Bryson, 828-262-6093, brysonbs@appstate.edu

Appendix C

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Determined to Rise—Leslie McKesson

- 1) Tell me about yourself and your family or those who are most important to you.
- 2) Describe your educational background.
- 3) Why did you pursue a community college degree? Would you recommend that other Black men do the same? Why or why not?
- 4) Thinking specifically about race, how would you describe your overall experience attending and graduating from a community college?
- 5) Does your ability and/or comfort in expressing your racial and cultural identity in the college environment differ from your ability/comfort in expressing your identity in the places where you grew up or in social as opposed to educational settings?
- 6) Thinking about race and other factors related to race such as gender and class, how would you describe your academic experiences (experiences with faculty and with peers in your classes, course options and course content, teaching approach of instructors, etc.)?
 - a. Specifically, in relation to academics, are your experiences in line with what you expected or have there been some surprises?
 - b. Were you prepared for your academic experiences that you've had so far? If so, how? If not, please explain.
- 7) Thinking about your college experiences, how would you compare them to the experiences of Black women? Were you treated in basically the same way or differently, and if differently how so?

- 8) Thinking about race and other factors related to race such as gender and class, how would you describe your general experiences outside of your classes (clubs and organizations, entertainment, etc.)?
- a. Specifically, in relation to the social experience, are your experiences in line with what you expected or have there been some surprises?
 - b. Were you prepared for the social experiences that you've had so far? If so, how? If not, please explain.
- 9) Thinking about your racial and cultural identity, what strengths did you draw from to cope with challenges in completing your degree?

Appendix D

RESEARCH DIARY JOURNAL GUIDE (IRB Approved Protocols)

1. The research diary journal (journal) is a record of the research and analysis phase of the dissertation study titled “Determined to Rise: A Conceptual and Counter-narrative Analysis of the Higher Education Attainment Experiences of Three African American Men.” It will provide evidence that my dissertation and any derivative work is based on my own research, and that the ideas are my own.

2. This journal may be used to reflect upon participant interviews, reviews of existing research, or other matters relevant to the conduct of this study.

3. Entries may include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Short quotations with citations
- Sketches, drawings, and diagrams
- Personal reflections

4. Journal entries

- will be maintained in a password protected format
- will identify participants only by their assigned pseudonym
- will not be subject to review by study participants
- may be used as additional counter-narrative data for the study at the discretion of the

Primary Investigator

Vita

Leslie Dula McKesson is a native of Lenoir, North Carolina. She earned a Bachelor of Science degree in the Administration of Criminal Justice from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and completed Master of Arts, Education Specialist, and Doctor of Education degrees in Adult Education and Educational Leadership at Appalachian State University.

Leslie's early work immersed her in the legal system, where she worked as a paralegal in civil and administrative law for several years before taking an instructional position at Western Piedmont Community College in Morganton, North Carolina, where she is now dean of Business, Public Services, and Academic Support. Leslie continues to serve on numerous local, statewide, and national boards related to law, education, and various social issues. In addition to publishing an award-winning family history book, Leslie has written articles for a number of professional journals and presented at regional, national, and international conferences. In her future endeavors, Leslie plans to continue the work of social justice by pursuing her particular interests in educational, legal, and criminal justice reform.