Black Women Undergraduates: A Phenomenological Examination of their Lived Experiences and Identity Construction at Predominantly White Institutions

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This disquisition is a phenomenological exploration of the lived experiences and identity construction of Black women undergraduates (BWU) at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). While recent literature has focused on Black women and graduate studies, this article's explicit focus on BWU provides a needed perspective in the field, contributing to our growing understanding of the experiences of Black women at PWIs. The purpose of this study was to examine BWUs' academic, social, and cultural lived experiences and the ways in which they constructed their identities within their respective PWIs environments. Situated upon a critical race feminist theoretical framework, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with seven participants. Findings reveal that BWU engage in various degrees of negotiating contexts, managing subjectivities, and (re)defining identities while navigating their respective campuses. This study supports extant and emerging literature centered on the experiences of BWU at PWIs, and extends the field's understanding of the intersection between their lived experiences and their identity construction while attending PWIs, specifically. Our findings illuminate PWIs' responsibility to transform systems and practices in order to foster positive academic and social experiences for BWU.

Keywords: Black women, Black women undergraduates, predominantly white institutions (PWIs), identity, critical race feminism

Introduction

Black women and girls have persistently resisted systems and barriers that attempt to ostracize them from educational spaces, and deny them opportunities to promote economic viability and positive life outcomes. In fact, Black women have historically utilized education as a means of resistance dating back to chattel slavery (hooks, 1981); not only for their individual progress, but situated within the larger struggle for group survival (Collins, 2000). Their membership in both racialized and gendered minoritized groups has uniquely positioned them at the intersection of multiple identities that often represent various axes of oppression (Blue, 2001; Crenshaw, 1989). One-hundred seventy years after Lucy Ann Staton's cement (not even glass) ceiling shattering feat of being the first Black woman to earn a college degree, the lived educational experiences of Black women and girls continue to be of urgent relevance.

Extant literature on Black women and girls' PK-20 experiences shows that educational institutions usher Black girls into the school-to-prison pipeline (Crenshaw, et al. 2015), push them out of schools (Morris, 2016), and render them invisible (Patton & Ward, 2016) at alarming rates. These realities draw attention to the need for research and practices that affirm and center Black women and girls' schooling experiences. One such discussion concerns their resilience and success. For instance, Kaba (2008) contends that Black women have become one of the most academically successful minoritized subgroups in spite of the many barriers they have faced due to their race and gender identities. There has also been recent discussion of Black women as the "new model minority" (Paul, 2003); that is, a group once educationally, economically, and socially marginalized but has, in the face of various obstacles, risen up and achieved prosperity, admiration, and even emulation. This line of thinking has become a point of contention amongst various scholars, as the notion suggests a stance that Black women have successfully overcome all odds and are in fact, better for it.

Patton et al. (2017) assert that the narrative of the new model minority paints Black women as a monolithic group of "super women," and discredits their marginalization in education and society more broadly. Their analysis concludes that this narrative may very well prevent policies and practices that are specifically dedicated to meeting the diverse needs of Black women students in postsecondary contexts. Thus, there is a growing body of scholarship specifically examining the experiences of Black women undergraduates (BWU) at predominantly white institutions (PWI). Their lived experiences on PWIs campuses is an urgent and timely discussion as these contexts often serve as distal environments where feelings of alienation and isolation abound (Robertson, et al., 2005; Robertson & Dundes 2017). By hyper-centering BWU, the purpose of this study is to examine their lived experiences and identity construction at PWIs. This study is built upon the extant literature about collegiate Black women, and extends the field's understanding by examining the intersection between their lived experiences and their identity construction. We ask: 1) What are the lived experiences of Black women undergraduates at a PWI? and 2) How do Black women undergraduates construct their identities within a PWI context?

Literature Review

In 2016, women made up 56% of the undergraduate college population and Black women represented 39% of undergraduates (NCES, 2017). To better understand these figures, it is important to consider the type of institutions that they attend. In comparison to the late 1950s when over 90% of Black women attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), more recently, 84% of all Black students attend PWIs (Harmon, 2012). Considering this enrollment data, and the fact that Black women have historically been excluded from scholarly literature documenting their educational experiences as students at PWIs, it is imperative to examine the landscape of literature that currently exists.

Black women undergraduates at PWIs

Research on the academic, social, and personal experiences of Black college students at PWIs rarely addresses the specific challenges facing BWU (Crenshaw, 2015; Harper, 2012). Patton et al. (2016) demonstrate how research often centers on the academic status of Black men while positioning Black women as superlatives, simply because the latter have historically fared better than their Black male peers. Literature on BWUs' experiences at PWIs, suggest that this group, which has been marginalized on the basis of both race and gender (Hannon et al., 2016; Leath & Chavous, 2017), faces myriad barriers that undermine their academic progress. However, the limited scholarly attention devoted to the collegiate experiences of BWU perpetuates their sense of invisibility at PWIs (Patton et al., 2016).

Studies have pointed to a lack of socioeconomic resources, inadequate mentoring, and support networks as barriers to degree completion for Black women (Bertrand Jones et al., 2015). Additional factors such as poor academic preparation, limited enrollment support, and lack of entry through nontraditional pathways have also hindered their access and success (Irvine & Fenwick, 2011; Sleeter & Milner, 2011). Shortcomings in support extend beyond negative in-class encounters and into residence halls, where Black and White students share intimate, personal space. Residence halls have historically been intended to serve as spaces for cross-cultural exchanges and the building of meaningful relationships (Kahn, 2013), though this is not always the reality for all students. BWU have reported that unaddressed racial and gender microaggressions have motivated them to isolate themselves, even in what they might have considered the "safe space" of their dormitory (Haynes, 2019). Racial and gendered microaggressions, especially when unchecked, can jeopardize a student's academic achievement (Allen et al. 2013; Lewis et al., 2013). Microaggressions are defined as subtle, ostensibly innocuous verbal and non-verbal interactions which target and harm Black people (Pierce et al., 1978). Gendered microaggressions are defined as "subtle forms of sexism towards women in daily interactions experiences" (Sue et al., 2008, p. 336). These norms marginalize women students; thus, BWU experience objectification, intellectual belittling, and other dehumanizing attacks on the basis of race and gender (Basford et al., 2014; Sue et al., 2008).

Sources of Support. While BWU face many barriers that directly affect their lives within PWIs, leveraging their community cultural wealth (CCW) and the establishment of counter-spaces has been noted as sources of support. Yosso (2005) affirm the importance of CCW, which

supports marginalized students as they matriculate to and persist through college. In contrast to Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, which has historically been used to depict White communities as possessing cultural wealth, while positioning communities of color as culturally deficient, Yosso (2005) proclaims that CCW is a response to traditional notions of cultural capital in that it prioritizes the cultural knowledge, experiences, and abilities of oppressed groups. Drawing from one's aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capitals are some of the means by which Black women persist and resist in educational spaces. BWU with clearly established networks and access to various forms of capital are likely better positioned to navigate and persist in PWIs that have not traditionally responded to their social, emotional, academic or relational needs (Allen-Handy & Farinde-Wu, 2018; Carey, 2016).

An additional source of support is counter-spaces. Counter-spaces can combat the often-culturally incongruent environment of PWIs. Solorzano et al. (2000) explain, "counter-spaces serve as sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained" (p. 70). For instance, having the opportunity to coalesce with other Black women and exchange stories of academic and social struggles and resilience has been an invaluable asset to BWU (Dortch, 2016). Counter-spaces can be created within Black student organizations, offices that provide services to students of color, Black sororities, and academic and social affinity groups (Baber, 2012).

BWUs' Identity Construction at PWIs

Not only are the lived academic and social experiences of BWU under-represented in scholarship (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Harper, 2012), a gap also exists in terms of how BWU define their identities amid stereotypes (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Two major lines of thinking exist with regard to the perceptions of BWU; both of which can have substantial impact on their identities. While BWU are positioned, at least colloquially, as successful, extant literature contends that they are held to unusually and unsustainably high standards when compared to other groups and are associated with the superwoman ideal (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). The superwoman ideal promotes the expectations of Black women as selfless, hard-working, and strong (West et al., 2016). When BWU are perceived as super women, they are seen as having the ability to persist at any cost, even if that cost is their own self-esteem and mental health (Everett & Croom, 2017). The idea that Black women are impermeable to vulnerability, the psychological and emotional impact of academic struggles, and microaggressive attacks on their intellect is harmful to their identities and self-concepts (Allen et al., 2013).

Black women students also suffer from a sense of invisibility (Haynes et al., 2016). Franklin (1999) contends, "invisibility is an inner struggle with feeling that one's talents, abilities, personalities, and worth are not valued or even recognized" (p. 761). Conversely to the superwoman narrative, hooks (1981) asserts that invisibility relegates Black women to a position of inferiority not only in classroom settings, but also social venues, such as residence halls and extracurricular activities. Hayes' et al. (2016) collective autoethnography with Black women doctoral students illuminates their own deficit thinking about themselves as scholars, as they

connect this negative sense of self to the master scripting (Acuff et al., 2012), that normalizes racism and sexism at PWIs. Academic transactions, or "the price that Black women and girls pay for doing business in the educational marketplace" (Haynes et al., 2016, p. 381) are often paid in terms of dignity, self-respect, and a devaluation of their Black womanhood.

PWIs policies and practices that frame Black women as a homogenous group ignore the multiplicitous nature of their identities (Patton & Croom, 2017). Hence, Blue (2001) asserts,

> because Black women are unduly oppressed along the axes of race, class, gender, and sexuality, it is necessary to take on the responsibility of recreating cultural identities and politicized knowledge and theoretical assumptions based on criteria that are important and relevant for them/us. (p.136)

 In summary, scholarly research demonstrates the need and opportunity for Black women to take ownership of their racial and gender identity definitions and reject those placed on them due to systems of institutionalized oppression (Porter, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Critical race feminism (CRF) is the theoretical lens utilized in this study (Wing, 1997, Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Originating from critical race scholars, CRF adheres to many of the same beliefs as critical race theory (CRT). A practice-based theory (Berry, 2010), CRF utilizes storytelling and emphasizes intersectionality and the multidimensional identities of women of color. Berry (2010) asserts that CRF addresses the systemic nature of racism by centering the lives and experiences of women of color, in this case, Black women, at the center of the discussion. CRF offers greater insight into how the endemic nature of racism, sexism, classism and other systems of oppression distinctly and disproportionately impact Black women (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Patton & Ward, 2016). In opposition to white supremacy, CRF challenges gender essentialism: "the notion that a unitary, 'essential' women's experience can be isolated and described independently of race, class orientation, and other realities of experience" (Harris, 1990, p. 585). Viewing identities in the context of experiences as linked and mutually shaping (Patton & Ward, 2016), CRF adheres to the concept of intersectionality as it places the complex lives of Black women at the center of analysis. Acknowledging the multiple and intersecting points of marginality that impact the lived experiences of BWU as outsiders within, "the situational identities that are attached to specific histories of social injustice" (Collins, 1999, p. 120) at PWIs, the interplay between race, gender, context and identity construction is inexplicably linked.

Methods

Positionality

We are Black women who unequivocally situate our scholarship within a critical paradigm. We draw from tenets of critical race feminism, Black feminist theory, and intersectionality in our individual and collective exploration of the educational experiences of Black women and girls. As Black women who have attended PWIs for one or more of our post-

secondary degrees and as current faculty and a PhD student at PWIs, we could not omit our own lived experiences and meaning-making throughout this research process. Therefore, we strived to manage our own biases through journaling and frequent check-ins with one another. Sharing our own stories in a safe space was critical to our research process and the deep commitment we upheld to honor the participants' narratives.

Research Design

Phenomenology explores the lived experiences of individuals, with the goal of deeply appreciating the essence of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013), while investigating the "essential meanings of individual experience" (Patton, 2002, p. 104). It calls researchers to engage in reduction, returning to original awareness through bracketing. While epoche (bracketing) is ideal to maintain objectivity, it is often impossible. Hence, the need to engage in reflexivity throughout the study. In addition, the intentionality of consciousness is another element of phenomenology, which "bespeaks the relationship between us as human beings and our world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 79). That is, the consciousness is directed or reaches out to the object (the world), giving it meaning (Crotty, 1998). Phenomenology as a research method also uses in-depth, explorative interviews in order to gain a deep understanding of participants' perceptions of reality and the nature or meaning of their everyday lives (Patton, 2002). Due to the nature of the research questions and the overall aim of the study, phenomenology is well suited to examine the lived experiences and identity construction of BWU at PWIs.

Participants

Seven BWU attending PWIs (see Table 1) served as participants in this study. We utilized purposive sampling, specifically criterion and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). The criteria utilized to select participants was that they a) identified as a Black woman and, b) were enrolled as an undergraduate student at a PWI. To maintain the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms were used in place of identifying names and places.

Table 1

Participants' Information

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Classification	Major	Type of School	Location
Christina	21	Senior	Cell & Molecular Biology	Small, private	South
Ella	20	Junior	Finance/Real Estate Minor	Medium, private	Northeast
Mariah	19	Sophomore	Sociology/Business Minor	Large, public	South Central
Chloe	19	Sophomore	Finance/Pre-Law	Large, public	South

Kya	17	Freshman	Sociology	Medium, ivy	Northeast
Natasha	18	Freshman	Health Sciences Pre-Physical Therapy	Medium, private	Northeast
Alexis	18	Freshman	Nursing	Medium, private	Northwest

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this IRB approved study was collected by the lead researcher who conducted two-hour, face-to-face interviews with all seven participants to discuss their lived experiences and identity construction. Participants responded to open-ended, semi-structured interview questions in the tradition of narrative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These audio-recorded interviews were then transcribed into written text. Initially, transcriptions were read in their entirety (Creswell, 2013) while we wrote textual and structural experiences of the participants. After a second read, it became apparent that the utilization of a holistic-content analysis would best assist in gathering an overall impression of each woman's experiences (Lieblich et al., 1998). The third level of data analysis included open and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006), which utilized both in vivo and process coding. These codes were compiled in a code book (Saldaña, 2016). Data were then compared and contrasted across all seven narratives to decipher emerging themes. In order to support the trustworthiness of our study, we employed triangulation. We engaged in a member-checking process that included ongoing informal follow-up conversations with the participants to ensure that our interpretations were in alignment with their own meaning-making processes. We maintained an audit trail and process logs of all decisions that were made throughout each stage of the study, which contained detailed memos and field notes (Beal, 2013).

Findings

After an analysis across all seven narratives, the findings indicate that the lived experiences and identity construction of BWU at PWIs involve ongoing and various degrees of 1) negotiating contexts, 2) managing subjectivities, and 3) (re)defining identities. These salient themes highlight their unique positions as BWU at PWIs.

Negotiating Contexts

Negotiating contexts represents the ways in which the participants have come to navigate the various environmental contexts of their college campuses all the while trying to figure out where they fit in. This negotiation entails understanding the embedded (and often hidden) rules and resources of their campuses in order to thrive and survive. In doing so, all of the women have mastered the art of shifting (often referred to as code switching) or the ability to slide in and out of different modes of acting, depending on the social context or group of interaction (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Several of the women referred to "acting" or "playing the part" in their narratives, identifying the ways in which they negotiate their behaviors to maneuver various campus situations such as the classroom, extracurricular and social settings. Ella discussed how she negotiates various campus contexts. She often asked herself, "Ok, am I going to be who I

am? If not, that takes time though, and it takes A LOT of time." In addition, Christina, and Alexis both expressed how they negotiate academic spaces. Christina explains her lack of exposure to Black and Brown faculty, TAs, and students. Despite limited diversity on her campus, Christina strives to persist, and explained:

> My major is cell molecular biology, and I have never had a Black TA, never. The department is a bunch of old White men and women. I had mostly White male professors. For my genetics class, I had an Indian lady, and then I had a lot of Asian TAs. At (university), there aren't a lot of African Americans, diversity here with students and the admin.

Alexis outlined a similar and distressing experience. She, like Christina, was the only Black person and more specifically, the only Black woman in her classes, which engendered insecurities and self-doubt. Alexis' recalled:

> My first semester, in all of my classes I was the only Black person...girl in my classes and all the kids were so smart. I remember thinking I cannot do this; I can't do this. People around me are just way too educated. But then I realized, hey, I am educated too. What am I talking about? I ended up being one of the stronger students in the class because I wasn't letting myself feel like I was inferior anymore.

A subtheme of negotiating contexts is the creation and maintenance of strong networks which support the women's abilities to negotiate their campus environments. Some rely on strong family and friend ties, while others glean support from networks built on their campuses. All but one of the women was strongly involved in their campus communities and held leadership roles in campus organizations.

Interestingly, another sub-theme of negotiating contexts is BWU experiences with their hair and pressure felt to modify their hair to conform and navigate both academic and social contexts. Several of the women discuss their need to bypass the natural state of their hair in order to conform to the unspoken rules of society. Chloe admitted to keeping her hair in its natural state by not using chemical relaxers; however, she masked her natural hair with weave, in order to fit into the expectations of "professionalism" within her major and desired career path. She shared,

> I don't think people understand that I do a lot of things to my hair to make it look like theirs, and some things aren't healthy. If only they understood the scalp burns and the breakage, they would not even require us to go through that process. I have a right to have my hair whatever way I feel, but until I get there and become a lawyer, I will conform.

Chloe's perspective was shared by Christina who also questioned her physical appearance at a PWI. Perplexed by her single status, she attempted to negotiate dating and relationships, wondering why both White and Black male students did not find her attractive.

> Is it because I don't have long hair? Is it because I am a size 10/12 and not a size two? Am I intimidating? That is the biggest thing. Usually, people say [I am] always smiling. Okay, so why can't guys approach me? Is it that I'm too focused? Is it physical attributes or because of my spiritual and religious convictions?

Christina illuminates how her PWI context caused her to question herself and wrestle with her self-esteem and identity. The findings of negotiating contexts in this study, indicate that BWU' attempted. to navigate, shift, and even sometimes conform to various campus environments as they moved in and out of their PWI spaces.

Managing Subjectivities

Managing subjectivities is the second research finding. Each woman described being critically conscious of her dual identity as Black and a woman, as well as the ongoing process to manage the various roles in her life as a daughter, sister, friend, student, girlfriend, employee, etc. Within this theme, the interplay between the various intersections of race and gender are highlighted as each woman attempted to manage various societal influences, their experiences in classrooms and social settings, and with professors and peers.

The ability or inability to manage their multiple roles had a great impact on their experiences at PWIs. Alexis refers to the process of managing subjectivities as being exhausting. She exclaimed, "I think you are automatically labeled as inferior to other people. It's like being Black and being a woman. I feel like I have to work ten times harder than the kids in my class." Meanwhile, Ella really struggled through how she could separate herself from the characteristics that she believed could inhibit her growth and success in her career. For her, being African American posed a greater threat to her success, more so than her position as a woman. She shared how she managed her dual identity when called a double minority by a White classmate:

> So what, I am a double minority; what does that mean about who I am as a person? That doesn't identify me in any way. That I am a female and an African American, that's a statistic you're giving me. You are putting me automatically in a statistic.

A broader conception of what it means to be Black in terms of the African diaspora was illuminated by Mariah and Chloe who attempted to manage their subjectivities through their ethnic heritage as Nigerian Americans, holding on to the salience of their African roots. Mariah distanced herself from being an "African American," "Black," or even having a dual identity:

> I am one person, there is no splitting, so it's like you know me as Mariah, you know me as Abena (alias for Nigerian name), but it's still the same person and you will know I'm Nigerian. I was having a conversation with somebody, and they're like, but you're Black still. I'm like but first and foremost I'm Nigerian.

Kya, Alexis, Ella, and Natasha highlighted the impact of their socio-economic status and its intersection with race and gender. Not only did they find themselves managing their race and gender, but also class issues as first-generation students from low-income urban communities. Alexis attested to this,

> I realized that a lot of the kids at the school are rich, and they don't know what it means to be poor and have nothing. I remember I was humiliated, embarrassed because I had to explain. My counselor made me give a speech to everybody telling them where I came from, my experiences and how I made it out. I am actually grateful that I got the opportunity because a lot of people do not know what it's like. They had a different view of me once I finished talking about it.

Another layer of managing subjectivities includes the various roles several of the girls take up on their campuses. All of them except for one serve in various leadership roles in their campus communities while maintaining high academic achievement. While continuously grappling with inaccurate roles that are often projected onto them, these women chose to participate in roles that reflect their true sense of self. For instance, when asked, "Who are you on your campus and within your campus community?" Christina responded,

> I am very visible with students and administration. I work in housing. I am a senior resident advisor, President of AKA, president of NPHC. I would say a student leader really focused on campus life because you can really excel academically but socially you can be dead.

Though difficult, having to manage these various subjectivities and roles is a critical part of the BWUs' lived experiences and identity construction on their respective PWI campuses.

(Re)defining Identities

While the BWU in this study are negotiating contexts and managing their various subjectivities at PWIs, they are having to contend with the ongoing construction of their identities. The theme (re)defining identities illuminates how BWU are active agents in the ways in which they identify and define themselves. The women in this study are ever aware of historical and contemporary "definitions" and stereotypical tropes and portrayals of Black women in society that have served to render Black women an under-class at the intersections of race, gender, class, and orientation.

Chloe's account of (re)definition is captured in her discussion of her transition to college:

> Coming to college, I had to redefine a lot of who I was because so many things changed. Especially getting older and being myself, I realized I am not the same person I was in high school. I feel like I have been put on a football field like the same football field I've been on all my life but all of a sudden, the lights are turned out; I have no clue where I am. And it's just very different. You really have to feel yourself out all over again.

Natasha shares a story of how she (re)defined herself and how she resisted stereotypes:

> It was my friend, two Asian guys and a Black guy and somehow, they started talking about color and racism. The Asian guys said they don't like Black girls. My friend asked why. They responded that Black women are intimidating, rude, and loud. I asked if he had ever been around a Black female who was loud and ghetto, and he said no. The worst part about it was the Black guy said that he agreed. He just sat there and did not defend us, but we fought back against him because we know we are not what the stereotypes say we are.

The process of (re)defining identities is an iterative one. At the beginning of each interview, the participants were asked how they identify themselves. In the response given by Ella, she did not identify herself as an African American woman; in fact, she omitted any identifying markers of race. When asked about this later in the interview, she stated how she (re)defines her identity and takes complete agency of how she chooses to define herself:

> The reason why I think I didn't identify myself as [African American] is I didn't want to limit myself. I didn't want you, I don't want people, when they look at me, when they see who I am to limit what my capabilities are or judge my background before ever knowing anything else about me. My vision is not always to be THE African American female, that ONE African American female, representing all African American females.

Herein, Ella depicted the non-monolithic experiences of BWU and redefined her self-definition through omission. This identity construction is important to the narratives of Black women at PWIs, because it demonstrates their active force in taking back the hegemonic and stereotypical modes of oppression and discouragement that have historically defined Black women's lived experiences. They are tearing down historical and stereotypical definitions of Black women and replacing them with redefined self-definitions.

Discussion

As established in previous literature, BWU must learn to navigate unwelcoming and foreign environments that attempt to erode their academic and socio-emotional advancement. In combating PWI contexts, Yosso (2005) describes the importance of CCW, as it supports

marginalized students through their tenure in college (Sleeter & Milner, 2011; Strayhorn, 2010). Accordingly, the current study revealed that the success of BWU attending PWIs is contingent upon their astute garnering and utilization of navigational, social, and resistant capital. Within their respective PWI contexts, our study participants navigated and negotiated both gendered and racialized experiences by continually resisting—managing inaccurate subjective portrayals of themselves and adopting roles that aligned with their identities. By defining and (re)defining themselves, BWU are instrumental in their own identity construction, and challenge oppression all the while earning their degrees.

Further, data from the current study also suggest that Black women are critically conscious of their duality at PWIs. Because of the ever present socially constructed notions of race, the BWU in our study had a greater awareness of their Black identities (Thomas et al., 2013). Race coupled with gender issues caused a dual consciousness, affecting how the women examined and interacted with others on their campuses. These findings support the literature documenting that Black women, unlike others, must manage their membership into two often underrepresented and marginalized groups (hooks, 1981; Stewart, 2008; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). As Black women students carefully tread foreign terrain, their racialized and gendered experiences produce numerous challenges that shape their schooling experiences and determine trajectory such as solidifying retention and graduation. Also, in the case of several participants such as Kya, Natasha, Alexis, and Ella, class and socioeconomic realities were critical to their experiences and intersectional identities. As mentioned, BWIs at PWIs must contend with both racism and sexism—two modes of discrimination; two sides of one coin each unable to exist in isolation. Race and gender, malformed by societal views, disadvantage and restrict BWU when such discriminatory perspectives are imposed upon them (Farinde & Allen, 2013). If either race or gender is eliminated, the experience is altered. It is the simultaneous existence of each that makes BWUs, educational experiences at PWIs unlike any other.

Our study participants' paths were sometimes turbulent, and often plagued with episodes of self-doubt. Consequently, they employed self-reliance and perseverance in order to circumvent explicit and implicit bias such as in the case of Alexis who pushed past her fears to excel in her classes. Despite impediments and minimal support, the women in this study formed counter-spaces and leveraged their familial and peer networks. Rather than accept inferior labels that reinforce stereotypes, it appears that BWU choose to enter into the unsupportive environments of PWIs and thrive within these contexts.

Indeed, in these PWI spaces, BWU contended with and resisted microaggressions (Hotchkins, 2017; Sue, 2010), and were forced to navigate exclusive academic and social spaces (Dortch & Patel, 2017). In managing their subjectivities, multiple roles, and responsibilities, the study participants expressed feelings of exhaustion and stress as they advanced in their college degrees. They negotiated their respective school contexts and expectations by conforming to implicit demands or adjusting their outward appearance. Despite the objectification of race and gender, our participants continuously sought to redefine their identities. In doing so, they strived to ignite change, challenge the status quo, and tear down stereotypes by excelling academically

and emerging as respected student leaders on their respective campus communities. Collins (2000) asserts:

> Black women who struggle to forge an identity larger than the one society would force upon them are aware and conscious, and that very consciousness is potent. Identity is not the goal but rather the point of departure in the process of self-definition. Black females' refusal to relinquish control over their self-definitions: resist by creating their own self-definitions and self–valuations. (p. 114)

Again, while BWU in this study managed to excel despite implicit racial and gender attacks, they should not have to endure or persevere in unsupportive educational environments. Rather, educational institutions should intentionally seek to understand BWU lived experiences and implement policies and practices that speak to improving BWU overall educational experience. Through their stories, this study seeks to hyper-center BWU lives by amplifying their voices as students at PWIs. Their experiences have critical implications for transformative praxis and the prospect of emancipatory educational spaces for all women at PWIs. To revise, reassess, and restore their educational experiences, we provide informed recommendations for educational institutions.

Implications & Recommendations

As this study has hyper-centered BWU experiences, so too must our PK-20 educational institutions—that is, leveraging all resources to support their journey toward graduation. Again, the model minority myth purports that a minoritized group has transcended significant life challenges to successfully contribute to society; and as such, should be lauded and emulated (Chou & Feagin, 2016). This myth, however, ignores a troubling reality— structural racism and systemic oppression significantly impact the life chances of said groups. Thus, for PWIs to ensure the success of their BWU, institutional policies and practices must forgo the false ideal that Black women, by some innate nature, are strong, resilient, able to persist through obstacles, and require no comprehensive support (Patton et al., 2017). PWIs must support BWU as they negotiate classrooms and student life aspects of their universities. Support should include strategic and system level initiatives to increase ethnically diverse faculty, staff, and administrators, particularly mental health and student affairs personnel. Representative faculty often serve as sources of both academic and emotional support, which increases students' sense of belonging. PWIs must better understand that BWU are often managing multiple subjectivities and roles both in and out of school.

Obviously, academic preparation is essential for Black women to be successful (Moses, 1989); but, there is also a need for initiatives that support their social and emotional transition. These programs should include positive identity formation and stereotype rejection, and also build partnerships with PK-12 schools and university admissions offices to support the experiences of BWU. Exemplars of such efforts include Black Girl Magic, S.O.U.L Sisters Leadership Collective, Black Girls Can Inc., and The Black Girl Tribe. Once Black women

matriculate to their respective institutions, it is imperative that they immediately access on-campus programs whose mission is to offer mentorship, and social and emotional support. BWU must also have "safe spaces" where they are centered and affirmed. Examples of such spaces are MIT's My Sister's Keeper and Boston College's Black Women Matter. Both provide refuge, healing, and community for Black women while also reducing feelings of isolation and increasing one's personal and academic wellbeing.

These aforementioned programs offer BWUs a culturally congruent campus space that aligns with their academic, emotional, and social needs. PWIs must attend to BWU' voices, offering seats at the proverbial table from which they are often omitted. Seats exist in all campus cultural spaces, including Black cultural and women's centers, classrooms, labs, social spaces, student government, athletic courts and fields, trustee meetings, president's cabinet, etc. Thus, it is imperative that when considerations of institutional policies and practices arise that may affect the experiences of Black women, their feedback is immediately solicited and utilized in decision-making processes towards sustainable efforts.

Future Research and Conclusion

This study captured the experiences of seven Black women and their stories have great implications for further research and practice. The literature continues to benefit from scholars highlighting the experiences of Black women at PWIs. Thus, additional studies that further the understanding of this phenomenon are critical. The field could benefit from research that unpacks university campus programs that successfully support Black women. Specifically, research that focuses on effective institutional initiatives to recruit, retain, and graduate Black women is needed. A need also exists for studies focused on successful Black women as well as Black women who did not "succeed" at PWIs. In closing, the experiences of BWU at PWIs are unique and remain under-researched. BWU are blazing trails on their college campuses and effecting change at the highest level despite the oppressive duality of race and gender. Situated within a PWI context that often does not acknowledge that Black lives matter, let alone Black women lives matter, there is an urgent need to amplify the experiences of BWU. PWIs have a responsibility to do their part in transforming systems and practices in support of fostering positive academic and social experiences for BWU. Though they may be considered representations of the new model minority, this notion must be problematized. As the findings in this study demonstrate, BWU are negotiating contexts, managing subjectivities, and (re)defining identities on PWI campuses to survive, thrive, and persist, often in the face of systemic impediments. Their stories say as much about the needed changes at PWIs as it does about the prowess and majesty of BWU.

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