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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, "SURVIVAL IS NOT AN ACADEMIC SKILL": EXPLORING HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE GRADUATES OF A PRIVATE BOARDING SCHOOL CRAFT AN IDENTITY, by TIFFANY SIMPKINS RUSSELL, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chair, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty. The Dean of the College of Education concurs.

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ABSTRACT

"SURVIVAL IS NOT AN ACADEMIC SKILL": EXPLORING HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE GRADUATES OF A PRIVATE BOARDING SCHOOL CRAFT AN IDENTITY

by

Tiffany Simpkins Russell

This qualitative study explores the private boarding school experiences of eight African American female graduates, the forms of identity they crafted and the survival skills they developed while navigating this unique terrain. A life history methodology grounded in the womanist tradition was used to develop a portrait of the women's experiences using their personal narratives as well as integrating my own. Data collection methods included archival research of historical documents related to the private school, Personal History Interview of the primary researcher, Individual Life History interviews of each of the women, and a Group Conversation with the participants. Narrative analysis (Labov, 1997) and Brown and Gilligan's *Listener's Guide* (1992) were used to analyze the women's narratives and revealed a set of four significant "creative essences." A "creative essence" is defined as "a proactive, unique, and individual path to inner fulfillment" (Davis, 1998, p. 493). These essences elucidate the survival skills the women employed at various times in their academic careers to cope with sexism, racism, marginalization and invisibility in an injurious environment. The emergent "creative essences" are: 1) Asserting Blackness; 2) Creating Safe Spaces; 3) Finding Voice and Embracing Loudness; 4) Relying on Sistafriends. These "creative essences" are explored in detail using examples from the female respondents' narratives, the scholarship on African

American women's strength and resilience and African American literature. Implications for educational practice and future research endeavors are discussed.

“SURVIVAL IS NOT AN ACADEMIC SKILL”: EXPLORING HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE GRADUATES OF A PRIVATE BOARDING SCHOOL CRAFT AN IDENTITY

by

Tiffany Simpkins Russell

A Dissertation

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CHAPTER 1

"THE MASTER'S TOOLS WILL NEVER DISMANTLE THE MASTER'S HOUSE": AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN WHITE SPACES

A WOMANIST APPROACH TO THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Author, activist and feminist Audre Lorde understood the challenge of fashioning an identity in an environment that is sometimes hostile. She also understood that African American women have become masters of this skill. In her Comments at "The Personal and the Political Panel" Second Sex Conference (1979), she suggested that "survival is not an academic skill," and that we must learn "how to take our differences and make them strengths" (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 99). This quote has meaning on both personal and pedagogical levels. Lorde is suggesting that survival techniques, while used in an academic environment, are not the academic skills taught in the classroom, but are rather born out of an experience (often shared with other women) of oppression and otherness. On the personal level, Lorde's comment has caused me to reflect on my experiences as an African American female student educated in a predominantly white independent boarding school. As an African American female graduate of a private, predominantly white elite boarding school in a northern city, I can recollect instances of prejudice, racism, and sheer exhaustion! Having to negotiate three worlds, at least, (my Blackness, my femaleness, and my class status) was a heavy load to bear. My experiences as a student and later teacher/administrator in private, predominantly white

elite schools in both northern and southern cities led me to question if there are other women who have experienced similar feelings while attending private schools.

This dissertation centers on the experiences of African American women coming into their sense of self in the private school setting, and on the survival skills they developed and utilized in this environment. The authors I discuss use the terms "survival skills" and "coping skills/strategies" interchangeably, and they define these terms as methods learned to interrupt, meliorate or otherwise deal with stressful situations. The various forms these "survival skills" and "coping skills/strategies" assume and how they are used will be examined in the second part of this work. In order to provide context for that examination, I will first provide a treatment of the literature on African American women in predominantly white learning environments. I will examine empirical social science literature, fiction and other genres of African American literature, as they provide a rich body of relevant knowledge to explore.

The reasoning behind my choice of literature is simple. Historical and current realities are brought to life through the written word (Gordon, 1985). Gordon, Miller and Rollock (1990) suggest that social science knowledge calls for multiple ways of knowing and a:

> [m]arriage between the arts, humanities, and social sciences to create distinct but related ways of knowing. If we are to understand the behavior and experiences of Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans, we may need to turn the arts and humanities. This is because the meanings of our behavior are often better explicated in our artistic and fictional work. (p. 18)

Furthermore, empirical studies do not examine the experiences of graduates across generations in the way that fiction does. Because empirical studies on African American girls in predominantly white, elite secondary schools is lacking, I extended this review to

include a discussion of African American women in public and private predominantly white, post-secondary educational institutions, as well as African American academicians working within predominantly white colleges and universities. Additionally, this review will pull from the fields of sociology, Black psychology and anthropology.

At the outset, it is important to clarify the various types of private schools. The authors examined use a combination of the following terms: private school, elite private school, predominantly white independent school, and predominantly white private elite boarding school. According to the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), an independent school is a school that is not dependent upon national or local government for financing its operation and is instead operated by tuition charges, gifts and, in some cases, the investment yield of an endowment. An independent school has: 1) an independent incorporation as a not-for-profit institution, with clearly stated educational goals and non-discriminatory policies in admissions and employment; 2) an individually developed mission and philosophy that in turn becomes the basis for the school's program; 3) a self-perpetuating board of trustees whose role is to plan for the future, to set overall policy, to finance the school (largely through setting tuition and generating charitable giving), and to appoint and evaluate the head of school; 4) an administration that is free to implement the mission of the school by designing and articulating its curriculum, by hiring and developing a capable and qualified faculty, and by admitting those students whom the school determines it can best serve; and 5) a commitment to continuous institutional growth and quality manifested by participation in the rigorous and comprehensive evaluation and accreditation process of a state or regional accrediting body (NAIS, www.nais.org).

Additionally, there are some slight differences between a private school and an independent school. A private school can be affiliated with a church, synagogue, or part of a non-profit organization. An independent school is not dependent on national or local government for funding. Independent schools can have a religious affiliation, but remain independent as long as the school is not dependent upon an outside organization. These terms are often used synonymously. It is important to acknowledge that there are private Black schools and private Black boarding schools; however, they are not discussed in this dissertation. The intent of this review is to examine the predominantly white private school environment and how African American girls navigate these environments.

Before addressing the private school environment, adolescence must briefly be examined, as it is during this time that African American girls are usually enrolled in private, predominantly white schools. Adolescence is situated between childhood and adulthood beginning at 12 or 13 years of age and ending at 18. According to Bettis and Adams (2005), adolescence is characterized by:

> increased physical growth with a focus on secondary sexual attributes; a desire to rebel against the mores of the adult world and to exert more independence; a desire to associate more closely with peers; a need for self-expression as seen through consumer choices of clothing and music; and a time to explore one's sexuality. (p. 7)

Scholars have analyzed the period of adolescence from different perspectives. Bettis and Adams (2005) suggest that some scholars view adolescence as a "masculine construct" focused on male coming of age characteristics while feminist critiques of adolescence suggest that the period for girls is more fluid. When examining adolescence, researchers must also account for race and ethnicity variables as they explore the meaning of adolescence. Lesko's (2002) review of the literature of adolescence theory revealed a tendency to pathologize the period that is marked by hyper-masculinity for boys and

docility for girls. She challenges researchers to avoid generalizing adolescence because the socialization experiences of adolescents are multilayered. Race and culture add additional variables to include when discussing African American adolescents. Furthermore, African American adolescent girls are faced with additional gender-based concerns. Stevens (1997) states that African American girls witness "not only the societal devaluation of her gender, but more importantly, societal devaluation of her as a member of a racial minority" (Stevens, 1997, p. 150).

To further contextualize the literature on African American female adolescents in private predominantly white schools, data should be presented that discusses how many African American girls are attending these schools. According to the NAIS 2008 annual survey, there are 582,345 students attending independent schools, and 131,927 are students of color comprising 22.6 percent of the total independent school population. Of this percentage, 5.9 are African American (roughly half are African American girls); 3.7 are Hispanic American; 6.8 are Asian American; 0.3 are Native American; 4.1 are Multiracial; and 1.4 are Middle Eastern American. NAIS represents approximately 1,300 independent schools, and the data are taken from 1,216 schools that completed surveys for the 2008-2009 school year.

The first part of the literature review is organized around the three major themes that emerge from empirical studies and fiction: *"Outsiders Within;" The Myth of Sameness and Racelessness; and Psychological Injury*. The first section is entitled *"Outsiders Within"* (Lorde, 1984; Collins, 2000). Audre Lorde first coined the term "outsiders within" to describe the phenomenon of not truly fitting into an environment because of one's race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. This term aptly describes the

difficulty some African American students encounter with fitting into the private school environment. Thus, "acting" is the theme explained in this section, and it includes the concepts of "acting white" and "acting upper class." The second section, entitled *The Myth of Sameness and Racelessness*, explores the tendency of white teachers, administrators, and students to group African American students into one group with white students and other students of color to avoid conversations around race and ethnicity, because of their supposed belief that at the core, "we are all the same." The third section, *Psychological Injury*, explores how African American students are wounded because of being in an injurious environment. In the fourth section, entitled *Coping Strategies and Survival Skills*, I discuss the survival skills African American women use to navigate predominantly white academic environments, while negotiating their race, class, and gender. The final two sections discuss womanism as an appropriate theoretical framework that undergirds this research endeavor and the research implications for future examinations of this topic.

Review of the Literature

> Oh, to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her? Nothing on the place nor in her grandma's house answered her. She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made. (Hurston, 1937, p.11)

Waiting for the world to be made. Perfect! So many African American girls within the private school environment are waiting for their worlds to be made in much the same way that Janie, in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, searches for meaning in her world. W.E.B. DuBois aptly describes the conflict African Americans

experience living in "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (DuBois, 1903). Such is the experience of some African American girls who attend elite private schools—having to look at oneself and one's academic progress through a white lens (DuBois, 1903).

Outsiders Within

The phrase "outsiders within" describes the phenomenon of not completely acclimating into an environment because of one's race, class, gender and sexual orientation. Peshkin (2001) defines the private school environment as individualistic. Additionally, he suggests that the natural orientation of a predominantly white independent school mirrors the students who attend that school, the board that governs the school and the parents and donors who financially support the school. Therefore, the curriculum the school embraces, the culture of the majority population and the process of socialization in a predominantly white school involves the shaping of the individual to fit a socially engraved perceptive, cognitive and behavioral mold defined by the majority, thus, shaping how the individual perceives, thinks and behaves in the world (Wilson, 1978). Psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum's book, *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race* (1997), is a collection of her own life experiences. In her book, Tatum teaches about racism and racial identity and explains her research on Black children and families in predominantly white settings. She suggests that while students of color are "invited" to the table, a true place at the metaphoric table has not been deliberately created for African American students in private schools. Therefore, as "outsiders within," African American students must create their own spaces where they are comforted and empowered.

While African American students can create their own spaces, as Tatum (1997) asserts, Cookson and Persell (1991) suggest that African American students do not possess the qualities (i.e., social and cultural capital) associated with academic achievement and social adjustment like their white peers. Myriad scholars have explored Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) social capital theory which is defined as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu 1986, p. 248). Using Bourdieu's theory, Lareau and Horvat (1999) suggest that "all individuals have social capital to invest or activate in a variety of social settings or fields. However, not all social or cultural capital has the same value in a given field" (p. 39). For example, an African American student may arrive at a private, predominantly white school with a strong sense of self, stemming from a history of parents and teachers extolling the intrinsic value of African American culture. Prior to attending the private school, this student has been educated and socialized in an African-Centered home and school environment. Thus, this student possesses a sort of cultural capital that others, who were not educated in the same way, do not posses. Furthermore, this student's African-centeredness could assist her/him construct a solid self-concept. However, as Lareau and Horvat (1999) suggest, this type of capital may not have any value in the private school environment, hence it holds no currency. Therefore, as Cookson and Persell suggest, "it is possible to be instrumentally and culturally empowered…and still be economically and socially disempowered because of one's class or racial position" (p. 220). Cookson and Persell further assert that African American students are positioned as outsiders within the larger institution and are burdened with having to "act upper

class" in order to fit into the culture of an elite private school. African American students are burdened since they do not possess the kind of capital that is useful because "in a racist and class-based society, non-White persons are not as likely to be accepted; similarly, in a society based on ownership or non-ownership of productive resources (class), persons of lower class, can only act, but never really be, upper class themselves" (Cookson & Persell 1991, p. 223).

Zweigenhaft and Domhoff's (1991) important text, *Blacks in the White Establishment?: A Study of Race and Class in America*, further addresses this concept of cultural capital. They interviewed 38 graduates of A Better Chance (ABC) programs and private schools and found that some students felt that their prep school education afforded them a type of cultural capital. The graduates were well prepared to "talk with anyone about anything, and [had] the ability to benefit from the access to influential people they had gained as a result of attending elite schools" (p. 107). However, they did not have this capital when they arrived. Most of the students came from "inner cities" and "ghettos" and just getting to these schools was a challenge. Zweigenhaft and Domhoff report that most of the students who graduated from prep schools went to elite colleges and universities and were extremely successful professionally. They also report that some students were not successful; however, all the ABC students had to navigate an educational terrain where their race and class status were sometimes an obstacle.

Cookson and Persell (1991) discuss the phenomenon of acting in terms of class, however; Datnow and Cooper, (1997); Bergin and Cooks, (2002); Fordham and Ogbu, (1986); and Peshkin, (2001) focus their attention on the concept of "acting white." The term first appeared in 1970 in the work of McArdle & Young—ground breaking work

that is now rarely cited. McArdle and Young, a clinician and school psychologist, respectively, were asked to mediate a small group of Black and white students as they discussed the integration of a Black school that was scheduled to close in Madison, Wisconsin. The Black Madison students were to be distributed to four other schools in the city. The city's Equal Opportunity Commission formed interracial student groups facilitated by psychologists and social workers to discuss what this transition meant to the students and potentially to deflect conflict.

Based upon the comments of the group participants McArdle and Young suggested that the Black students:

> [V]alued the preservation of the color and style and did not favor total assimilation by the Caucasians, in the name of integration. The goal, to have equal rights and opportunities without 'acting white,' strengthened a sense of being 'black and beautiful'…the whites were learning that verbal acceptance was not enough. They unconsciously tried to strip the Negro of his identity and heritage by denying any differences…The blacks were proud to point out the differences and especially to stress the importance of not 'acting white.' To become inhibited, more formal, or to lack 'soul' was to lose a very important and natural part of Negro behavior as it has evolved in this country. Alienation from their black peer group was expressed as the result of 'acting white' (p. 137).

The concept of "acting white" did not begin as an oppositional behavior to school success and achieving. In fact, Black students resisted acting white for fear of losing themselves and sacrificing the beauty of their culture. Black students also expressed fear of being "swallowed up" through integration (p. 137). Integrating a new school "would force them to scatter and become a less powerful group" (p. 137). While avoidance of "acting white" can be seen as a form of resistance for some African American students (Bergin & Cooks 2002), a student who is accused of "acting white" faces banishment from African Americans inside and outside the school community. Horvat and Lewis (2003) reexamine this phenomenon in their ethnographic study "of academically successful

black female high school seniors from various class backgrounds" (p. 266). However, Horvat and Lewis, rather than using "camouflaging" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) or "acting white," suggest the term "managing academic success" to encompass those students who affirmed their academic success and who were supported by their peers. They suggest African American peer networks aid in the maintenance of a Black identity. Most recently, Horvat and O'Connor (2006) reexamine the "acting white" phenomenon in their edited volume *Beyond Acting White: Reframing the Debate on Black Achievement*. In the Introduction, the authors suggest that the term "acting white" has been oversimplified and victimizes African American youth. Horvat and O'Connor suggest:

> Race is more than a product of how African Americans make sense of themselves as racial subjects and then enact this sense-making in relation to school. It is also a consequence of how schools and their agents racialized black subjects…and by examining the intersection of race, school structure, and individual difference we must move the debate away from a dichotomous conversation about either the presence or absence of acting white in schools (pp.17-19).

This text also provides multiple reasons why students are using the term, what *they* mean by it [emphasis is mine] and how they operate within the "acting white" paradigm. Engaging in the "acting white" debate requires that we revisit McArdle and Young's (1970) original definition because it should be noted that school achievement was not the premise of McArdle and Young's work as it has become for contemporary scholars.

This phenomenon of acting or, as Terhune (2008) labels it, the "burden of performing," can also be seen in African American women as they "role-flex" (Shorter-Gooden, 2004) or "pass" (Fordham, 1993); when they wear masks of contentment (Hassouneh-Phillips & Beckett, 2003); and when they "act quiet" when they want to scream (Fordham, 1993). Role-flexing (Shorter-Gooden, 2004) involves "altering one's speech, behavior, dress, or presentation to fit in better with the dominant group" (p. 418).

Passing refers to the African American woman's inability to be her true self. Similar to role-flexing, she may be "too Black" for her environment and must pass as "less Black" to fit in. Thus, she is "compelled to construct an ad hoc identity" (Fordham, 1993, p. 26). Greene (1994) and Bell and Nkomo (1998) discuss the figurative armor that African American girls and women are socialized to wear, a strategy for self-protection and psychological resistance that provides ways to diminish the threat of racism and sexism.

The Myth of Sameness and Racelessness

The myth of sameness and racelessness posits that students of color and African American students in particular are pulled into one group defined by white students that erases their race and culture (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fordham 1991). Fordham (1991) further explains this concept as she suggests the dominance of a Eurocentric ethos in private schools challenges an African American identity by imposing a set of norms that are foreign to an African American worldview. In order to cope in this environment, African American students consciously and unconsciously assimilate into the dominant environment. The majority of Fordham's data are taken from the experiences of African American students and their parents' experiences in six independent schools in New Jersey. Fordham suggests African American students are expected "to validate that the schools they are attending are committed to inclusion" without taking into consideration the importance of their racial integrity (Fordham, 1991, p. 475). The parents and students in Fordham's study indicated that a sacrifice must be made; that African American students must "give in a little" (i.e., do not fight that battle) and "hold on" until the end of their school careers, thus negating the positive journey that school is supposed to be. By being required to make this sacrifice in order to succeed, African American students

simultaneously feel the need to deny their racial identity and to internalize a debilitating double consciousness—a Black racial identity that is in direct opposition to the culture of the predominantly white private school. By being "less Black" (through behaviors), students can make it through, but not without inner and outer conflict.

Racelessness, according to Arrington, Hall and Stevenson (2003), suggests Black students are seen as having no race at all. Furthermore, it is easier for whites not to see race, [read color] because whiteness assumes a colorblind, "we are all the same," orientation. Frankenberg (1993) suggests "whiteness, as a set of normative cultural practices, is visible most clearly to those it definitively excludes and those whom it does violence. Those who are securely housed within its borders usually do not examine it," nor do they examine how whiteness provides certain privileges that people of color may not possess (p. 228-229). This notion erases the evolving racial and cultural identity of African American adolescents and reconstitutes their evolving identity as "Other" in the private school context (Fordham, 1991).

Congruent with the myth of racelessness is the myth of sameness. In her significant text, *Seeing a Colorblind Future: The Paradox of Race*, Patricia Williams clearly outlines this myth of sameness. She states "those who privilege themselves as Un-raced—usually those who are white—are always anxiously maintaining that it [race] doesn't matter…" (Williams, 1997, p. 9). Williams cautions the reader that this "colorblind" approach to teaching students of color engenders white's "disingenuousness, an innocence that amounts to the transgressive refusal to know" about other people (p. 27). She then questions, "How can it be that so many well-meaning white people have never thought about race when so few blacks pass a single day without being reminded of

it?" (p. 28). Thus, the inclination among whites [read teachers] to cluster all students of color into one homogenous group negates the racial and ethnic realities of African American students.

Arrington et al.'s (2003) qualitative study further examines this myth of sameness. Their study of African American students in private schools primarily consisted of individual interviews with 65 male and female students in grades 6-12 and focus groups with the high school students. Through the interviews with white teachers and administrators, an idea emerged from the teachers that "in the interest of treating all children equally, many of them don't want to focus on racial and cultural diversity…which sends the message to students that since 'we are more alike than different' there is no need to discuss race and diversity" (Arrington, *et al.*, 2003, p. 15). Like Williams, Arrington, et al. also found that this myth of sameness thwarts any discussion of race and cultural difference and suggests that race and cultural difference are maladies that if ignored, will simply go away. Prohibiting African American students from expressing themselves may lead to psychological injury (Brookins & Robinson, 1995; Horvat & Lising, 1999; Proweller, 1998).

Psychological Injury

The authors highlighted above discuss the various elements of the private school that negatively affect African American students. This section describes the resultant injury that African American students can experience in the private school environment. Brookins and Robinson (1995) define psychological injury as damage to a person's mental, intellectual and rational self. This injury hinders a person from actualizing their full potential in the classroom and beyond because of suboptimal educational

experiences. Iglesias and Cormier (2002) suggest that there are "four major kinds of losses derived from literature on adolescent girls: "emotional, physical, educational, and behavioral" (p. 261). Iglesias and Cormier suggest that as girls move through adolescence they feel less free to communicate their feelings. Horvat and Lising (1999) concur and suggest that African American girls who attend private, predominantly white and upper class schools endure psychological injury by living out their lives as silenced outsiders within the race and class defined school organization. Thus, in addition to feeling inhibited, African American girls' silence is injurious. Alexander-Snow (2000) extends this idea in her qualitative study of two African American female graduates of a historically white boarding school. Alexander-Snow's research focused on how African American female graduates are prepared for "what they will encounter in traditionally white colleges and universities (TWCU)." Data suggested the graduates were socially and academically prepared—one of the women enrolled at a TWCU and the other at an HBCU (historically Black college and university). However, Alexander-Snow's study found that the two African American female subjects reported being ostracized and alienated at their boarding school and when they were not "fighting for respect in the dorms," they were fighting for a place in the curriculum.

Proweller's (1998) ethnographic study of Best Academy, "a historically elite, private, independent, single-sex high school for girls" uncovered similar themes (p. 5). Proweller's data collection consisted of participant observations and interviews with faculty, auxiliary staff, thirty-four students and fifteen single and coupled parents. Of the thirty-four high school juniors, five were African American, one was Puerto Rican, and one was Native American. The strength of Proweller's study lies in the thick description

she uses when presenting the girls' personal stories. Proweller includes large blocks of unedited text, primarily from the white girls, that respond to the interviewer's questions. However, this method prevents the reader from hearing the voices of the girls of color in the same manner. There are limited first-person narratives, and Proweller remarks that "African American students express that they feel most comfortable with their black peers with whom they are able, as they narrate, to be 'true to themselves'" (p. 123). In this sense, the voices of the girls of color are further silenced. When Proweller includes the voices of girls of color at Best Academy, she finds that not only do Black girls struggle with their dual identities—who they are at Best and who they are outside of the Academy—she also illustrates that "African American youth are inescapably positioned as expert witnesses to life on the 'other' side" (p. 160).

These "assumed and prescribed" roles further marginalize African American girls, as they are now asked to educate whites about their Blackness. Jackson (1998) suggests that because of this psychological injury, the self is altered to internalize what the African American girl sees and hears about herself and how she sees herself fitting into or sitting on the margins of the larger school community. Jackson interviewed African American women in predominantly white institutions who reported that navigating their Blackness within these institutions requires negotiating being Black and being female at the same time. The title of her article, "We're Fighting Two Different Battles Here," connotes the "double-bind" (Greene, 1994) that African American women experience in predominantly white environments. The women in Jackson's study discussed that it was a "daily struggle" being the spokesperson for Black people, having their race and gender questioned daily and not being able to complain out of fear of being defined as

"unfeminine," (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003) abrasive and loud. Likewise, in a study of girls at Capital High, Fordham (1991) found that girls who were academically successful remained silent, became voiceless, or "impersonated a male image" (in an effort to combat sexism) because being who they were as African American and female was constantly challenged (p. 331). Fordham suggests that this silence is intentional, and remaining silent by choice is an act of defiance. This act of defiance will be discussed later in the section addressing the concept of "Voice/Loudness" as a survival skill.

In her 1993 study of Black women and loudness, Fordham admits, "growing up female and African American in American society, I learned early on to discount the validity of my experiences" (p. 9). Fordham is not alone, as this mindset contributes to the self-silencing of African American women and stifles academic achievement. Morris's (2007) ethnographic study adolescent Black girls demonstrates this effect. He examines how educators perceive assertive girls as "loudies." He suggests that Black girls who are considered loud are such because "they do not enjoy the same systemic protections as other girls, and have learned to stand up for themselves" (p. 506). However, their loudness is misconstrued as combative and confrontational. As such, Morris observed that most Black girls responded to this quandary by silencing themselves and "re-forming themselves into traditional, restrained, 'young ladies'" (p. 511).

Riley's (1982) feminist study of how young Afro-Caribbean girls discuss gender roles endeavors to respond to the psychological injury theme by making "women visible in fields where they have been previously ignored or overlooked" (p. 63). Riley suggests that "removing the invisibility is not only a matter of studying the girls and drawing conclusion…it also involves letting [Black girls] speak for themselves" (p. 63). Riley

interviewed fifteen Afro-Caribbean girls in a school in an inner-city school in South London who described being injured when the white teachers usurp their voices and desires. Riley tells a story using the words of the London girls in much the same way that Cary's (1991) novel *Black Ice* tells the story of a young African American girl's acceptance and matriculation into an elite private school in New Hampshire. Cary's narrative draws on the themes discussed above—fear, powerlessness, "outsiders within"—and forges them into an account that is reminiscent of other coming of age stories. Cary's young, Black female protagonist finds herself caught between two worlds—her home in Philadelphia and her elite prep school—often not fitting into either one. Furthermore, Cary eloquently portrays the sacrifices that African American families endured when sending their children to private schools. For example, as the ending of the graduation ceremonies draws near, Libby, the main character, wonders what award she will receive for her sacrifice and for her parents' sacrifices:

> …Nothing for me, nothing for my work? Not a farthing for my trouble? Nothing for the family who traveled so far? Nothing to compensate for what they don't even know they have lost—my confidence, my trust? Not one little gift to give the people who have given up a daughter? (p. 217).

As Libby shakes the hands of the teachers who educated her during her time at St. Paul's, she said that she was overwhelmed with feelings of "love and gratitude, hate, resentments, shame, admiration, [and] loss" (p. 219). Later, this sentiment is further explored when Libby describes her fifteen-year reunion. When her peers questioned why she had returned to teach, Libby said she returned because "[she] wanted to revisit the place that had so disturbed [her] in [her] overserious youth; to encourage kids who might feel similarly; and to learn from them" (p. 232).

Likewise, Southgate's (2002) novel, *The Fall of Rome*, further confirms the ethos of the private school environment as being divided along lines of class and race and gender. Though Southgate's protagonist is male, she clearly suggests that survival skills are necessary in the private school environment. Even more salient is that the young Rashid Bryson comes to the prestigious Chelsea School, an all boys boarding school, with life experiences from his Brooklyn home that come in direct conflict with his new "home." Rashid turns to African American Latin teacher Jerome Washington for support navigating the race and class-shaped New England school, but finds that Washington, too, has been negatively affected by his time at the Chelsea School. Southgate's novel encourages the reader to understand that African American faculty and students alike endure injurious experiences in predominantly white elite schools.

Coping Strategies and Survival Skills

The foregoing literature describes how the predominantly white academic environment affects the experiences of African American girls and women. This section addresses the literature that examines how African American girls and women actually cope with the effects of living and working in predominantly white academic environments and the strategies they use to depart the institution (ideally, through graduation) unbroken. In this literature the terms "coping skills," "coping strategies," "survival skills," and "resistance strategies" are synonymous, and the unifying thread is that these skills/strategies are "cognitions and behaviors that are directed at managing a problem and its attendant negative emotions" (Aldwin 1994, p. 82). Scott (1991) discusses the "habits of surviving," as a set of skills that African American women have compiled to cope with economic, racial, and gender exploitation, adaptations that help to

reduce anger, enhance a sense of self-control, and facilitate hope. Davis (1998) coined the term "creative essences" that describes how African American women creatively "construct meaning out of life stress and what types of activities they engage in that assert the creative essences within them" (p. 493). Accordingly, a creative essence is "a proactive, unique, and individual path to inner fulfillment" (p. 493). These coping strategies, habits of survival, survival skills, and creative essences are learned. Moreover, as Audre Lorde has previously suggested, "survival is not an academic skill," thus suggesting that African American women must be creative in how they respond to racism, discrimination and oppression (Lorde, 1979).

Loudness/Voice. One coping strategy found in the literature is using one's "voice." In Fordham's (1993) ethnographic study, she defines loudness as "one of the ways by which African American women seek to deny society's effort to assign them to a stigmatized status…it is used as a metaphor proclaiming African American women's existence, their collective denial of, and resistance to, their socially proclaimed powerlessness" (p. 25). While the perceived loudness in Morris' study referenced above caused girls to retreat, Fordham suggests that loudness (i.e., defiance) can be seen as a coping strategy—a way of protesting against whitewashed normalcy.

The ability of a young African American girl to speak her mind as a resistance strategy was demonstrated in Way's (1995) qualitative study. She explored the ways in which 12 urban, poor and working-class adolescent girls spoke about themselves, their relationships and their school experiences over a three-year period. She further suggests that the ability to be outspoken or to "speak one's mind" in relationships was the prevalent theme. This theme of voice is echoed in Iglesias and Cormier's (2002) study.

They found that, when teenagers are given permission to voice their feelings through creative strategies that allow them to speak about their culture, such as journaling and personal narratives, they find strength and validity in their voices and can utilize multiple literacies. Richardson uses the term literacies to include "vernacular resistance arts…that are created to carve out free spaces in oppressive locations such as the classroom, the streets, the workplace…" or the private school (Richardson 2002, p. 678). She also suggests that African American women are uniquely skilled to:

> [c]ommunicate these literacies through storytelling, conscious manipulation of silence and speech code/style shifting and signifying, among other verbal and non-verbal practices. Performance arts such as singing, dancing, acting, steppin', and stylin', as well as crafts such as quilting and use of other technologies are also exploited to these purposes (e.g., pots, pans, rags, brooms, and mops); African American females' language and literacy practices reflect their socialization in a racialized, genderized, sexualized, and classes world in which they employ their language and literacy practices to protect and advance themselves. Working from this rhetorical situation, the Black female develops creative strategies to overcome her situation, to "make a way outa no way." (Richardson 2002, p. 680)

Richardson eloquently outlines the various methods African American women have skillfully devised to combat racism and sexism in myriad environments, exercising one's voice to transform otherwise hostile spaces within the school environment.

Social Networks. In addition to finding and exercising one's "voice," researchers also identified the creation of social networks as an effective coping strategy for African American women. Briggs (1998) and Dominguez and Watkins (2003) examine how African American women generate social capital to obtain resources for survival and social mobility. Briggs (1998) conceptualizes two types of social capital residing in relational networks: social support and social leverage. Social support is emotional support from family, friends and neighbors. Social support Networks that offer social

leverage help individuals “get by” and/or “get ahead,” providing access to education, training, and employment (Dominguez & Watkins, 2003). Similarly, Shorter-Gooden (1993) found in her qualitative study of the African American Women’s Voices Project that African American women utilize internal and external resources as coping strategies to deal with the stress caused by racism and sexism. For example, internal resources “are worldviews or belief systems that help shape how the person feels about herself and how she defines her relationship to the larger world” (p. 416). These internal resources include “resting on faith,” “standing on shoulders,” and “valuing oneself” (p. 417). Outside resources, such as “leaning on shoulders,” are resources found outside of oneself and in the comfort of others.

Robinson and Ward (1991) continue to expand upon the importance of social networks through their work with adolescent girls. They have surmised that there are two types of resistance strategies: strategies for survival and strategies for liberation. They suggest that techniques for survival are short-term and can be deleterious such as substance abuse, for example. This approach can lead to isolation and disconnectedness from the collective community and from the self. However, “resistance strategies for liberation provide a sense of unity with others that transcends age, socioeconomic status, ethnic origin, and sexual orientation” (p. 266). It is important to note their conclusion that learning to utilize strategies for “liberation can be accomplished by learning about other women, through their writings or through dialogue with them, who have been resisters and by identifying the strategies that were effective for them” (p. 267). This strategy is particularly effective as it builds relationships with other women across

generations, which is particularly useful when examining the experiences of African American women in private schools over time.

Religion and Spirituality. Some researchers found that religion/spirituality and prayer help women to interrogate and accept the reality of certain circumstances (Shorter-Gooden, 1993; Way, 2002; Mattis, 2002; and Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) said that:

> [M]any [African American] women turn to spirituality and religious faith and rely on the love and affirmation of relatives and friends. Seeking spiritual and emotional support can be a way of shifting away from the feelings connected to bias and prejudice, exploring alternative problem-solving strategies, and garnering a new perspective (p. 81).

A belief in something greater allowed African American women to "identify, confront, and transcend limitations" (Way, 2002 p. 317) imposed on them by their institutions, work or school environments. African American women are also able to recognize their purpose and see beyond the space (confines) of their immediate environment. This theme of transcending space is found in Galván's (2001) ethnographic work with rural women in Central Mexico. Although Galván examines Latina women, her results are applicable to other women of color as she utilizes a theoretical framework that connects diverse communities of women. She suggests that "women's spirituality serves as a catalyst with which to struggle and combat the daily turmoil of their home, work or community" (Galván 2001, p. 611) and is an impetus to other communal activities. For example, Galván observed women who participated in the *pastoral social* (a part of the Catholic Church's mission) also participated in small savings groups (ways for women to save money together) and literacy projects.

Strength and Resilience. It is important to briefly examine the literature on strength and resilience and how African American women find strength despite the risks they may encounter. Risks can be defined in terms of educational achievement (O'Connor 2002; O'Connor, Lewis, and Mueller, 2008) and in terms of emotional and psychological risks (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2005, 2007). First, Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2005) cautions that the "strong black woman" syndrome "is a limiting rather than empowering construction of black femininity and that it rewards women for a stoicism that draws attention away from the inequalities they face in their communities and the larger society" (p. 105). Likewise, African American women are "overly attuned to other's needs" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007, p. 29) and neglects her own emotional needs. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) call this the "Sisterrella Complex." When an African American woman works hard to please others she is often disconnected from herself and her own desires, and is thus unfulfilled.

Carla O'Connor's work on resilience examines strength in a different manner. For example, the women in O'Connor's (2002) qualitative study were the first to graduate from a four-year college however; "their immediate families could not readily provide them with the knowledge necessary for navigating college costs and admissions" (p. 895). Therefore, the women in her study had to be resilient, actively obtaining the resources they needed to be successful. O'Connor's study suggests that the "processes of resilience are highly adaptive" (p. 897) and that strength is a necessary tool to combat racist and sexist processes that hinder educational achievement. O'Connor also expands the definition of risk to extend beyond a fate of African American women living in urban environments. She suggests that constraints on, and opportunities for agency and mobility

change from one generation to the next and the risks on, in this case, educational achievement, change as well. Therefore, for example, an African American female with enough financial means may still be "at risk" in the private school environment because of other factors, such as race. Resilience is an "institutionally responsive process" and the ways in which women demonstrate resilience during different times is broader (O' Connor 2002, p. 898). In this regard, historical time will also determine the face of racism and its effects on young people (O'Connor, Lewis, and Mueller, 2008). For example, how would the story of an African American woman who attended a predominantly white private school in the 1960's differ from the story of a woman who attended the same school the 1990's?

Theoretical Perspective

I arrived at womanism as a theoretical perspective to guide my study of African American women's experiences in private schools after conducting a pilot study in 2002 with one African American female graduate of a private predominantly white boarding school (see appendix). I conducted two interviews with one woman for a total of two and one half hours. I then coded the interview transcripts for emergent themes. I used the literature on African American women in private/independent schools previously reviewed in this chapter to situate the participant's comments. I found that the participant's experiences mirrored my own in many ways and that the participant began to heal old wounds in the process of telling her story. Womanism allows multiple experiences and stories to exist equally, positing that everyone who comes to the proverbial kitchen table to engage in emancipatory dialogue has an equal voice (Davis,

1999). I have used this perspective to situate my role as a participant researcher and African American female graduate of a private boarding school.

Additionally, womanism suggests that the final product of my research must be shared if it is to be healing and truly of, and for everyday people. Author/educator Michele Russell (1982) recognized the grassroots and vernacular aspect of womanism through her teaching of African American women at the Detroit Downtown YMCA. She realized that the "conventional" curriculum was inappropriate because it did not resonate with the experiences of the African American women in her class. She learned that teaching must pull on the daily experiences of simply being, one that places daily life as the principal subject of inquiry.

In using womanism as the theoretical perspective undergirding my research, I am suggesting that research must also draw from the daily experiences of being and on daily life. In this research study, daily life occurs in the private boarding school setting. Though the term womanism surfaced in 1979 with Alice Walker, womanist authors acknowledge that a womanist way of being in the world has existed before there was a term to define it. In her book, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), Walker defines womanism as:

> 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.
>
> 2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's

> strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?" Ans. "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."
>
> 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. *Loves* love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.
>
> 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender (Walker, 1983, p. xi).

In *The Womanist Reader* (2006) Layli Phillips offers her definition of womanism as a:

> social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. (Phillips, 2006, p. xx)

While Phillips (2006) has "defined" womanism, she suggests the definition of womanism is evolving, because it is constantly under construction and the people who participate in womanist discourse contribute to the progression of the perspective. Additionally, Phillips elucidates womanism's five characteristics. First, womanism is antioppressionist. A womanist is against all forms of oppression and does view one form of oppression worse than another (i.e. there is no hierarchy—racism, sexism, homophobia etc., must all be dismantled.) Second, womanism is vernacular, concerned with the everydayness of everyday people. Third, womanism is nonideological and "abhors rigid lines of demarcation and tends to function in a decentralized way" (p. xxv). Fourth, womanism is communitarian and is focused on the wellness of all members of a community (p. xxv). Last, womanism is spiritualized, symbolizing the connectedness of

human life, “livingkind” and the spiritual world (p. xxvi). Phillips asserts that “womanism is a harmonizing and coordinating project, not an isolating and separating project. It seeks to promote relations of interconnectedness and cooperation all while blurring, dissolving, and dismantling ideological lines of demarcation” (p. xxxii).

Together, Phillips (2006) and Walker (1983) propose a way to engage women in a meaningful dialogue that allows them to share their beliefs and where healthy conflict can exist. Sheared (1994) furthers this concept of dialogue. In this regard, Sheared uses the concept of polyrhythmic, which “reflects the belief that individuals do not just have multiple realities and distinct understandings of them. Instead, individuals experience intersecting realities simultaneously—their realities are polyrhythmic” (p. 270). Sheared suggests that if teachers understood and utilized students’ polyrhythmic realities, students would see themselves as “active authors of their worlds” (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 235 quoted in Sheared, 1994). As a womanist researcher, I am concerned with the voices of the women in my study, and my own, as womanism allows multiple experiences and stories to exist equally, positing that everyone who comes to the proverbial kitchen table to engage in emancipatory dialogue has an equal voice (Davis, 1999).

I am using womanism as a theoretical framework to “recover our traditions, to attain equality, and to give expression to our social, political, and cultural contributions to American history and scholarship” (Davis, 1999, p. 365). I also turn to womanism because it is a perspective that redefines the spaces that African American women occupy. The terms, *ordinary*, *everyday*, and *mundane* (Galván, 2001) are not to be devalued. Capturing the “everydayness” (O’Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007) of African American women’s experiences with racism and sexism can provide tools for

understanding the impact of these maladies on their lives. In Lanehart's (2002) womanist work chronicling the journey towards literacy of five ordinary African American women in her family, she states:

> [O]ur stories are not unique, but I think isolation can make us think they are….we need to study ourselves, get a good look at ourselves, in order to unmask who we are within ourselves and in the context of our interactions with those who help to make us who we are…(p. 11).

Thus, research must allow African American women to connect and discuss their daily acts of resistance that will, in turn, redefine what is ordinary.

Research Implications

The limited existence of African American female voices in the literature on independent/private schools suggests a need to further explore the lives of these women. Listening to the voices and life experiences of African American women who attend or who have graduated from elite private schools may provide suggestions for policy and curricular reform. Most of the research on African American women in predominantly white educational environments has been qualitative and ethnographic. Researchers enter a person's environment to understand how they operate within it and how they make sense of the space. However, researchers need to delve deeper into the coping strategies that African American women employ in these unique environments.

Cookson and Persell (1991); Fordham (1991); Cary (1991); Proweller (1998); Tatum (1997); Datnow and Cooper (1997); Horvat and Lising (1999), Alexander-Snow (2000); Bergin and Cooks (2002); and Arrington et al. (2003) suggest that these coping strategies combat racism and sexism and the psychological effects of "Otherness," isolation, powerlessness, double consciousness, and the phenomena of "acting" that occurs in these institutions. Appropriate methodologies should further explore the

narratives of the individual. A life history methodology allows an individual's experiences to be told. Sharing personal stories is not only therapeutic, creating a healing state for the individual participants (Collins, 2000; Few et al., 2003) it is also a methodology that helps the participant and the researcher understand "how, in an individual life, different dominant ideologies and power relations in society are maintained, reproduced, or subverted" (Bloom 2000, p. 324). In this regard, when we examine society through the lens of the individual, we can better "understand society and resist hegemonic tendencies" (Bloom 2000, p. 324). As such, studying the private school experience from the perspective of the people living it allows researchers to closely examine the affects of such a place on a woman's well-being and educational experiences.

The history of elite private schools in America is characterized by choice for the wealthy and the exclusion of others based on race, class, and in some cases gender. Nevertheless, the transformative possibility of private schools exists. These schools "have the ability to structure their school climate and curriculum to reflect a sincere commitment to the retention of non-White students…and providing an excellent education while accommodating the cultural differences of a multiethnic student body" (Royal 1988, p. 68). Some independent schools are beginning to recognize the need for their policies and procedures to change to include and better support a more diverse student body. Likewise, some institutions are making conscientious efforts to change their admission procedures and the curriculum to include traditionally neglected voices with the creation of offices and programs devoted to spearheading these efforts. However, deep at the core of many of these schools are the entrenched ideas of white

supremacy and white privilege, manifestations of which are still present in methods of instruction, curriculum, and student/teacher attitudes and behaviors (Alexander-Snow, 2000).

Fordham (1993) concludes her ethnographic study with some profound questions: “Should success for African American women be so expensive? Should the African American female seek to reconstruct her life to become successful, pawning her identity as a “loud Black girl” for an identity in which she is the “doubly-refracted [African American] Other”? (p. 24). In addition to these important questions, I have developed an inquiry that will shape my future research enterprises: What are the unique ways in which African American women craft an identity within the private school environment that nurtures, rather than injures the creative aspects of their individual and collective selves?

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CHAPTER 2

"MAH TONGUE IS IN MAH FRIEND'S MOUF:" SHARING STORIES AND LEARNING FROM THE LIFE HISTORIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

Introduction

The title of this dissertation is borrowed from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). At this point in the novel, Janie has just returned to Eatonville, Florida, where the townsfolk are all abuzz over her sudden return without her love, Tea Cake. As Janie walks down the street in silence past her whispering neighbors, Janie's friend Pheoby challenges the rumors and goes to comfort her. Over a bowl of mulatto rice, Janie tells her story and trusts Pheoby to share her story with the community. Hence, Janie's comment, "Mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (Hurston, p. 6).

I have grounded my research in a womanist intellectual tradition that explores the life histories of eight African American women who attended a predominantly white boarding school in a northern city. As an African American female graduate of the same school of the participants, I can recollect instances of prejudice, racism, and sheer exhaustion! Having to negotiate three worlds, at least, (my Blackness, my femaleness, and my class status) was a heavy load to bear. My experiences as a student and later teacher/administrator in private predominantly white elite schools in both northern and southern cities led me to question if there are other women who have experienced similar feelings while attending private schools.

This dissertation centers on the experiences of African American women coming into their sense of self in the private school setting, and on the survival skills they utilized in this environment. The authors I discuss use the terms “survival skills” and “coping skills/strategies” interchangeably, and they define these terms as methods learned to interrupt, meliorate or otherwise deal with stressful situations. The various forms these “survival skills” and “coping skills/strategies” assume and how they are used will be examined in the second part of this work. In order to provide context for that examination, I will first provide a treatment of the literature on African American women in predominantly white learning environments. I will examine empirical social science literature, fiction and other genres of African American literature, as they provide a rich body of relevant knowledge to explore.

The reasoning behind my choice of literature is simple. Historical and current realities are brought to life through the written word (Gordon, 1985). Gordon, Miller and Rollock (1990) suggest that social science knowledge calls for multiple ways of knowing and a

> marriage between the arts, humanities, and social sciences to create distinct but related ways of knowing. If we are to understand the behavior and experiences of Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans, we may need to turn the arts and humanities. This is because the meanings of our behavior are often better explicated in our artistic and fictional work (p. 18)

Furthermore, empirical studies do not examine the experiences of graduates across generations in the way that fiction does. Because empirical studies on African American girls in predominantly white, elite secondary schools is lacking, I extended this review to include a discussion of African American women in public and private predominantly white, post-secondary educational institutions, as well as African American academicians

working within predominantly white colleges and universities. Additionally, this review will pull from the fields of sociology, Black psychology and anthropology.

At the outset, it is important to clarify the various types of private schools. The authors examined use a combination of the following terms: private school, elite private school, predominantly white independent school, and predominantly white private elite boarding school. According to the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), an independent school is a school that is not dependent upon national or local government for financing its operation and is instead operated by tuition charges, gifts and, in some cases, the investment yield of an endowment. An independent school has: 1) an independent incorporation as a not-for-profit institution, with clearly stated educational goals and non-discriminatory policies in admissions and employment; 2) an individually developed mission and philosophy that in turn becomes the basis for the school's program; 3) a self-perpetuating board of trustees whose role is to plan for the future, to set overall policy, to finance the school (largely through setting tuition and generating charitable giving), and to appoint and evaluate the head of school; 4) an administration that is free to implement the mission of the school by designing and articulating its curriculum, by hiring and developing a capable and qualified faculty, and by admitting those students whom the school determines it can best serve; and 5) a commitment to continuous institutional growth and quality manifested by participation in the rigorous and comprehensive evaluation and accreditation process of a state or regional accrediting body (NAIS, www.nais.org).

Additionally, there are some slight differences between a private school and an independent school. A private school can be affiliated with a church or synagogue or part

of a non-profit organization. An independent school is not dependent on national or local government for funding. Independent schools can have a religious affiliation, but remain independent as long as the school is not dependent upon an outside organization. These terms are often used synonymously. It is important to acknowledge that there are private Black schools and private Black boarding schools; however, they are not discussed in this dissertation. The intent of this review is to examine the predominantly white private school environment and how African American girls navigate these environments.

To further contextualize the literature on African American female adolescents in private predominantly white schools, data should be presented that discusses how many African American girls are attending these schools. According to the NAIS 2008 annual survey, there are 582,345 students attending independent schools, and 131,927 are students of color comprising 22.6 percent of the total independent school population. Of this percentage, 5.9 are African American (roughly half are African American girls); 3.7 are Hispanic American; 6.8 are Asian American; 0.3 are Native American; 4.1 are Multiracial; and 1.4 are Middle Eastern American. NAIS represents approximately 1,300 independent schools, and the data are taken from 1,216 schools that completed surveys for the 2008-2009 school year.

The first part of the literature review is organized around the three major themes that emerge from empirical studies and fiction: *"Outsiders Within;" The Myth of Sameness and Racelessness; and Psychological Injury*. The first section is entitled *"Outsiders Within"* (Lorde, 1984; Collins, 2000). Audre Lorde first coined the term "outsiders within" to describe the phenomenon of not truly fitting into an environment because of one's race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. This term aptly describes the

difficulty some African American students encounter with fitting into the private school environment. Thus, "acting" is the theme explained in this section, and it includes the concepts of "acting white" and "acting upper class." The second section, entitled *The Myth of Sameness and Racelessness*, explores the tendency of white teachers, administrators, and students to group African American students into one group with white students and other students of color to avoid conversations around race and ethnicity, because of their supposed belief that at the core, "we are all the same." The third section, *Psychological Injury*, explores how African American students are wounded because of being in an injurious environment. In the fourth section, entitled *Coping Strategies and Survival Skills*, I discuss the survival skills African American women use to navigate predominantly white academic environments, while negotiating their race, class, and gender. The final two sections discuss womanism as an appropriate theoretical framework that undergirds this research endeavor and the research implications for future examinations of this topic.

Review of the Literature

> Oh, to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her? Nothing on the place nor in her grandma's house answered her. She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made (Hurston, 1937, p. 11)

Waiting for the world to be made. Perfect! So many African American girls within the private school environment are waiting for their worlds to be made in much the same way that Janie, in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, searches for

meaning in her world. W.E.B. DuBois aptly describes the conflict African Americans experience living in "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (DuBois, 1903). Such is the experience of some African American girls who attend elite private schools—having to look at oneself and one's academic progress through a white lens (DuBois, 1903).

Outsiders Within

The term "outsiders within" describes the phenomenon of not completely acclimating into an environment because of one's race, class, gender and sexual orientation. Peshkin (2001) defines the private school environment as individualistic. Additionally, he suggests that the natural orientation of a predominantly white independent school mirrors the students who attend that school, the board that governs the school and the parents and donors who financially support the school. Therefore, the curriculum the school embraces, the culture of the majority population and the process of socialization in a predominantly white school involves the shaping of the individual to fit a socially engraved perceptive, cognitive and behavioral mold defined by the majority, thus, shaping how the individual perceives, thinks and behaves in the world (Wilson, 1978). Psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum's book, *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race* (1997), is a collection of her own life experiences. In her book, Tatum teaches about racism and racial identity and explains her research on Black children and families in predominantly white settings. She suggests that while students of color are "invited" to the table, a true place at the metaphoric table has not been deliberately created for African American students in

private schools. Therefore, as "outsiders within," African American students must create their own spaces where they are comforted and empowered.

While African American students can create their own spaces, as Tatum (1997) asserts, Cookson and Persell (1991) suggest that African American students do not possess the qualities (i.e. social and cultural capital) associated with academic achievement and social adjustment like their white peers. Myriad scholars have explored Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) social capital theory which is defined as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu 1986, p. 248). Using Bourdieu theory, Lareau and Horvat (1999) suggest that "all individuals have social capital to invest or activate in a variety of social settings or fields. Therefore, as Cookson and Persell suggest, "it is possible to be instrumentally and culturally empowered…and still be economically and socially disempowered because of one's class or racial position" (p. 220). Cookson and Persell further assert that African American students are positioned as outsiders within the larger institution and are burdened with having to "act upper class" in order to fit into the culture of an elite private school. African American students are burdened since they do not posses the kind of capital that is useful because "in a racist and class-based society, non-White persons are not as likely to be accepted; similarly, in a society based on ownership or non-ownership of productive resources (class), persons of lower class, can only act, but never really be, upper class themselves" (Cookson & Persell 1991, p. 223).

Cookson and Persell (1991) discuss the phenomenon of acting in terms of class, however; Datnow and Cooper (1997); Bergin and Cooks (2002); Fordham and Ogbu

(1986); and Peshkin (2001) focus their attention on the concept of "acting white." The term first appeared in 1970 in the work of McArdle and Young—ground breaking work that is now rarely cited. McArdle and Young, a clinician and school psychologist, respectively, were asked to mediate a small group of Black and white students as they discussed the integration of a Black school that was scheduled to close in Madison, Wisconsin. The Black Madison students were to be distributed to four other schools in the city. The city's Equal Opportunity Commission formed interracial student groups facilitated by psychologists and social workers to discuss what this transition meant to the students and potentially deflect conflict.

Based upon the comments of the group participants McArdle and Young suggested that the Black students:

> [V]alued the preservation of the color and style and did not favor total assimilation by the Caucasians, in the name of integration. The goal, to have equal rights and opportunities without 'acting white,' strengthened a sense of being 'black and beautiful'…the whites were learning that verbal acceptance was not enough. They unconsciously tried to strip the Negro of his identity and heritage by denying any differences…The blacks were proud to point out the differences and especially to stress the importance of not 'acting white.' To become inhibited, more formal, or to lack 'soul' was to lose a very important and natural part of Negro behavior as it has evolved in this country. Alienation from their black peer group was expressed as the result of 'acting white' (p. 137).

The concept of "acting white" did not begin as an oppositional behavior to school success and achieving. In fact, Black students resisted acting white for fear of losing themselves and sacrificing the beauty of their culture. Black students also expressed fear of being "swallowed up" through integration (p. 137). Integrating a new school "would force them to scatter and become a less powerful group" (p. 137). While avoidance of "acting white" can be seen as a form of resistance for some African American students (Bergin & Cooks 2002), a student who is accused of "acting white" faces banishment from African

Americans inside and outside the school community. Horvat and Lewis (2003) reexamine this phenomenon in their ethnographic study "of academically successful black female high school seniors from various class backgrounds" (p. 266). However, Horvat and Lewis, rather than using "camouflaging" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) or "acting white" suggest the term "managing academic success" to encompass those students who affirmed their academic success and who were supported by their peers. They suggest African American peer networks aid in the maintenance of a Black identity. Most recently, Horvat and O'Connor (2006) reexamine the "acting white" phenomenon in their edited volume *Beyond Acting White: Reframing the Debate on Black Achievement*. In the Introduction, the authors suggest that the term "acting white" has been oversimplified and victimizes African American youth. Horvat and O'Connor suggest:

> Race is more than a product of how African Americans make sense of themselves as racial subjects and then enact this sense-making in relation to school. It is also a consequence of how schools and their agents racialized black subjects…and by examining the intersection of race, school structure, and individual difference we must move the debate away from a dichotomous conversation about either the presence or absence of acting white in schools (pp.17-19).

This text also provides multiple reasons why students are using the term, what *they* mean by it [emphasis is mine] and how they operate within the "acting white" paradigm.

This phenomenon of acting or, as Terhune (2008) labels it, the "burden of performing," can also be seen in African American women as they "role-flex" (Shorter-Gooden, 2004) or "pass" (Fordham, 1993); when they wear masks of contentment (Hassouneh-Phillips & Beckett, 2003); and when they "act quiet" when they want to scream (Fordham, 1993). Role-flexing (Shorter-Gooden, 2004) involves "altering one's speech, behavior, dress, or presentation to fit in better with the dominant group" (p. 418). Passing refers to the African American woman's inability to be her true self. Similar to

role-flexing, she may be “too Black” for her environment and must pass as “less Black” to fit in. Thus, she is “compelled to construct an ad hoc identity” (Fordham, 1993, p. 26). Greene (1994) and Bell and Nkomo (1998) discuss the figurative armor that African American girls and women are socialized to wear, a strategy for self-protection and psychological resistance that provides ways to diminish the threat and result of racism and sexism.

The Myth of Sameness and Racelessness

The myth of sameness and racelessness posits that students of color and African American students in particular are pulled into one group defined by white students that erases their race and culture (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fordham, 1991; Williams, 1997). Fordham (1991) further explains this concept as she suggests the dominance of a Eurocentric ethos in private schools challenges an African American identity by imposing a set of norms that are foreign to an African American worldview. In order to cope in this environment, African American students consciously and unconsciously assimilate into the dominant environment. Fordham suggests African American students are expected “to validate that the schools they are attending are committed to inclusion” without taking into consideration the importance of their racial integrity (Fordham, 1991, p. 475). The parents and students in Fordham’s study indicated that a sacrifice must be made; that African American students must “give in a little” (i.e., do not fight *that* battle) and “hold on” until the end of their school careers, thus negating the positive journey that school is supposed to be. By being required to make this sacrifice in order to succeed, African American students simultaneously feel the need to deny their racial identity and to internalize a debilitating double consciousness—a Black racial identity that is in direct

opposition to the culture of the predominantly white private school. By being "less Black" (through behaviors), students can make it through, but not without inner and outer conflict.

Racelessness, according to Arrington, Hall and Stevenson (2003), suggests Black students are seen as having no race at all. Furthermore, it is easier for whites not to see race, [read color] because whiteness assumes a colorblind, "we are all the same," orientation. Frankenberg (1993) suggests "whiteness, as a set of normative cultural practices, is visible most clearly to those it definitively excludes and those whom it does violence. Those who are securely housed within its borders usually do not examine it," nor do they examine how whiteness provides certain privileges that people of color may not possess (p. 228-229). This notion erases the evolving racial and cultural identity of African American adolescents and reconstitutes their evolving identity as "Other" in the private school context (Fordham, 1991).

Congruent with the myth of racelessness is the myth of sameness. In her significant text, *Seeing a Colorblind Future: The Paradox of Race*, Patricia Williams clearly outlines this myth of sameness. She states, "those who privilege themselves as Un-raced—usually those who are white—are always anxiously maintaining that it [race] doesn't matter…" (Williams 1997, p. 9). Williams cautions the reader that this "colorblind" approach to teaching students of color engenders white's "disingenuousness, an innocence that amounts to the transgressive refusal to know" about other people (p. 27). She then questions, "how can it be that so many well-meaning white people have never thought about race when so few blacks pass a single day without being reminded of it?" (p. 28). Thus, the inclination among whites [read teachers] to cluster all students of

color into one homogenous group negates the racial and ethnic realities of African American students.

Arrington et al.'s (2003) aforementioned qualitative study further examines this myth of sameness. Their study of African American students in private schools primarily consisted of individual interviews with 65 male and female students in grades 6-12 and focus groups with the high school students. Through the interviews with white teachers and administrators, an idea emerged from the teachers that "in the interest of treating all children equally, many of them don't want to focus on racial and cultural diversity…which sends the message to students that since 'we are more alike that different' there is no need to discuss race and diversity" (Arrington, et al., 2003, p. 15). Like Williams, Arrington, et al. also found that this myth of sameness thwarts any discussion of race and cultural difference and suggests that race and cultural difference are maladies that if ignored, will simply go away. Prohibiting African American students from expressing themselves may lead to psychological injury (Brookins & Robinson, 1995; Horvat & Lising, 1999; Proweller, 1998).

Psychological Injury

The authors highlighted above discuss the various elements of the private school that negatively affect African American students. This section describes the resultant injury that African American students can experience in the private school environment. Brookins and Robinson (1995) define psychological injury as damage to a person's mental, intellectual and rational self. This injury hinders a person from actualizing their full potential in the classroom and beyond because of suboptimal educational experiences. Iglesias and Cormier (2002) suggest that there are "four major kinds of

losses derived from literature on adolescent girls: “emotional, physical, educational, and behavioral” (p. 261). Iglesias and Cormier suggest that as girls move through adolescence they feel less free to communicate their feelings. Horvat and Lising (1999) concur and suggest that African American girls who attend private, predominantly white and upper class schools endure psychological injury by living out their lives as silenced outsiders within the race and class defined school organization. Thus, in addition to feeling inhibited African American girls’ silence is injurious. Alexander-Snow (2000) extends this idea in her qualitative study of two African American female graduates of a historically white boarding school. Alexander-Snow’s research focused on how African American female graduates are prepared for “what they will encounter in traditionally white colleges and universities (TWCU).” Data suggested the graduates were socially and academically prepared—one of the women enrolled at a TWCU and the other at an HBCU (historically Black college and university). However, Alexander-Snow’s study found that the two African American female subjects reported being ostracized and alienated at their boarding school and when they were not “fighting for respect in the dorms,” they were fighting for a place in the curriculum.

Amira Proweller’s (1998) ethnographic study of Best Academy uncovered similar themes (p. 5). Proweller’s data collection consisted of participant observations and interviews with faculty, auxiliary staff, thirty-four students and fifteen single and coupled parents from an all-girls private school. Of the thirty-four high school juniors, five were African American, one was Puerto Rican, and one was Native American. The strength of Proweller’s study lies in the thick description she uses when presenting the girls’ personal stories. Proweller includes large blocks of unedited text, primarily from the white girls,

that to respond to the interviewer's questions. However, this method prevents the reader from hearing the voices of the girls of color in the same manner. There are limited first-person narratives, and Proweller remarks that "African American students express that they feel most comfortable with their black peers with whom they are able, as they narrate, to be 'true to themselves'" (p. 123). In this regard, Proweller speaks for the girls of color, thus further silencing their voices. When Proweller includes the stories of girls of color at Best Academy, she finds that not only do Black girls struggle with their dual identities—who they are at Best and who they are outside of the Academy—she also illustrates that "African American youth are inescapably positioned as expert witnesses to life on the 'other' side" (p. 160).

These "assumed and prescribed" roles further marginalize African American girls, as they are now asked to educate whites about their Blackness. Jackson (1998) suggests that because of this psychological injury, the self is altered to internalize what the African American girl sees and hears about herself and how she sees herself fitting into or sitting on the margins of the larger school community. Jackson interviewed African American women in predominantly white institutions who report that navigating their Blackness within these institutions requires negotiating being Black and being female at the same time. The title of her article, "We're Fighting Two Different Battles Here," connotes the "double-bind" (Greene, 1994) that African American women experience in predominantly white environments. The women in Jackson's study discussed that it was a "daily struggle" being the spokesperson for Black people, having their race and gender questioned daily and not being able to complain out of fear of be defined "unfeminine," (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003) abrasive and loud. Likewise, Fordham's (1991) study

of girls at Capital High found that girls who were academically successful remained silent, became voiceless, or "impersonated a male image" (in an effort to combat sexism) because being who they were as African American and female was constantly challenged (Fordham, 1991, p. 331). Fordham suggests that this silence is intentional, and remaining silent by choice is an act of defiance. This act of defiance will be discussed later in the section addressing the concept of "Voice/Loudness" as a survival skill.

In her 1993 study of Black women and loudness, Fordham admits, "growing up female and African American in American society, I learned early on to discount the validity of my experiences" (p. 9). Fordham is not alone, as this mindset contributes to the self-silencing of African American women and stifles academic achievement. Morris's (2007) ethnographic study adolescent Black girls demonstrates this effect. He examines how educators perceive assertive girls as "loudies." He suggests that Black girls who are considered loud are such because "they do not enjoy the same systemic protections as other girls, and have learned to stand up for themselves" (p. 506). However, their loudness is misconstrued as combative and confrontational. As such, Morris observed that most Black girls responded to this quandary by silencing themselves and "re-forming themselves into traditional, restrained, 'young ladies'" (p. 511).

Riley's (1982) feminist study of how young Afro-Caribbean girls discuss gender roles endeavors to respond to the psychological injury theme by making "women visible in fields where they have been previously ignored or overlooked" (p. 63). Riley suggests that "removing the invisibility is not only a matter of studying the girls and drawing conclusion…it also involves letting [Black girls] speak for themselves" (p. 63). Riley interviewed fifteen Afro-Caribbean girls in a school in an inner-city school in South

London who described being injured when the white teachers usurp their voices and desires. Riley tells a story using the words of the London girls in much the same way that Cary's (1991) novel *Black Ice* tells the story of a young African American girl's acceptance and matriculation into an elite private school in New Hampshire. Cary's narrative draws on the themes discussed above—fear, powerlessness, "outsiders within"—and forges them into an account that is reminiscent of other coming of age stories. Cary's young, Black female protagonist finds herself caught between two worlds—her home in Philadelphia and her elite prep school—often not fitting into either one. Furthermore, Cary eloquently portrays the sacrifices that African American families endured when sending their children to private schools. For example, as the ending of the graduation ceremonies draws near, Libby, the main character, wonders what award she will receive for her sacrifice and for her parents' sacrifices:

> …Nothing for me, nothing for my work? Not a farthing for my trouble? Nothing for the family who traveled so far? Nothing to compensate for what they don't even know they have lost—my confidence, my trust? Not one little gift to give the people who have given up a daughter? (p. 217).

As Libby shakes the hands of the teachers who educated her during her time at St. Paul's she said that she was overwhelmed with feelings of "love and gratitude, hate, resentments, shame, admiration, [and] loss" (p. 219). Later, this sentiment is further explored when Libby describes attending her fifteen-year reunion. When her white peers questioned why she had returned to teach, Libby said she returned because "[she] wanted to revisit the place that had so disturbed [her] in [her] overserious youth; to encourage kids who might feel similarly; and to learn from them" (p. 232).

Likewise, Southgate's (2002) novel, *The Fall of Rome*, further confirms that the ethos of the private school environment as being divided along lines of class and race and

gender. Though Southgate's protagonist is male, she clearly suggests that survival skills are necessary in the private school environment. When the young Rashid Bryson comes to the prestigious Chelsea School, an all-boys boarding school, his life experiences from his Brooklyn home come in direct conflict with his new "home." Rashid turns to African American Latin teacher Jerome Washington for support navigating the race and class-shaped New England school, but finds that Washington, too, has been negatively affected by his time at the Chelsea School. Southgate's novel encourages the reader to understand that African American faculty and students alike endure injurious experiences in predominantly white elite schools.

Coping Strategies and Survival Skills

The foregoing literature describes how the predominantly white academic environment affects the experiences of African American girls and women. This section examines how African American girls and women cope with the effects of living and working in predominantly white academic environments and the strategies they use to depart the institution (ideally, through graduation) unbroken. This literature revealed that the terms "coping skills," "coping strategies," "survival skills," and "resistance strategies" are synonymous, and the unifying thread is that these skills/strategies are "cognitions and behaviors that are directed at managing a problem and its attendant negative emotions" (Aldwin 1994, p. 82). Scott (1991) discusses the "habits of surviving," as a set of skills that African American women have assembled to cope with economic, racial, and gender exploitation, adaptations that help to reduce anger, enhance a sense of self-control, and facilitate hope. Davis (1998) coined the term "creative essences" that describes how African American women creatively "construct meaning

out of life stress and what types of activities they engage in that assert the creative essences within them" (p. 493). Accordingly, a creative essence is "a proactive, unique, and individual path to inner fulfillment" (p. 493). These coping strategies, habits of survival, survival skills, and creative essences are learned. Moreover, as Audre Lorde has previously suggested, "survival is not an academic skill," thus suggesting that African American women must be creative in how they respond to racism, discrimination and oppression (Lorde, 1979).

Loudness/Voice. One coping strategy found in the literature is using one's "voice." In Fordham's (1993) ethnographic study, she defines loudness as "one of the ways by which African American women seek to deny society's effort to assign them to a stigmatized status…it is used as a metaphor proclaiming African American women's existence, their collective denial of, and resistance to, their socially proclaimed powerlessness" (p. 25). While the perceived loudness in Morris' study referenced above caused girls to retreat, Fordham suggests that loudness (i.e., defiance) can be seen as a coping strategy—a way of protesting against whitewashed normalcy.

The ability for a young African American girl to speak her mind as a resistance strategy was demonstrated in Way's (1995) qualitative study. She explored the ways in which 12 urban, poor and working-class adolescent girls spoke about themselves, their relationships and their school experiences over a three-year period. She further suggests that the ability to be outspoken or to "speak one's mind" in relationships was the prevalent theme. This theme of voice is echoed in Iglesias and Cormier's (2002) study. When teenagers are given permission to voice their feelings through creative strategies that allow them to speak about their culture, such as journaling and other tools to capture

their personal narratives, they find strength and validity in their voices and can utilize multiple literacies. Richardson uses the term literacies to include "vernacular resistance arts…that are created to carve out free spaces in oppressive locations such as the classroom, the streets, the workplace…" or the private school (Richardson 2002, p. 678). She also suggests that African American women are uniquely skilled to:

> communicate these literacies through storytelling, conscious manipulation of silence and speech code/style shifting and signifying, among other verbal and non-verbal practices. Performance arts such as singing, dancing, acting, steppin', and stylin', as well as crafts such as quilting and use of other technologies are also exploited to these purposes (e.g., pots, pans, rags, brooms, and mops); African American females' language and literacy practices reflect their socialization in a racialized, genderized, sexualized, and classes world in which they employ their language and literacy practices to protect and advance themselves. Working from this rhetorical situation, the Black female develops creative strategies to overcome her situation, to "make a way outa no way." (p. 680)

Richardson eloquently outlines the various methods African American women have skillfully devised to combat racism and sexism in myriad environments, exercising one's voice to transform otherwise hostile spaces within the school environment. As women develop and utilize these multiple literacies their identities they are actively shaping their own unique identities.

Social Networks. In addition to finding and exercising one's "voice," researchers also identified the creation of social networks as an effective coping strategy for African American women. Briggs (1998) and Dominguez and Watkins (2003) examine how African American women generate social capital to obtain resources for survival and social mobility. Briggs (1998) conceptualizes two types of social capital residing in relational networks: social support and social leverage. Social support is emotional support from family, friends and neighbors. Social support Networks that offer social leverage help individuals "get by" and/or "get ahead," providing access to education,

training, and employment (Dominguez & Watkins, 2003). Similarly, Shorter-Gooden (1993) found in her qualitative study of the African American Women's Voices Project that African American women utilized internal and external resources as coping strategies to deal with the stress caused by racism and sexism. For example, internal resources "are worldviews or belief systems that help shape how the person feels about herself and how she defines her relationship to the larger world" (p. 416). These internal resources include "resting on faith," "standing on shoulders," and "valuing oneself" (p. 417). Outside resources, such as "leaning on shoulders," are resources found outside of oneself and in the comfort of others.

Robinson and Ward (1991) continue to expand upon the importance of social networks through their work with adolescent girls. They have surmised that there are two types of resistance strategies: strategies for survival and strategies for liberation. They suggest that strategies for survival are not enough. They are short-term and can be deleterious such as substance abuse, for example. This approach can lead to isolation and disconnectedness from the collective community and from the self. However, "resistance strategies for liberation provide a sense of unity with others that transcends age, socioeconomic status, ethnic origin, and sexual orientation" (p. 266). It is important to note their conclusion that learning to utilize strategies for "liberation can be accomplished by learning about other women, through their writings or through dialogue with them, who have been resisters and by identifying the strategies that were effective for them" (p. 267). This strategy is particularly effective as it builds relationships with other women across generations, which is particularly useful when examining identity formation and the experiences of African American women in private schools over time.

Religion and Spirituality. Some researchers found that religion/spirituality and prayer help women to interrogate and accept the reality of certain circumstances (Shorter-Gooden,1993; Way, 2002; Mattis, 2002; and Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Watt, 2003). Jones & Shorter-Gooden said,

> [M]any [African American] women turn to spirituality and religious faith and rely on the love and affirmation of relatives and friends. Seeking spiritual and emotional support can be a way of shifting away from the feelings connected to bias and prejudice, exploring alternative problem-solving strategies, and garnering a new perspective (p. 81).

A belief in something greater allowed African American women to "identify, confront, and transcend limitations" (Way, 2002, p. 317) imposed on them by their institutions, work or school environments. Watt's (2003) study of forty-eight African American female college students focused on understanding how African American women's spiritual development contributes to their identity formation and psychological resistance to oppression. Watt (2003) and Way's (2002) studies suggest African American women are able to recognize their purpose is greater and they can see beyond the space (confines) of their immediate environment. This theme of transcending space is found in Galván's (2001) ethnographic work with rural women in Central Mexico. Although Galván examines Latina women, her results are applicable to other women of color as she utilizes a womanist theoretical framework that connects diverse communities of women. She suggests, "women's spirituality serves as a catalyst with which to struggle and combat the daily turmoil of their home, work or community" (Galván 2001, p. 611) and is an impetus to other communal activities. For example, Galván observed women who participated in the *pastoral social* (a part of the Catholic church's mission) also participated in small savings groups (ways for women to save money together) and literacy projects.

Strength and Resilience. It is important to briefly examine the literature on strength and resilience and how African American women find strength despite the risks they may encounter. Risks can be defined in terms of educational achievement (O'Connor 2002; O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2008) and in terms emotional and psychological risks (Robinson & Ward, 1991; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2005; 2007). First, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2005) cautions that the "strong black woman" syndrome "is a limiting rather than empowering construction of black femininity and that it rewards women for a stoicism that draws attention away from the inequalities they face in their communities and the larger society" (p. 105). Thus, the strong Black women becomes "overly attuned to other's needs" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007, p. 29) and neglects her own emotional needs. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) call this the "Sisterrella Complex." When an African American women works hard to please others she is often disconnected from herself and her own desires, and is unfulfilled.

O'Connor's work on resilience examines strength in a different manner. For example, the women in O'Connor's (2002) qualitative study were the first to graduate from a four-year college however; "their immediate families could not readily provide them with the knowledge necessary for navigating college costs and admissions" (p. 895). Therefore, the women in her study had to be resilient, actively obtaining the resources they needed to be successful. O'Connor's study suggests that the "processes of resilience are highly adaptive" (p. 897) and that strength is a necessary tool to combat racist and sexist processes that hinder educational achievement. O'Connor also expands the definition of risk to extend beyond a fate of African American women living in urban

environments. She suggests that constraints on, and opportunities for agency and mobility change from one generation to the next and the risks on, in this case, educational achievement, change as well. Therefore, for example, an African American female with enough financial means may still be "at risk" in the private school environment because of other factors, such as race and possible gender. Resilience is an "institutionally responsive process" and the ways in which women demonstrate resilience during different times is broader (O' Connor 2002, p. 898). In this regard, historical time will also determine the face of racism, its effects on young people and their resilience (O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2008). For example, how would the story of an African American woman who attended a predominantly white private school in the 1960's differ from the story of a woman who attended the same school the 1990's? Additionally, how did resistance strategies differ over time?

Based on the findings in the literature presented above, the questions that guide this dissertation are:

1. What are significant events in the life histories of African American female graduates of a predominantly white boarding school in the northeast?
2. What survival skills did African American women develop to reclaim their voice?
3. How did African American women craft their identities using the survival skills they developed?

The goal of this study was not to generalize to larger populations of women but, rather, to listen closely to an intimate group of women as they reflect on their private school experience. Although many themes emerged from in the interviews, the findings

presented here focus on the survival skills that the women employed in the private school.

Methodology

For this research study, I utilized a life history methodology grounded in a phenomenological inquiry framework and a womanist theoretical framework. How these frameworks influenced method will be discussed. It was my desire to understand how the phenomenon of the private elite boarding school became a part of the women in this study and, how the boarding school may have influenced their actions and behaviors (Peterson, 1997). Phenomenology is the study of phenomena; the way things appear in an individual's experience or consciousness. Phenomenology is a discipline that endeavors to describe how the world is constituted and experienced through conscious acts. A phenomenological approach to inquiry on women's experiences in independent schools allowed me to understand the "lived experiences" of boarding school life from the perspective of the people who lived it (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Moustakas, 1994).

Additionally, as an inquiry framework, phenomenology allowed me to explore the phenomenon thematically by identifying certain essences as they emerged. Spiegelberg (1965) defined *essences* as "the whatness of things" or the key elements of things. He further explained, using Husserl's philosophical interpretation of phenomenology, the *essence* is the genesis of a phenomenon. Davis (1998) concurs with her definition of "creative essences"—"proactive" pathways to "inner fulfillment" (Davis, 1998, p. 493). Every phenomenon can be broken down into pieces and those pieces can be explored. I wanted to explore how African American women assigned meanings to what they

experienced in the white, private school environment (Spiegelberg, 1965; Van Manen, 1990) because a deeper understanding of the various facets of the private school experience yields a deeper understanding of the whole experience.

A life history methodology allowed me to study the life experiences of African American women through their own voices and stories. Life history methods place the individual, understood as a social being, at the center of the research. Furthermore, examining the psychological and physical effects of the boarding school environment through the eyes and memory of the graduates who lived it can be used to construct social critique and action at personal, collective and institutional levels.

For Dhunpath (2000), life histories give our lives meaning and to deny someone "the right to tell their story is then to deny their birth right and human dignity" (p. 545). Through narratives, oppressed people can resist being acted upon by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, crafting their own identity, naming their history and telling their story (Freire, 1970). Edmundson and Nkomo (1998) suggest that narrative inquiry is committed to representing the actions of the relatively unknown, perhaps oppressed and ignored social groups whose agendas and meanings have been underrepresented. What is clear is that there is a need to hear these stories and for the participant to give an account of her own life in her own words.

According to Geiger (1986), life histories can serve as "the link between experience and consciousness" and show how people make sense of their social world, their relationships with others whether they are "oppressive, brutal, or tension-ridden or, alternatively, as satisfying, harmonious and fulfilling" (p. 348). Geiger (1986) goes on to suggest life history research "may be feminist" (p. 350) and womanist, as life history

research is emancipatory, participatory and grassroots in nature—its strength lies in one person telling their story to another person who is legitimately interested in hearing it (Reinharz, 1992). Some researchers even emphasize life histories as more authentic than other forms of qualitative research inquiry. Dhunpath (2000) says:

> Autobiography, biography and other forms of life history, each dedicated to the significance of individual experience, have become increasingly popular methods in educational [social science] inquiry ... I want to suggest boldly, therefore, that the life history approach is probably the only authentic means of understanding how motives and practices reflect the intimate intersection of institutional and individual experience in the postmodern world (Dhunpath, 2000, p. 544).

Narrative understanding, which has the fluidity and wholeness of a story, brings together in a meaningful whole an understanding that is in tune with the pain, aspirations, memories, joys and longings of the person experiencing it. The act of making sense of the stories and showing the significance of them is a creative individual and collective endeavor.

Womanism is the theoretical perspective that allows for multiple experiences and stories to exist equally. Though the term womanism surfaced in 1979 with Alice Walker, womanist authors acknowledge that a womanist way of being in the world has existed before there was a term to define it. In her book, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), Walker defines womanism as:

> 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.
>
> 2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually.

> Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?" Ans. "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."
>
> 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. *Loves* love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.
>
> 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender (Walker, 1983, p. xi).

In *The Womanist Reader* (2006) Layli Phillips offers her definition of womanism as a:

> social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. (Phillips, 2006, p. xx)

While Phillips (2006) has "defined" womanism, she suggests the definition of womanism is evolving, because it is constantly under construction and the people who participate in womanist discourse contribute to the progression of the perspective. Additionally, Phillips elucidates womanism's five characteristics. First, womanism is antioppressionist. A womanist is against all forms of oppression and does view one form of oppression worse than another (i.e. there is no hierarchy—racism, sexism, homophobia etc., must all be dismantled.) Second, womanism is vernacular, concerned with the everydayness of everyday people. Third, womanism is nonideological and "abhors rigid lines of demarcation and tends to function in a decentralized way" (p. xxv). Fourth, womanism is communitarian and is focused on the wellness of all members of a

community (p. xxv). Last, womanism is spiritualized, symbolizing the connectedness of human life, "livingkind" and the spiritual world (p. xxvi). Phillips asserts that "womanism is a harmonizing and coordinating project, not an isolating and separating project. It seeks to promote relations of interconnectedness and cooperation all while blurring, dissolving, and dismantling ideological lines of demarcation" (p. xxxii).

Together, Phillips (2006) and Walker (1983) propose a way to engage women in a meaningful dialogue that allows them to share their beliefs and where healthy conflict can exist. Sheared (1994) furthers this concept of dialogue. In this regard, Sheared uses the concept of polyrhythmic, which "reflects the belief that individuals do not just have multiple realities and distinct understandings of them. Instead, individuals experience intersecting realities simultaneously—their realities are polyrhythmic" (p. 270). Sheared suggests that if teachers understood and utilized students' polyrhythmic realities, students would see themselves as "active authors of their worlds" (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 235 quoted in Sheared, 1994). As a womanist researcher, I am concerned with the voices of the women in my study, and my own, as womanism allows multiple experiences and stories to exist equally, positing that everyone who comes to the proverbial kitchen table to engage in emancipatory dialogue has an equal voice (Davis, 1999).

I have used this perspective to situate my role as a participant researcher and African American female graduate of a private boarding school. Additionally, womanism suggests that the final product of my research must be shared if it is to be healing and truly of, and for everyday people chronicling their journey through daily life. In this research study, daily life occurs in the private boarding school setting. I also turn to womanism because it is a perspective that redefines the spaces that African American

women occupy. The terms, *ordinary*, *everyday*, and *mundane* (Galván, 2001) are not to be devalued. Capturing the "everydayness" (Collins, 2000; O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007) of African American women's experiences with racism and sexism can provide tools for understanding the impact of these maladies on their lives. In Lanehart's (2002) womanist work chronicling the journey towards literacy of five ordinary African American women in her family, she states,

> [o]ur stories are not unique, but I think isolation can make us think they are….we need to study ourselves, get a good look at ourselves, in order to unmask who we are within ourselves and in the context of our interactions with those who help to make us who we are…(p. 11).

Method

Setting

Logan Academy (this is a fictitious name, as are all the names in this dissertation), established in 1848, is situated on approximately 400 acres of land in the northeast. In the years since its founding, Logan Academy built new buildings including dormitories, classrooms, and a gymnasium with financial support from the founder and his son. Logan has always been closely associated with the Presbyterian Church, and it continues to respect Judeo-Christian values. The Academy assumes an inclusive view of religious life, which is modeled in the weekly chapel services and monthly church/Vesper requirements. While attendance at these services is mandatory, the chaplain encourages students and faculty to contribute to the spiritual aspect of the school so that other religions and points of view are brought into the community.

Historical documents revealed that Logan was coeducational until 1915, when it became a boys' school. Coeducation was reinstated in 1970, welcoming students and faculty members from a variety of cultural, economic, ethnic and educational

backgrounds. Students in grades nine through twelve and a select number of postgraduates are, almost without exception, college-bound. During the 2008-2009 school year, Logan enrolled 445 students (249 boys and 196 girls); 40 of those students represent 21 different nations, "creating an atmosphere that fosters unique friendships and prepares students to thrive in a global community." Today, according to annual report, Logan awards $4,000,000 in financial aid to cover the annual tuition of $41,600 for boarding and $30,000 for day students. The average financial aid award is $25,641 and there are 39 (of the 445) student loan recipients. Logan is a fiscally stable school boasting an endowment (as of June 30, 2008) of $61,582,464.

The student/faculty ratio is 7:1 and it is expected that Logan students are committed to academic, athletic and extracurricular excellence. Logan's college preparatory curriculum is designed to provide a rigorous, yet personalized academic experience that covers a wide variety of disciplines. Any student who is not accustomed to receiving hours of homework in the ninth grade will have a difficult time managing the workload at Logan. However, because nearly 85% of Logan students board, they have access to their teachers after school, after the afternoon athletic practices and during evening study hall.

The Women

Participants for this study are African American female graduates of Logan Academy. Eight women were interviewed who graduated between years 1973 and 1998. One participant of a 2002 pilot study (see Appendix for the full study) was re-interviewed, and she was the eighth participant. Seven women and the researcher participated in the Group Conversation discussed below.

Carol was the first African American woman to graduate from Logan in 1973. She attended Logan through the A Better Chance Program (ABC), which was designed to support students of color and their matriculation into private schools. ABC provides all the funding and indentifies schools that the students apply to and attend. (The work of Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1991) provides an historical examination of the ABC program). It is important to note, however, that "the ABC program took students away from their homes, their neighborhoods, and their local high schools to attend the finest secondary school in the county, coming in contact with the top one-half of 1 percent of the social structure, the rich and the super-rich" (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff 1991, p. 3). Carol now has three children, and she works for the Army. After Logan, she decided to return home to take care of ailing family members; thus, she never attended college. Carol was also raised in a foster home with her biological sister and several foster brothers and sisters.

Vivian and Sophia attended Logan from 1974-1977 through the ABC program. They lived in the same city and knew each other well before attending Logan and "came to Logan together." Both women attended college directly after graduating. Vivian has three children and is a homemaker. Sophia has one child, one grandchild, and she currently works in telecommunications.

Rashida attended Logan from 1982-1986. In her interview, she stated that she was raised by a single mother, "who was very creative" ensuring that her children had everything they needed and were exposed to diverse educational and social environments. Rashida attended Logan with aid from a private foundation. Rashida graduated from Logan in 1986, and she now has a career in wholistic medicine. She is married with two children.

Joan attended Logan from 1983-1987 and her education was supported by a private foundation (the same foundation that supported the researcher's education at Logan). She attended college and is currently working in telecommunications. Joan is "happily married with no children."

Malika attended Logan in 1986 and she graduated in 1990. Her education was also supported by a private foundation. She enrolled in college upon graduation, but she never completed her undergraduate coursework. She worked in the mortgage industry for 10 years until she was laid off. Malika is a mother of two young children and has returned to college full-time to complete her degree.

Nia attended Logan from 1994-1998 supported by the same private foundation that supported Malika. Upon graduation in 1998, Nia enrolled in an Ivy League university but, in her third year, she withdrew. She is now a pastry chef and textile artist. Nia describes her household as a Cultural Nationalist home, where her Black and Muslim cultures were sources of pride.

Sanaa attended Logan on private and federal loans beginning in 1994, and she graduated in 1998. Sanaa attended an Ivy League university as an undergraduate, a master's program, and recently completed her law degree. She is currently working at a law firm.

I attended Logan from 1987-1991 and I was supported by a private foundation. I attended a northern university through graduate school. I then returned to Logan to teach for two years and my salary for was funded by the same private foundation that supported me as a student. I am now pursuing my doctorate in Educational Policy Studies. I am married with one 16-month old son.

Procedure

Recruitment

I utilized “snowball sampling” to select my participants, by allowing the subject of my pilot study and past acquaintances at Logan to “recruit” subjects from among their acquaintances. In narrative research, as suggested by Vaz (1997), participants are considered co-researchers because they play integral roles in the research process and are just as important as primary researchers. Thus, caution was taken when choosing participants for the study. Sampling for the study was purposeful. Participants were chosen according to the years that they attended the school and other parameters, such as proximity to the boarding school campus, which was the site of the Group Conversation. I consulted historical documents such as yearbooks, old directories and school newspapers in order to locate the African American female graduates. The alumni affairs office at Logan Academy also assisted me with obtaining the contact information of the participants. In an effort to discern how many African American women graduated from Logan, I consulted school yearbooks and graduation rosters. Since 1973, when the first African American woman graduated from Logan, an additional 183 African American women have graduated from the school.

After identifying the participants, I telephoned them about the study. In this conversation, I explained the purpose and the procedures of the research, and why I was interested in their participation. Since I was a Logan graduate, there was an instant connection and many of these phone calls became reunions of sorts. At this time, I explained the life history interview and scheduled a two-hour block of time to conduct their interview. I also explained the Group Conversation method and surveyed each

participant to be sure they would attend the Group Conversation. Seven of the women still live in the northeast, and one of the participants lives in the southeast. I emailed the participants a description of the study and the consent form for their review. The oldest participant was unable to attend the Group Conversation at the last minute. Her unfortunate absence is discussed in the Limitations section.

I conducted the life interviews either in the homes of my participants or in locations that were amenable to private conversations. Once I completed the life history interviews, the interview tapes were transcribed. I then scheduled the three-hour Group Conversation. Logan graciously provided the campus as the site for the Group Conversation and a videographer to document the conversation. Logan also provided lunch and refreshments.

Data Collection Methods

For this dissertation, I used myriad data sources: historical documents; group discussion data; and individual Life History interviews. Following established methods for Group Conversation, I used literature written by African American women to initiate discussion. For example, King and Mitchell (1995), in their study of Black mothers raising Black sons, used African American literature to illicit candid responses from the women. For my study, I utilized literature written by African American women and other women of color to initiate conversation. The literature addressed the following themes: search for identity; power; agency; powerlessness; “outsiders within;” beauty; femininity; selfhood; and self worth.

Primary Investigator. Because I play a significant role in this dissertation, it is important to discuss my own characteristics. I am a self-identified African American

woman who attended Logan Academy from 1987-1991. I am also a womanist. I hoped the participants would feel empowered to share their life histories. In addition, I assumed that all of the women underwent some sort of metamorphosis while in the private school environment. I experienced feelings of voicelessness and powerlessness and various times in my Logan career. I also experience happy times when I felt encouraged. In short, my experiences, even to this day, leave me with conflicting feelings.

I kept a reflective journal that I used throughout the research process to chronicle the journey and to note potential areas of bias. I recognized that my African American identity did not automatically grant me insider status. Other facets, such as my socioeconomic status and my educational background, further layered my identity. In addition, I asked the participants to analyze their own interview transcripts. That process allowed each woman to see her words and reflect upon their meaning.

Personal History Interview. According to Cole and Knowles (2001), "care, sensitivity and respect" for the participant and the research endeavor "must be authentically felt and lived" (p. 44). This occurs when the researcher understands her role as researcher and how she understands what she brings to the research process. Cole and Knowles (2001) suggest that "one way to unpack our researcher baggage is to write what we call a personal history account…A personal history is an account of a segment of one's life written for purposes of understanding oneself in relation to a broader context" (p. 49). As mentioned above, I knew that, as the researcher I must always acknowledge what I am bringing into the research endeavor. Before conducting the individual life history interviews, I wrote my own Personal History Interview. The Personal History was an opportunity for me to explore what my time at Logan meant to me. This personal

history was also a way to test the interview questions before I conducted the life history interviews. This process brought me closer to my research and allowed me to explore what the private boarding school experience meant to me and my growth as an African American woman. Furthermore, the personal history allowed me to learn about myself while learning about the women I am studying (Reinharz, 1992).

Life History Interview. I conducted individual life history interviews with each of the eight graduates. I adapted the three-interview sequence (Seidman, 1991), and this enabled me to move from background questions related to the participant' upbringing, home life, and prior education through their matriculation at Logan. Most importantly, this interview focused on the Logan experience and delved into their lives post-Logan. Interviews were "pathways into relationships" with my participants (Brown & Gilligan, 1992 p. 19), and it was my desire to...

> …understand a situation, profession, condition, or institution through coming to know how individuals walk, talk, live, and work within that particular context. It is about understanding the relationship, the complex interaction, between life and context, self and place. It is about comprehending the complexities of a person's day-to-day decision making and the ultimate consequences that play out in that life so that insights into the broader, collective experience may be achieved. (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p.11)

Cole and Knowles assert that "the principles of reflexivity, relationality, mutuality, care, sensitivity, and respect guide the development of questions…of life history inquiry" (p. 73). Kvale (1996) and Seidman (1991), who view qualitative research as *interviewing*, suggest that researchers take great care when constructing interview questions. In this regard, I developed questions that allowed the participants to speak freely throughout the interviewing process. Accordingly, I began the interview asking questions such as, tell me about your family growing up and would you say that you grew up with more than

enough, enough, or less than enough financial resources in your home? These questions allowed me to have a "guided conversation" (Cole & Knowles, 2001) with the participants that encouraged them to talk about their lives before attending Logan.

The major section of the Life History interview was devoted to the Logan expereince. I followed a process that allowed me to connect the participants' life histories with the Logan context. As such, the second phase of the interviewed entailed queries such as, Describe your private boarding school experience; can you describe your social adjustment at Logan?; did you ever miss home?; can you describe your interaction with your friends and family at home? The third phase of the interview focused on their lives after Logan. I asked about their college experiences and if they had returned to Logan since graduating. Before ending the interview, I asked each participant if they kept any letters from home, poetry, and other types of artifacts that would further contextualize their experiences.

Group Conversation. I conducted the Group Conversation at Logan Academy during the Fall of 2008. Seven women (including Malika) who were previously interviewed participated; however, one participant had a conflict and could not attend. The conversation lasted for three hours and was audio and videotaped.

DuBois and Li (1963) developed the Group Conversation method as a way of helping a roomful of people, even strangers of mixed backgrounds, share personal stories. Group Conversation enables a group to experience a common humanity; by first reaching into the past for memorable experiences to be shared around a universal topic or moment or interest. The method is designed to facilitate real and spontaneous communication by developing the social climate, which fosters mutual regard and confidence (DuBois and

Li, 1971). According to King and Mitchell (1995) and Brock (2005), participants are brought into greater readiness for discussion, problem solving, decision-making and other levels of social thinking and action.

For this dissertation, I used the Group Conversation method to uncover shared experiences through dialogue. The importance of dialogue is at the center of both the method Group Conversation and the theoretical framework of womanism. The use of dialogue for explorations of the roots of the lived experiences of African American women has foundations in African-based oral traditions and in African American culture. What an individual experiences, knows and believes to be true regarding oppressive experiences is enhanced when in dialogue with others who have shared experiences. In addition, one's worldview or understanding of this experience can expand, and one can learn that they are not alone when dealing with their issues (Collins, 2000). Banks-Wallace (2000) suggests that "research designs that facilitate dialogue, accompanied by reflection and evaluation of ideas/theories" promote harmony (p. 39).

DuBois and Li (1971) conclude that a group goes from discussion, to problem solving and decision-making then to commitment and action. According to DuBois and Li, "Group Conversation prepares for profitable discussion by helping to point up the basics and strategic aspects of a problem so that the group can look squarely at what is the issue, then get to work on it" (DuBois and Li, 1971, p. 140). The participants in this study were not told that this was in the intent of the Conversation. They understood that they would be discussing their experiences. King and Mitchell (1995) found that the mothers in their study wanted to engage in a dialogue that uncovered their "joy of attempting to teach certain values with a tangible goal of protecting sons" (p. 75). Byrne,

Canavan, and Miller (2009) conducted a qualitative participatory study with teenagers in a town in Ireland where they used the Voice-Centered Relational (VCR) method, an adaptation of Brown and Gilligan's (1992) Listener's Guide. They learned that this method demanded that they "act with or on behalf of the teenagers" in their study (p. 75).

The Group Conversation creates safe spaces where women can share aspects of their lives, feeling free to express their innermost feelings without ridicule or censorship. Safe spaces can also serve as the beginning ground of social justice work (Collins, 1997). In these spaces, women align themselves with one another and around common causes. These common causes can be teased out and explored and women can find themselves poised to act on behalf of each other. Thus, the Group Conversation method is an effective method for uncovering individual and shared stories around a single phenomenon. In her analysis of the African American oral tradition, Banks-Wallace (2002) suggests that stories help create intimate "relationships among tellers and listeners by serving as touchstones—touchstones are things that remind people of a shared heritage and/or past" (p. 411). This study seeks to uncover the touchstones in women's lives while laying a foundation for understanding how women bonded over shared experiences; how they healed themselves and each other; and how they resisted oppressive conditions. Sharing stories "provide[s] opportunities for us to reexamine difficult periods in our lives, gleaning wisdom and empowerment" (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 417). I used African American literature as way to elicit these personal stories in much the same way that King and Mitchell (1995) used African American literature to uncover stories from Black mothers. I took great care in choosing the literature underpinning my study, because I know that authors speak to women in different ways. I

chose Nikki Giovanni and Alice Walker, for example, to model the different voices African American women possess. A womanist intellectual approach serves as a link that connects my chosen data collection methods with the use of African American literature.

Analysis of Narrative Data

After the eight life history interviews and single group conversation were professionally transcribed, I analyzed the data using two established methodologies: 1) the Listener's Guide (Brown and Gilligan, 1999); and 2) narrative analysis (Labov, 1997). The Listener's Guide is a voice-centered method of listening to the variety of layers of a person's story and an individual's voice. Brown and Gilligan (1999) developed the Guide through their work with adolescent girls and women and their desire to support their voices and resisting speaking for the women they were researching. Brown and Gilligan (1999) further explain that the Listener's Guide is derived from their:

> effort[s] to find ways of speaking about human experience in a manner that re-sounds its relational nature and carries the polyphony of voice, as well as the ever-changing or moving-through-time quality of the self and the experience of relationship, [leading] us to shift the metaphoric language psychologists traditionally have used in speaking of change and development from an atomistic, positional, architectural, and highly visual language of structures, steps, and stages to a more associative and musical language of movement and feeling that better conveys the complexity of the voices we hear and the psychological processes we wish to understand (p. 23).

The Listener's Guide utilizes four "listening" stages. During the first listening stage, focus is given to the "story the person tells" (Brown & Gilligan, 1999, p. 27) during the interview. In the second stage, the researcher listens for the "self" and the "I" emerging from the interview, in order to ensure that the participant's story and her voice

"enters [the researcher's] psyche and in part by discovering how she speaks of herself before [the researcher] speak[s] for her" (pp. 27-28). The first two listening stages bring the researcher and the respondent into relationship with one another. The third and fourth listening stages focus on the "ways people talk about relationships—how they experience themselves in the relational landscape of human life" (Brown & Gilligan 1999, p. 28) and the language they use in their descriptions.

As a first step in this stage of the analysis, I created a binder containing the transcribed interviews and group conversation. Each interview was 2-2 ½ hours long and yielded 40-55 pages of text. During my first review of the interviews, I "listened" for how the participant spoke of herself and her Logan experience. I equated this to listening for the main story line or the plot. The second listen—where I listened for how the participant described herself—helped me to develop the first list of themes or nodes for my list of codes. The second listen is important because the researcher is attending to how the participant speaks about herself. Following Brown and Gilligan's instructions, I created "I Poems" for each of the women (some are included here), and I extracted every first person reference within an interview along with the attendant verb and accompanying information. I then placed the phrases on separate lines, like the lines of a poem.

In addition to the "I Poems," these first two listening stages generated the following initial set of themes: academic achievement; self-esteem; psychological injury; social adjustment; family; Blackness; coping and survival skills; safe spaces; cultural strengths; identity and silence. The themes from the selected literature on African American women provided direction as I looked to categorize how women described

their overall Logan experience. For example, I examined whether they experienced feelings of isolation, powerlessness and inadequacy. As I read, I highlighted the themes in color markers "creating a 'trail of evidence' indicating where and when a particular theme emerged in the interview" (Way 1995, p. 112). This procedure highlights the multilayered nature of the experience of self and relationships, as conveyed through their interviews, and requires the researcher to actively reflect on her own process of interpretation (Way 1995, p. 112). For the third and fourth listens, I used QSR Nvivo 8 data management software to create a collection of narratives around themes. This software allowed me to see the frequency of repeated themes and the interviews in which the themes were presented. For example, the theme of coping skills was identified in eight interviews, including the Group Conversation, with 28 occurrences.

The second method that I employed was narrative analysis. Labov (1997), found that narrative analysis occurs when a group is exposed to the life history narratives of others and can react to them in a group setting. Thus, one focus of the Group Conversation was to collectively analyze selected portions of the texts from the life history interviews. I excerpted passages from the participants' interview transcripts that I thought offered a diversity of experiences and assembled them in a spiral bound booklet. Each participant received a booklet and was asked to read the stories of their peers at the beginning of the conversation. Few et al. (2003) suggests that Black feminist (i.e., womanist) researchers, when working with African American women, should be creative when trying to uncover previously hidden information. The Group Conversation Booklet was my concept for presenting each woman's narrative in a creative way. I asked each participant to select a narrative that made an impression on them and share it with the

group. According to Labov (1997), exposing the narratives of others extends the richness of the narrative by making private stories public. Furthermore, the womanist theoretical perspective welcomes and thrives from dialogue around a shared phenomenon, even though the women may have experienced the phenomenon of the private boarding school differently. Uncovering the diversity of experiences is important to this inquiry and to the womanist perspective. Additionally, allowing the participants to review and comment on their own narratives and those of others further clarified the emergent ideas, which served as a form of member checking (Labov, 1997).

Results

The task of presenting the stories of eight women raised an interesting dilemma. Should I allow each woman to speak for herself as Lanehart (2002) did in her study of African American women in her family? Or should I weave the narratives together? The strength of telling separate narratives is that it gives each woman her own space to tell her own story. For all of my participants, this was the first time that they were asked to talk about themselves. I agree with Lanehart that "we need our own texts, because the paucity of investigations of African American women's speech demands that we be rendered visible in our own right" (Lanehart 2002, p. 2). However, theoretically, I align myself with the womanist tradition, where individual stories become more salient when shared in a group of other women.

As I contemplated how to share these stories, I envisioned crafting a quilt where each square depicted a story or message. When each square is connected, either by one seamstress (me) or by a group of seamstresses (all the women), a larger story comes to life. Therefore, I settled upon writing this dissertation as a collective story, where each

narrative, including my own, interlocks with the others. Cash (1995) suggests that the lives of African American women are multifaceted and "quilts can be used as resources in reconstructing the experiences of African American women" (p. 30). This approach empowers the women to play an important role in "creat[ing] their own lives, shap[ing] their own meanings" becoming the "voices of authority on their own experience[s]" (Brown, 1989, p. 927).

To accomplish this task of quilting the women's experiences, I include large blocks of text from the Life History Interviews and the Group Conversation in order to allow the women to dialogue with one another and speak for themselves as themes are uncovered. As I previously discussed, Gordon et al. (1990) has concluded that, African American literature provides an authentic way to look at African American life. Accordingly, I use passages from novels, poetry, and song lyrics to demonstrate the diversity of the African American experience and how remarkably connected African American women are to their creative outputs.

I have structured the presentation of my data as follows: first, I will provide an analysis of the various challenges the African American women faced at Logan and how they carafe and identity in their own words. The two categories that depict these challenges are *Invisible yet Visible* and *Sacrifices, Losses and Injury*. Thereafter, I will explore the survival skills that the women employed to address those challenges. Four categories that represent these survival skills are *Asserting Blackness, Creating Safe Spaces, Finding Voice and Embracing Loudness* and *Relying on Sistafriends*. Some of the narratives are presented in the "I Poem" format (Brown and Gilligan, 1992), in order to demonstrate the lyricism of the women's voices as well as the future possibilities of

narrative work with women. Last, it is important to note that each section begins with a quote from one of the participants and a quote from African American fiction and popular music to demonstrate how the participants' narratives closely mirrored the themes in the literature and song, a form of oral literature.

Challenges

Invisible yet Visible

> *"So I think I felt like being Black made me invisible, and that was what their definition was. That my problems were not problems...it kind of made me invisible."* ~ Malika,C'90 (Life History Interview)

> *I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasma. I am a man of substance, of flesh and of, fiber and liquids and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me…When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me."* ~ Ralph Ellison (1965)

I began the Life History Interview with a grand tour statement: "Tell be about your Logan experience." In response, the women used terms like "defining," "rough," and "wonderful." They described their initial impressions of Logan's campus—some were shocked that "schools like this actually exist." Carol, Vivian, and Sophia all stated that the ABC Program was their first opportunity to learn about private schools. When Vivian and Sophia first visited the school on a tour, they "fell in love" and remarked about the beautiful campus and that the teachers they met "were so nice." Only two of the participants had attended private elementary schools prior to coming to Logan. However, this was the first experience for all of the women to live away from the home. Sanaa was the only participant who lived near Logan and therefore did not board.

Once enrolled and "a part of the Logan community" the women learned that there "was a certain type of kid" that was successful at Logan. Malika described a Logan student as academically strong and a gifted athlete. If this student was a student of color, they should already be skilled at navigating the white world of Logan (or learn very quickly) or they would get lost. In other words, they should possess and know how to use their "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1986; Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1991; Cookson & Persell, 1991; and Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Malika did not possess these skills, and thus, the theme of invisibility/visibility surfaced early in Malika's narrative. More specifically, she stated:

> I felt
> I was invisible
> I was from Newark
> I struggled in writing
> I couldn't
> I didn't know how
> I didn't fit into certain things
> (Malika C'90, "I Poem" from Life History Interview)

For Malika, her invisibility stemmed from her perceived academic deficits. She was "high achieving" in her public middle school, but Logan's academic standards were different. She did not fit the mold of a traditional Logan student from affluence; thus, she believed she was deemed insignificant. Looking back, Malika wished that someone had taken an interest in her, rather than simply telling her that she could not measure up:

> Why didn't somebody say, "You know what? She didn't do well in this particular subject." Are there any progress research programs so that I could get better at what I was passionate about? Find out what it was that I was passionate about. You all kept telling me I couldn't write! (Group Conversation)

In both the Life History Interview and the Group Conversation, Malika discussed her first day in ninth grade English class. The teacher assigned a baseline grammar test

and Malika scored a 94 percent. She continues to explain how "floored" the teacher was because:

> I knew she was like (listening to me talk): "How the hell does she know this?" Because I was not ain't-in' and don't-in' and ain't be gotten'. And I remember she gave everybody the opportunity to take it over which was interesting. Some people still failed. But when it came to that, that was my biggest moment there [at Logan] because I felt like I knew something.

When Malika took the test again she scored a 65 percent, which was the grade the teacher recorded, not her A. Looking, back Malika credits this first experience as the one that shaped her identity and laid the foundation for her questioning herself and her academic abilities. In the Group Conversation, she shared:

> I didn't want to start a fight, but somebody should have fought for me and said, "Wait a minute, what are you doing? She got a 94. Those people who failed, if you want to give them an opportunity to take it again, go ahead, but, don't take away her A." There were pockets of experiences that shaped me in very negative ways that, even today as a 36-year-old woman, I'm still trying to shake off. It affected my college years. I'm now finishing my Bachelors degree because I wasn't confident, I didn't think I was smart enough as everyone else. I just wasn't confident. I came here and completely lost that I'm smart. (Malika C'90, Group Conversation)

For Malika her visibility/invisibility was linked to academic achievement. As she states, her "biggest moment" was when she scored well on the grammar test she described above. However, being asked to retake the test questioned her intelligence and her academic self-concept. This idea of self-doubt was seen in Vivian's narrative as well. Vivian recalled:

> [S]truggling so much academically. It might have been because I was homesick too, but it hit me because I started doubting myself I said "Well, maybe I am not smart." You know, I think I needed a mentor, somebody I could relate to that was an adult. There weren't any African-American teachers, coaches or anything (Vivian C'77, Group Conversation).

In addition to being invisible and ignored, Carol discussed that her Blackness was seen as a novelty, making her visible only as something exotic. Carol said:

> In the beginning, I loved everyone. "Oh, you're so nice." Their big thing was my skin. "Your skin is so beautiful." "Okay, thanks." I thought it was a compliment until you realize that, "Why are they making such emphasis over your skin?" (Carol, C'73 Life History Interview)

Here, Carol begins to realize that the color of her skin has "marked" her in much the same way that Malika and Vivian's classroom experiences have marked them, thus she became visible and invisible at the same time.

Nia's narrative furthers this notion of visibility/invisibility as she describes her classroom experiences of being the "smart Black kid." Nia described her home growing up as a "cultural nationalist" household. Nia was the youngest study participant (she graduated at sixteen), and she remembers feeling as if she was still a child, needing encouragement and support. She entered Logan aware of her African history from a young age and comfortable in her own skin. Yet this cultural strength contributed to pigeonholing her into the role spokesperson for her race. She explains:

> [B]ecause it kind of turned into a thing that I knew what I was doing and I knew this and I knew that, rather than approaching me as a child who was still trying to figure this mess out. It's not my job to teach you; you're the teacher. That's not my responsibility. I'm supposed to be able to come to school and figure out who I am and maybe teach somebody who they are experientially, but it's not my job to sit up here and be the living, breathing African-American studies curriculum….I might not be paying you, but somebody is paying you. It's not my job to teach this class. It really isn't (Nia, C'98, Life History Interview).

Nia's narrative presents notable discussion points. First, Nia did, in fact, possess a form of cultural capital: her knowledge of self and her heritage. The literature previously reviewed suggests that an African worldview is in direct opposition to the cultural of the private school (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fordham, 1993). Therefore, this

type of capital (or currency) was not the kind Nia needed to navigate the Logan community (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Nia was academically strong—she said the academics at Logan were "easy"—but she was not prepared to have her Blackness become the only facet of her identity that the school recognized. Second, the anger and frustration in Nia's narrative is palpable. She was being asked to do something that no other Logan student was being asked to do (Williams, 1997). She had to suspend a part of herself so that she would not be damaged. Through the Life History Interview, Nia reflected on this and other sacrifices she had to make.

Sacrifice, Losses, and Injury

> *"Where am I? What am I supposed to be doing? What am I supposed to be wearing? And if one more person tells me how well I speak, I'm going to lose my mind."* ~Nia C'98 (Life History Interview)

> *"We have always been the best actors in the world…I think that we are much more clearer than they are because we know that we have to play the game. We've always had to live two lives—one for them and one for ourselves ."* ~ Patricia Hill Collins, 1999

During the interviews and Group Conversation, each woman discussed the sacrifices that were required (knowingly and unknowingly) in order to attend Logan Academy. Some women left behind childhood friends, while others cited leaving family and the comforts of home as the most traumatic. Sanaa was the only woman to attend Logan who was not financially supported by foundations or government initiatives and who did not board. In her interview, she said that her mother and father only recently finished paying off the loans they took out to send her to Logan. Thus, Sanaa was keenly aware of the price of a Logan education.

Carol understood this price in a different way. Carol was the only woman in the study who grew up in a foster home. She described her father as a good man who simply lacked the financial stability to care for her and her sister after her mother died. He

agreed to place Carol and her sister in foster care under the condition that they remained together. When I asked Carol to talk about her family life as a youth, Carol immediately thought of her sister Cathleen:

> My sister, she stayed at home. I never realized she resented me for leaving her until recently. We went to foster care together, and she always had something you couldn't put your finger on. She'd get angry with me for no reason as we were growing up. "What in the world is wrong with Cathleen? I didn't do anything to her." So one day I just said – it just popped into my mind. I talk to God a lot too. So sometimes He puts things into my head. "Go ahead and ask her this." I said, "Cathleen, are you angry with me for leaving you and going to school?" She just burst out crying. And this was just last year. We're both 50 years old. And I'm like, oh my God. She's always afraid that I'm going to leave her. And we just hugged and cried. So everyone else was asleep. I said, "I can't believe it". And we haven't had an argument since. We have never been closer because I told her, "I'm never going to leave you again." I said, "The only one who's going to take me from you is God. That's it. I'm never leaving you again." So we've been closer than ever (Carol C'73, Life History Interview).

While Carol described how her family ties were strained because of her attendance, Malika also remembered that her relationship with her father and siblings was tense whenever she came home for weekends or holiday breaks. She experienced a distancing that she was only able to describe in her interview. Malika later learned that her sister resented her going to Logan in much the same way that Carol's sister begrudged her leaving.

Sophia and Vivian grew up in the same neighborhood and accompanied each other to Logan. In both of their interviews, they credited each other for lessening the losses that were experienced by other women in the group. However, Sophia and Vivian expressed that their homesickness and the challenging curriculum caused them to question if they made the right choice to attend Logan. They wondered, was it worth it? In particular, Vivian remembered how she thought she was smart (and the ABC program

would not have supported her if she was not), but "public school smart was different from Logan smart."

Rashida remembers wanting to do a good job and representing her "Black womanhood" while, at the same time, she resented the pressure of having to be the perfect "Black girl." W.E.B. DuBois (1903) describes this "two-ness" of having to negotiate two worlds to simply "fit in" as an unfair burden. This burden of acting is also echoed in Collins' quote at the beginning of this section. Rashida clearly knew she was living a life for herself and one for them. Likewise, when Joan described her interactions with her friends at home, she echoed similar feelings of being caught between two worlds—school and home:

> *Joan*: Yeah. You feel that and then you don't completely fit in to your urban area anymore, because then you're – I guess you're different to your friends back home, a little different. Yeah. So you're kind of like out there in the middle.
>
> *Tiffany*: Tell me more about that. How did your friends treat you when you came home or when they came to get you?
>
> *Joan*: I only had a couple friends because to have a good friend, you can't have a lot of them. They didn't treat me different, but they could tell [I have changed] or if I'd say something, they'd say, "Oh, that sounds different or you talk different" (Joan C'87, Life History Interview).

As a result, women developed certain survival skills to help reconcile the everyday stress associated with living out multiple identities.

Survival Skills

The narratives foregoing depict the stories of women who experienced oppression because of their gender, class and culture (Fordham, 1991). These stories are compelling, but it is equally important to illuminate how these women creatively dealt with the oppression in the Logan environment including the identities they crafted (Davis, 1998).

In examining the stories and the Group Conversation, I discovered that the themes presented in the literature on coping and survival skills (Aldwin, 1994; Scott, 1991); and "creative essences" (Davis, 1998) were echoed in the participant's narratives. The prevalent themes that emerged were: Asserting Blackness, Creating Safe Spaces, Finding Voice and Embracing Loudness and Relying on "Sistafriends."

Asserting Blackness

"I definitely was determined to say, 'I'm black.'" ~Vivian C'77 (Group Conversation)

I was born in the congo
I walked to the fertile crescent and built
the sphinx
I designed a pyramid so tough that a star
that only glows every one hundred years falls
into the center giving divine perfect light
I am bad
~ Nikki Giovanni, 1974

Exploring the impact of the variety of the participants' attendance years was one of the most beautiful aspects of preparing this dissertation. It appeared that the women who attended Logan in the 1970's had a significantly different experience than the women who attended Logan in the 1990's. Vivian attributed this distinction to the country being in "a giving time:"

> We had great scholarships from the state and everything. That was all looking positive. Yeah, it was. And we were aware of being Black and proud, and we had Marvin Gaye, *What's Going On*, and all that stuff. I think that kind of helped us to be able to be Black and proud at that time…I guess we felt like we had an obligation to keep our culture alive. We tried to do things that were Black. One time, we actually got a whole group of us and we did *A Raisin in the Sun*….Yeah. I think that was the biggest thing we did to keep our culture alive. We tried to do things like that. We tried to keep our hair the way it was. We tried to wear our styles. That's how we kind of stuck together. We tried to keep our culture alive (Vivian C'77, Life History Interview).

For Vivian and Sophia, asserting their Blackness was not always easy but it was a means of coping with being away from home, establishing who they were and what they wanted to be in Logan. Asserting Blackness was also a way of making connections with other African American students. It is important to reiterate that Vivian and Sophia knew each other before coming to Logan and they also made up a community of African American students that numbered 20 (out of 100 students overall) in their graduating year. This is among the highest number of African Americans in one class at Logan, largely due to the popularity of the ABC Program. I do not intend to suggest that, once a critical mass of "diverse" students is reached, a private school is doing all that it needs to do to support its students. However, the literature suggests that African American students feel less isolated when other students from similar backgrounds are also enrolled.

According to Vivian and Sophia, their efforts at asserting their Blackness went unchallenged. Nia, on the other hand, remembers that asserting her Blackness and her pride in her cultural heritage was met with questions and often disdain. She recalled:

> When I finally cut the perm off, and Mr. Whitman, who was gone before you came, looked at me and said, "What happened to your hair?" I was like, "Nothing happened to my hair. This is my hair, fool." "What'd your mother have to say about it?" I said, "She cut it." Self-esteem is hard to cultivate when everybody is telling you everything about you is wrong. It's a funny economy at Logan in terms of negotiating your self worth, because there were some kids who their self worth was completely predicated on their parents' wealth. There are other kids whose self worth was completely predicated on athletic ability. So you had several forms of currency being traded, and I didn't have any. I'm broke. I didn't really have anything of apparent value in those markets.
>
> *Tiffany*: So how did you deal with that?
>
> *Nia*: I kind of turned into my own personal Cuba. Give me a fedora, and a beard, and all that. The Western Hemisphere is evil. Western religion is evil. Take your hegemony and throw it – I was not using words like hegemony in high school. I didn't learn that word until college. Had I learned that word in high school…

While in high school, Nia admits that she did not have the language to describe how she viewed the curriculum and the overall ethos of Logan. She did do things, however, that shaped her identity in positive ways. This is quite significant, as Nia explains a coping strategy for liberation and survival at the same time (Robinson & Ward, 1998). As previously discussed, Robinson and Ward suggest that the strategies for survival are enacted "just to get by," while the strategies for liberation are unifying. Nia's suggestion that she "turned into her own Cuba" alludes to her liberatory, revolutionary spirit. However, she had to, in a sense, create a self-imposed exile to complete her final years at Logan. She said that, by the time she got to her sophomore year she had "given up completely on trying to fit in" (Life History Interview); and instead demanded that she be appreciated on equal terms. With this act of resistance, Nia is saying:

> I'm going to be fabulous
> I don't care what you think
> I don't care what you say
> I'm going to be fabulous
> I'm going to be happy
> You're not going to convince me that I'm deluded
> You're not going to convince me that I'm wrong
> No.
> I'm the one saying no.
> No.
> No.
> No, no.
> You have the option of listening
> Or
> You can just walk away
> and move on out of my face.
> (Nia C'98 Poem from Life History Interview)

During the Group Conversation, Nia volunteered to read Nikki Giovanni's poem, *Ego Trippin'*. She felt connected to the poem, as it provided another voice that echoed her

unshakable pride and love for herself. She used the poem to remind her that she will "be fabulous" and "happy." In this regard, the literature written by African American women provided another voice to speak on Nia's behalf when she could not.

Creating Safe Spaces

"It was like having a day off from work. Don't have to lead the march today. I could put down the sign today. I can take off the hat, pull off the beard." ~ Nia C'98 (Life History Interview)

"…I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. For instance at Barnard. "Beside the waters of the Hudson" I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself." ~ Zora Neale Hurston, 1923

Creating a safe space was akin to what Davis (1998) calls "creative essences." In the face of adversity, women took their learning and personal growth into their own hands. These safe spaces took different forms. For some, it was a class or a school-sanctioned club, and for others it was an independent study in African American literature. The idea of safe space that resonated in Rashida's interview was more of a mental exercise—a way of carrying the comforts of home to Logan, and a way to transcend the confines of the institution. Rashida explained:

> Home is home, but you can make home wherever you are. And that's a skill, because…home is where you are. And so I just have a real good way of creating my little home and the little cocoon that I live in through my environment, my room, or whatever it might be and I make home…And I think home is a fundamental human need, and the ability to make it where you are is an extraordinary skill, survival skill…I think it is something that you cultivate and you cultivate it in the face of adversity. And to cultivate that ability, survival skills and the ability to create home where you are, is so freeing because I could go anywhere. But, if you can't do that, then you're limited to physical places (Rashida C'86, Life History Interview).

Rashida's narrative lyrically embraces a womanist ethos, as it suggests the need to be creative and utilize diverse strategies when trying to manage oppression. A womanist

knows that projects aimed at ending oppression have a spiritualized and harmonizing element. This is demonstrated in Rashida refusing to be limited to physical spaces. Her narrative suggests an awareness of the spiritual realm and that it must be called upon and utilized.

Joan was unique in that she had what she described as a "keep it moving" strategy that allowed her avoid the losses other women felt. Joan keenly understood that her time at Logan was limited, and she did not allow Logan to affect her in the way that it affected other women in the study. Joan did not live far from Logan and, so she was able to physically visit home more often than Sophia, Vivian, and Nia. Joan recalls:

> Sociably, I believe I was fine. Again, I was a loner, so I'd have one or two friends and I'd hang with them, but I always had a boyfriend at home. So most weekends, I would go home. So, I was more like a Monday through Friday gal or Saturday morning because we had Saturday classes. Honestly, most of my social life was outside of Blair. You got to be able to recognize who you are what you got going on in your life and try not to let all the other issues – and when I say a lot of stuff, a lot of it wasn't positive because there was a lot of drugs in the school. You just have to keep it in perspective and – I don't know - keep it grounded and keep it moving, and get what you can from the situation. You definitely have to recognize that in a lot of ways, Logan wasn't real life. It was like surreal. It was cool, but it was going to be over one day. It was going to be over. You just had to know that and keep moving (Joan C'87, Life History Interview)

Joan's view of "Logan [not being] real life" was her successful attempt to keep Logan in its place. Logan would provide an educational space for Joan, however substantial relationships and other important lessons were obtained at home. Thus, the concept of safe spaces is defined in different terms for Joan as it was for Nia.

Even though Nia did well academically, she wished that she could have taken more visual arts classes, because they represented a safe place for her. She felt that the teacher took a true interest in her and that it was a very constructive space. Nia also

remembered her membership in a club that encouraged students to engage in dialogue around spirituality and world religions. This space was endorsed by the school, and it seemed to be free of the rigid boundaries felt by Nia and other women in the group as well. Malika, Rashida, and I ultimately created an independent study in African American literature because we recognized a need to explore the voices that were absent from our curriculum, and we also endeavored to understand who we were in relation to other women.

When Malika and I were students at Logan (1986-1991), no one mentioned that another African American young woman had created an independent study in examining African American female writers. In the interview with Rashida that I learned she felt the same way about her educational experiences and the effects of design such a course were the same—we all felt most alive and validated, even though we had to create this experience for ourselves. Rashida explained that "this stuff, [my academic course of study], need[ed] to mean something to me…and I was determined to make it my own and to make it work for me." Malika described the importance of her independent reading as follows:

> When I first read Nikki Giovanni's poem *Ego Trippin'* I was like, "Oh my God, this was like I never ever had this kind of confidence in myself." I think it was the Spring semester of my senior year that I started feeling like "you are somebody!" "Not only are you somebody, you're beautiful and you're black and beautiful." Nobody ever said that to me, and in that environment, you need to be told those things…So to be reminded that not only are you beautiful, but you are the bomb. You are the queen of the earth. That was something absolutely new to me, Tiffany, and I'm not going to lie. I immediately fell in love with Maya[1]. And then I read *I*

[1] When you see me passing
It ought to make you proud.
I say,

> *Know Why a Caged Bird Sings*. I never even knew that I was a phenomenal woman until I read that book and that poem. I was like, you are so worth every ounce of who you are. And people need to know that. It completely changed my life.

Gordon's work (1985; Gordon, et. al 1990) emphasizes this concept of African American literature authentically speaking to the experiences and accomplishments of African Americans. Reading and discussing African American literature served as turning point for some of the women in the study. They discovered that finding and exercising their voice in a positive and life-affirming way made the Logan experience bearable and even worthwhile. Through the independent study Rashida, Malika and I uncovered questions we had about ourselves as young Black women and answers. We learned that African American women wrote beautiful stories that reminded us of how beautiful we were. As we read, we learned new words to use to describe ourselves—beautiful, talented, worthy—we had voices that needed to be heard. In this regard, our lives began to take shape and it was of our own doing.

Finding Voice and Embracing Loudness

"You can't tell me no. You can't tell me no. People been trying to tell me no since I was 11." ~ Nia C'98 (Life History Interview)

I was always too concerned about what everybody would think.
But I can't live for everybody, I gotta live my life for me.(Yeah)
I pitched a fork in the road of my life and ain't nothing gonna happen unless I decide.
And I choose) to be the best that I can be.

It's in the click of my heels,
…The bend of my hair,
The palm of my hand,
The need of my care,
'Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

from *And Still I Rise* (1978) by Maya Angelou

(I choose) to be authentic in everything I do.
My past don't dictate who I am. I choose. (Yeah)
~India.Arie, 2006[2]

When read together, Nia's words and India.Arie's lyrics above, provide a manifesto for an African American woman choosing to chart her own path. This path however comes with a price. For example, in her interview, Nia remembered times when she found herself shouting to be heard in a way that Morris (2007) and Fordham (1993) suggest negatively stereotypes African American women and girls as irrational beings. Thus, loudness can have negative connotations as is clearly articulated in the following portion of Nia's interview transcript.

> *Nia*: I did do a lot of things purposefully that made it harder. I didn't have to walk around with paint on my face. I did not have to dress up like Josephine Baker[3] for Halloween.
>
> *Tiffany*: Did you?
>
> *Nia*: Picture in the yearbook and everything, with a banana skirt that I went to the A&P and made myself.
>
> *Tiffany*: Nia, that's precious. And they just weren't ready for that, huh?

---

[2] India.Arie (born India Arie Simpson on October 3, 1975) is a Grammy Award winning American soul, R&B, and neo soul singer-songwriter, record producer, guitarist, and flautist.

[3] Josephine Baker (June 3, 1906 – April 12, 1975) was an American expatriate entertainer and actress. Most noted as a singer, Baker also was a celebrated dancer in her early career. She was given the nicknames the "Bronze Venus" or the "Black Pearl, "as well as the "Créole Goddess" in Anglophone nations. In France, she has always been known as "La Baker."

Baker was the first African American female to star in a major motion picture, to integrate an American concert hall, and to become a world-famous entertainer. She is also noted for her contributions to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States (she was offered the leadership of the movement by Coretta Scott King in 1968 following Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, but turned it down); for assisting the French Resistance during the Second World War; and being the first American-born woman to receive the highest French military honor, the Croix de Guerre. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephine_Baker

> *Nia*: No, they were not ready. They were not ready. They weren't trying to be ready. I could probably go back this year and they would still not be ready (Nia C'98 Life History Interview).

Nia's Halloween costume is an indication of how culturally informed she was, however this did not prepare her for life at Logan. Thus, the Logan community marked her as exotic and silly, rather than culturally grounded and sane. Nia admits that she did "a lot of things purposefully that made it harder" to fit in. However, there is another way of reading and interpreting Nia's narrative. She used the word "purposefully" implying that she *thought* about how she wanted her voice to be heard. The Josephine Baker costume was one way of exercising her voice (being loud) and demanding to be seen. For Nia, finding her voice appeared to be an ongoing process that began the moment she arrived on Logan's campus. For Rashida, Malika and me, we found ways of speaking through the literature we were reading. And for other women, exercising one's voice came from certain events marked in time. For example, Carol recalls:

> *Carol*: But I just didn't understand the racial undertones and that everybody don't like you. They're really saying something bad to you, and you just "Okay," didn't realize it. So one day at the dinner table, it just hit me. I don't even remember what this guy said. But whatever he said, he ended up with one of those big metal pitchers of milk all over him. It was somebody I sit across from every night, and he kept saying something. But it wasn't just that particular time; it was a couple of times before. I just had started becoming more enlightened and more sensitive to what people were saying. I'm like, "That was an insult"
>
> *Tiffany*: What made you realize that they –
>
> *Carol*: Were making fun of me? I don't know. I do not know. Maybe it's because of something I read because Mr. Sikes was my English teacher, and I loved him to death. He was a hard guy. But he had us reading everything, and it may have been something I read. I don't know what it was. But I just started realizing that the people that you thought were complimenting you were really kind of joking with you. Not joking with you. Making a joke at your expense (Carol C'73, Life History Interview).

Carol's narrative suggests that her reaction to her classmate's racist joke was a result of something she had read in class. Robinson and Ward (1991) may suggest that Carol's actions were reactive thus resistance strategies for survival instead of resistance strategies for liberation. However, womanism suggests that resistance to oppression comes in many forms and it is up to the individual to choose what resistance strategy works at the time. Thus, when we reexamine Nia's and Carol's narratives through a womanist lens we see something different. In her critique of African womanist writing, Ogunyemi (1985) suggests that the female protagonist in an African womanist novel experiences a metamorphosis after which she is not the same. As previously discussed, Rashida, Malika and I experienced this transformation while reading African American literature. Carol and Nia experienced a transformation as they decided when and how to exercise their voices around particular events.

Relying on Sistafriends

> "*God sent her…she created a very safe space for me"* ~ Joan C'87 (Life History Interview)

> "*Pheoby, we been kissin'-friends for twenty years, so Ah depend on you for a good thought. And Ah'm talking to you from dat standpoint."* ~ Zora Neale Hurston, 1937

All of the participants said that they were grateful for the personal relationships that they created with other women. Malika said that I "saved" her. We saved each other. When I taught African American Studies at Logan, Nia and Sanaa were my students, and they thanked me for Sunday morning breakfast talks. Vivian and Sophia knew each other before coming to Logan and they relied on each other to remind each other of home and to affirm their Blackness. This was also the case for me, Joan, Rashida and Malika. As Banks-Wallace (2002) previously defined, touchstones are "things that remind people of a shared heritage and/or past" (p. 411). For each woman in

the study, other women served as touchstones, providing an immediate and real connection and commitment to female wellness, which is the cornerstone of womanism. While each woman alluded to a friendship they had at Logan, it was in the Group Conversation that the women validated each other's existence and experiences.

The following, unedited portion of the Group Conversation beautifully illustrates how we "relied on each other" and comforted each other in an effort to avoid victimhood:

> Rashida: You guys probably survived because you had each other. But, I think that is a really important part of it, and it is something that when we talk about the discussion of the African American woman, that is basically how we survive everything, by relying on each other…I am saying [this] to say that the whole part of having some other person that you can connect with and feel at home with, I think is critical. I think it is critical for surviving with your sanity intact.
>
> Nia: The more I think about not seeing yourself as a victim really speaks to me too. I guess it makes sense how my experience went down, that also plays into why Tiffany being there was so important because it was just, finally there was somebody in my corner. You can speak about this, your voice does have some merit, you are validated in your feelings, you're not losing your mind, you're just not being understood.
>
> Malika: I remember the first Black woman I identified with was Joan. I probably was a pain because I needed her so badly, I would look for her for some sense of familiarity, and I remember when she graduated I was like, "There is no way I am going to make it through these next three years."
>
> *(Laughter)*
>
> Sanaa: To a little girl, you need that validation, you need your peer group making you believe that you are beautiful. From day one, my parents were telling me I was brilliant, nobody could tell me otherwise, so I was fine academically, but didn't know the social thing. If you don't have somebody that says you are beautiful, or you are as beautiful as they are, then you are lost.

Discussion

There were two major questions that guided this study. First, I wanted to uncover the significant events in the life histories of African American female graduates of a

predominantly white boarding school in the northeast. Second, I wanted to understand the survival skills the African American women developed and utilized to reclaim their voice within this environment. The goal of this study was not to generalize to larger populations of women but, rather, to listen closely to an intimate group of women as they reflected on their private school experience.

Throughout the life history interviews, the women stated that they had never been interviewed and that the process was a way to reconnect with old memories, good and bad. Vivian expressed that she was nervous at the beginning of the interview, but became more comfortable as the interview progressed. The Group Conversation, as Rochelle Brock (2005) suggests, "is more comfortable to many African American women" (p. 25) because we are accustomed to communicating in a group and sharing our experiences with each other. When asked to describe their private boarding school experience, the eight women used words like "defining," "rough," and "wonderful." All of the women realized that Logan represented a time of growth, where life at home continued in their absence. Parents divorced, elders passed away, siblings grew distant and resentful, while others waited for us to come home. Some of our parents made enormous financial sacrifices while we were making sacrifices of our own.

The study results reveal that there are common identities among us (our Blackness and our womanhood), and there are aspects of our lives that are different such as socioeconomic class status and level of education post Logan, for example. Even within this small sample of women, there was marked diversity. For some, a clearer vision of their Logan experience came after they left Logan. Throughout her life history interview Sanaa remarked about how she "was made to feel special" by her teachers. She excelled

academically and athletically. Though she had friendships at Logan, (she did not date much because she thought "boys were not attracted to her"), Sanaa describes her overall experience as "memorable" and "affirming." However, she stated that her college years provided another lens through which to view her Logan experience. She admitted the following:

> Yeah, I got angry. I got very involved in community service [in college]. I guess when you're around more people who are like you, then what you say *is* black enough, and the way you talk *is* black enough. "Oh, you guys aren't saying I talk white. You guys aren't saying all this stupid shit that little kids say in high school (Sanaa C'98 Life History Interview).

While Sanaa's overall Logan experience was a positive one, her narrative revealed that she needed to contend with undefined issues. This also speaks to how much Logan remains a part of who we are as African American women. How we made sense of our time at Logan and the skills we acquired while students informs who have become. In this regard, Rashida eloquently shares "I think the experience gives you the words and then maturity gives you the content with which to balance what you are experiencing today."

Implications

One of the goals of the Group Conversation method is that the participants are moved towards social action through dialogue. As mentioned earlier, the goal of a Group Conversation is to create a space for understanding and healing to occur. The conversation also creates the space for people to channel the energy of their shared experiences toward action. As a former Logan student, faculty member and friend to all of the women, I had a unique vantage point from which to view the individual life histories that I had the privilege of recording. As a womanist researcher, my goals for the

Group Conversation were simple—to create the space for the sharing of personal stories across the Logan continuum.

A remarkable thing occurred at the conclusion of the Group Conversation. After I thanked the group for their time and a few women made some concluding remarks, Sophia suggested the creation of an African American alumni group for women with the goals of supporting each other and supporting current African American female students at Logan Academy. I included this significant portion of the conversation because it was through dialogue that the women recognized that their purpose for convening for the Group Conversation was greater.

> Sophia: Why don't we start a Black Alumni group? Send out an invitation. Say, "Come back, we want to hear your thoughts," just something. I think if it is going to happen, we're going to have to make it happen.
>
> Malika: I think I hear there is a need for African American alumni from Logan Academy to have a formalized way of getting together. I hear that there is a need for African American women alumni to have a formalized way of getting together, and I think that if we take this to the school, they would be supportive of what we ask.
>
> Sophia: I think if we were all able to get it together, just gel a little bit, we might be in a position to send somebody to school or at least sponsor somebody the way that we all were.
>
> Tiffany: You took the words right out of my mouth. The opportunity I got to come here on the scholarship was life changing…we could support one student, I know.
>
> Vivian: Right, my son. (Laughter) We want to show them that we survived. We have a valid reason for being here. We can come in here and get the same things and do the same things that you have done. We are successful. We may not be CEO's and all that, but we are successful, we are proud of who we are. We are proud of our families. We are proud of who we are, so I try to come back, one because I love the campus—because it gets me away from my home of being around [a northern city]. I come back because I want them to know I didn't fail. I was determined not to fail out of this private school existence and I don't want to be dropped out of it either, but, I also feel that I would like to have other

> people of color to share that. But, I can't seem to figure out how to get the school to reach out to you guys. Look at you guys, you have things to offer back to the school or even your experiences to other students, or whatever, but who has tapped into us?
>
> Sophia: I was just thinking, if we all came together and were able to pool our resources, of course that means we have to have buy in from a good number of people. I know we all got issues right now as far as the economy, but we could mentor, too. (Group Conversation)

As previously mentioned, Byrne, Canavan, and Miller's (2009) qualitative participatory study on teenagers used the Voice-Centered Relational (VCR) method, which is an adaptation of Brown and Gilligan's (1992) Listener's Guide. They learned that this method demanded that they "act with or on behalf of the teenagers" in their study (p. 75). Likewise, the women interviewed for this dissertation realized that their purpose for participating in this research must extend beyond sharing their personal stories and that they must act on behalf of current Logan women. The women confirmed what a womanist knows—dialogue stimulates a consciousness that already exists. The Group Conversation was the stimulus and the women acted on their vision, which is a form of catalytic validity (King & Mitchell, 1995). Catalytic validity "strives to ensure that research leads to action" and that participants are empowered to "understand and transform their oppressive situation" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p. 111). What the women do with these stories becomes the next step. Additionally, my role as researcher must extend beyond data collection and analysis. I know that there is work still to be done that will bring more women's narratives from Logan to light. By making individuals more consciously aware of the social and ideological roots of their self-understanding, they are able to alter, reject, or make more secure their tentative views of the world (Dhunpath, 2000). As the Logan narratives elucidated:

> Narratives can illuminate how, in an individual life, different dominant ideologies and power relations in society are maintained, reproduced, or subverted. When we examine society through the lens of the individual, we can better understand society and resist hegemonic tendencies. (Bloom 2000, p. 324)

African American female voices are largely absent from the literature on independent/private schools. This suggests that research needed to further explore the lives of African American women in this context. I will continue to integrate my own experiences, and as I did with the independent study that I conducted with Malika, and I will suggest the creation of programs that educators can craft to deliberately address the psychological effects of otherness, isolation, powerlessness, and the phenomena of "acting" that Cookson and Persell (1991); Fordham (1991); Proweller (1998); Tatum (1997); Datnow and Cooper (1997); Horvat and Antonio (1999), Alexander-Snow (2000); Bergin and Cooks (2002); and Arrington *et al.* (2003) suggest occur in these institutions.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this dissertation was the location of the Group Conversation. After transcribing the Life History Interviews, I knew how difficult Logan had been for some of the women. I wondered if being on campus would affect the women's willingness to share their stories. I came to the decision to have the Conversation at Logan after speaking with each woman. Through private conversations with the more apprehensive participants, I learned that while the memories of their four years were tough, returning to Logan could possibly bring more clarity and reconciliation. Additionally, giving those who could not articulate why they had not returned to Logan an opportunity to do so, and allowing those who had returned annually

an opportunity to revisit the school that they love, was another benefit to having the Conversation at Logan.

Another limitation was that the Group Conversation was audio- and videotaped. Each woman consented to the tapings of the Life History Interview and the Group Conversation: however, on the day of the Group Conversation, one woman expressed a concern about the camera, fearing that she would not be able to talk and "say what she really wanted." I used this opportunity to reiterate that the videotaping of the Conversation would help with transcribing the conversation. This participant consented and, throughout the Conversation, most of the women (except for one) appeared to be even more outspoken than in their Life History Interview. I suspect that this was because the Conversation provided an opportunity to be heard by more women, which supports what Brock (2005) found in her study with African American women.

Third, a disadvantage associated with interviewing friends is that they will only tell me what they want me to know, and this information is *their* interpretation of particular events. It is the individual's conceptualization of essences associated with the phenomenon in her life that is the most valuable, and a womanist theoretical perspective allows for multiple experiences and perspectives to coexist within the same space. Another challenge for me was limiting my commentary throughout the interview. While I have included a piece of my own Logan experience (the womanist perspective allows my voice to be heard along with the other women), I wanted to be sure that I did not make my story their story. As a Logan graduate, I can remember many of the experiences Malika, Nia, and Sanaa recalled in their interviews. However, I had to

restrict my responses (particularly in the Life History Interviews) to simple nods that encouraged the women to continue to tell their stories (Peterson, 1997).

Fourth, Carol's absence from the Group Conversation left the group a bit saddened. They were looking forward to meeting the first African American female graduate from Logan. However, Carol was there in spirit and I sent her a Group Conversation Booklet and Thank You so that she knew how important she was in this research endeavor.

Last, the school does not maintain accurate demographic records containing the race and ethnicity of its graduates. This made it challenging to locate participants for the study and to obtain statistical information such as the number of African American female graduates, for example. I obtained these data using yearbooks and consulting tenured Logan faculty and staff.

Additional questions emerged as a result of this study: Are there other female graduates from Logan who have stories to tell? What is Logan's responsibility for caring for all students, particularly African American women? Can this research influence private school policy and procedures? Similarly, can this research influence programs like ABC in how they support African American students? Last, can this research endeavor be useful to African American girls in public institutions. Future research endeavors should address these questions as well as extend the life history interview to include more graduates of Logan.

The stories of the Logan graduates suggest several responses to the above referenced questions. First, six of the eight participants attended public elementary and middle schools prior to attending Logan for high school. Therefore, their public school

careers helped to shape their identities and laid the foundation for future identity formation. While this time period was not the subject of this inquiry, it is important to revisit those years in future studies. Likewise, it is possible for African American women who attend public high schools to experience feelings of isolation and powerlessness, for example, and they, too, must develop appropriate survival techniques to navigate that terrain. The womanist foundation of this study allows multiple voices to be heard, thus future research should include the experiences of African American girls in public schools.

Second, it was made abundantly clear that Logan must take better care of African American women and support the families of these women. Women, at various times in the Life History interview, referenced learning that Logan would not positively contribute to their ethnic and racial socialization. In this regard, Logan is removed from having any responsibility for caring about us as ethnic and racial beings. I believe that Logan does have a responsibility to provide avenues for African American women to explore their African American selves without ridicule or censorship. Additionally, our parents, in most cases, were not prepared for the academic and social pressures that we would endure and were not prepared to support us in the way that we needed. Likewise, Logan has a responsibility to our parents to take a critical look at the curriculum and advisement of African American women. Logan must understand that they interrupt the psychological injury that this research demonstrates occurs in the private boarding school.

Conclusions

It is important to reiterate that the goal of this research was not to suggest that the experiences of the eight women in this study are representative of all African American women who attended predominantly white private schools. It is, however, noteworthy that the women's experiences resonated with the literature that was used to initiate the Group Conversation. King and Mitchell's (1995) study found similar results. The Black mothers saw their experiences loving, raising and educating Black sons echoed in the literature of African Americans. This point cannot be overemphasized, as at many points the women's narratives in this study were as lyrical, poignant and as rhythmic as the poetry Nikki Giovanni and Maya Angelou!

All of the women in this dissertation recognized that an appreciation of their culture was absent from their learning experiences. If it was present, they created it on their own. Ladson-Billings (1994) suggests that culturally relevant teaching fosters the types of social interactions in the classroom that support the individual in the group context. When students feel that they are a part of a collective effort (i.e., feel a part of the school community, and not marginalized), their sense of humanity and dignity is honored and they are more likely to have positive academic and social experiences. Culturally relevant teaching promotes self-worth and self-concept in a very basic way, through acknowledgment of an individual's worthiness to be a part of a supportive and loving group (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

I believe that an educative process must develop critical thinking and self-reflection in young African American women. A critical understanding of literature, history, media, and current events leads to critical action. This critical action can range

from developing and maintaining a strong sense of self, to designing a program for African American girls who attend a private, predominantly white boarding school, and perhaps even to founding an African American all-girls academy focused on leadership and civic engagement. At the conclusion of Malika's pilot study interview, I asked her if she would change anything or add to her experiences at Logan Academy. She said, "more black teachers. More black curriculum. Just much more diversity. And I would have actually liked somebody to take a true interest in me." When a young African American woman learns to think critically about the messages she receives regarding her culture, history, beauty and self-worth, she is more likely to become actively involved in social change. Additionally, understanding the unique experiences of African American girls and women in environments where they are among the minority will provide insight into the development of methods to cope with and navigate those environments.

Malika and I talk often. She and I continue to believe that safe spaces for African American women are important in allowing women to explore their creativity and to problem-solve. Notably, however, the new tools gained while in the safe space may not be used immediately, but later in life.

Application of the womanist perspective allows us to use liberation tools/strategies that work for the problem that we are trying to address. For example, Malika was able to realize that the manner in which three of her white male colleagues treated her at her job was very similar to the way some white students at Logan had treated her fifteen years earlier. For example, the white males formed an alliance in much the same way that a class of white Logan students shared a Chemistry test amongst themselves, ignoring Malika. Malika was a manager and equal in rank to her male

colleagues, and yet she was excluded from decision-making processes. When she challenged them, she was labeled as emotional and loud, and so she stopped challenging their behavior altogether. In one of our many conversations, I asked her if her actions reminded her of anything. She paused and said, "I can't let this happen again, can I?" It was at that moment that her past Logan experience came to bear on events in her adult and professional life. Malika committed herself to be her own advocate, and while her job did not offer safe spaces in the same way that many of us created at Logan, she utilized what she had learned in high school through her independent reading of African American literature to address obstacles in her work and to be loud in a way that prohibits her voice from being silenced again.

At the beginning of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston writes:

> Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly. (Hurston 1937, p. 1)

The act of telling one's personal story and choosing what elements to share and to omit is a courageous and emancipatory act. By telling her story, a woman begins to shed the baggage that she has carried, and she begins to understand the multilayered meanings of her experiences and how they influence her adult life. Surely, there are elements of each participant's experience that were not shared with me. Yet, their *active* silence or, as Hurston suggests, their "remembering and forgetting" are all liberating actions. By choosing to conjure their memories of Logan (and, by extension, other oppressive environments) these women will know that there is validity in their stories.

As King and Mitchell (1995) suggest at the conclusion of *Black Mothers to Sons*, "we need to anticipate and move beyond survival to a liberated, collective future" (p. 91). The individual narratives presented in this study, elucidate survival techniques the participants created, however, it was in the Group Conversation that these skills were shared as a way "of knowing the Black Experience" (King and Mitchell, p. 3) and as the impetus for future activism from the participants. King and Mitchell envisioned their Group Conversation to provide an avenue for Black mothers to discuss raising Black sons that would "improve the black condition…Therefore, this inquiry is more that a mere examination or passive recording of black mother-to-son relationships" (p. 5). I, too, hope that the participants in my study understand the deeper meaning of their time spent in boarding school, and how to actively engage their shared experiences for social change.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Name	Years at Logan	Current Age	Family Resources*	Elementary Education	Post-Secondary Education	Current Employment	Years Away From Logan
Carol	70-73	53	Less than Enough	Public	none	Army	35
Vivian	73-76	49	Less than Enough	Public	BA	Homemaker	2
Sophia	73-76	49	Enough	Public	BA	Telecommunications	4
Rashida	82-86	38	Enough	Private	BS, MD	Wholistic Medicine	17
Joan	83-87	39	Enough	Public	BA	Telecommunications	20
Malika	86-90	36	Less than Enough	Public	Some college	Student and Homemaker	9
Tiffany	87-91	36	Enough	Private	BA, MA, Ph.D.	Educational Consultant	9
Nia	94-98	27	Enough	Public	Some college	Pastry Chef and Textile Artist	9
Sanaa	94-98	28	More than Enough	Private	BA, MFA, JD	Lawyer	2

* The interview question was phrased in the following way: "Tell me about the resources in your home?" Most of the women had a difficult time using terms like upper, middle, and lower class. Although Malika described herself as "poor" another women needed clarification. I said, "Growing up, did you have more than enough, enough, or less than enough financial resources in your home."

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

Georgia State University
Department: College of Education – Educational Policy Studies
Informed Consent Form

Project Title: "Survival is Not an Academic Skill:" Exploring How African American Female Graduates of a Private Boarding School Craft an Identity

Principal Investigator: Joyce Elaine King, Ph.D.
Student Principal Investigator: Tiffany Simpkins Russell, Ph.D. Candidate

I. Introduction/Purpose

You have been asked to take part in a research study. This study explores the experiences of Black females who attended a mostly white boarding school in a northern city. You are invited to join because you are a Black female who went to Logan Academy. Eight women will be asked to be in this study. Joining will require six hours of your time.

II. Procedures

You will be interviewed one time for three hours in a face-to-face interview. You will take part in a Group Conversation on October 11, 2008 at Logan Academy for three hours. You must pay for any expenses related to traveling to Logan. The interview will be audio taped. The Group Conversation will be audio taped and video taped. The Group Conversation will consist of all eight women in the study who have been previously interviewed. Small sections of your interview transcript will be chosen to include in a book to share with members of the Group Conversation. Any identifiable characteristics will be removed from the text before it is shared.

III. Risks

There is no discomfort or risk related to the interview or the Group Conversation. You will not have any more risks than you would in normal daily life.

IV. Benefits

Participation in this study may not benefit you personally. Overall, we hope to obtain data about Black women's experiences in mostly white schools.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Your role in this research study is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop at any time.

VI. Confidentiality

Audiotapes and videotapes will be used to record the interviews and Group Conversation. The tapes will be kept in a locked safe in my home office. The interviews and Group Conversation transcripts will be analyzed using a code sheet, which will be stored separately from the data to protect privacy. The audiotapes and the code sheet will be kept for one year and then destroyed. All typed materials will be kept on a computer, equipped with an up-to-date Symantec Anti Virus program with a built-in firewall and Windows Defender. All materials will also be backed-up by an 80-gig external hard drive. The data you provide during the interviews will be kept private to the extent allowed by law and not reported to others outside the research project in a way that names you. Data from the interviews and Group Conversation may result in published articles, books, dissertations, and presentations.

VII. Contact Persons

You may ask questions about the project of the PI, Tiffany Simpkins Russell (678-860-9497) a doctoral student in Educational Policy Studies or her advisor, Dr. Joyce E. King (404-413-8266). The Georgia State University Institutional Review Board can provide you with general facts about the rights of human subjects in research. Susan Vogtner in the Office of Research Compliance can be reached at (404) 413-3513.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep. If you are willing to volunteer for this research and be audio and video recorded, please sign below

_____ **I grant** consent for my interview transcripts to be used in books and other printed materials as long as my identity is protected

_____ **I do not grant** consent for my interview transcripts to be used in books and other printed materials

_____	_____	_____
Printed Name	Signature	Date

APPENDIX C

PILOT STUDY

Pear Trees and Poetry: Exploring How African American Female Graduates of a Private Boarding School Craft an Identity

Introduction

"So I think I felt like being Black made me invisible, and that's what their definition was of me…that my problems were not problems at all, at least not to them…"

Malika Dodson interview transcript

The purpose of this essay is to explore how the private boarding school experience at Logan Academy shaped the consciousness of two African American female graduates. This essay endeavors to explore what effect, if any, did the reading of African American female authors in a school-sanctioned independent study have on the graduates' lived experiences. It is my goal to contribute to the body of literature centered on the experiences of African American women coming into their sense of self in the private school setting through the telling of personal stories—mine and those of Malika Dodson, the primary participant. Thus, this essay seeks to further examine the use of personal narratives in revealing the lived and shared experiences of African American women in distinctive environments such as the private boarding school. Malika Dodson and I attended Logan Academy between 1986-1990 and 1987-1991, respectfully, on full scholarships from two different private foundations. Special attention is given to

identifying the coping strategies that we employed while in the school environment using a womanist lens to examine the kinship networks that we created to support one another then and now.

Audre Lorde's comments at "The Personal and the Political Panel" of the Second Sex Conference (1979) are fitting when situating the purpose of this essay. Lorde suggests that women on the margins of society learn how to survive by acquiring unique skills and coping strategies:

> Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths (Lorde 1979, 99).

This quote resonated with me on a personal and pedagogical level. Personally, it has caused me to reflect on my experiences as an African American female graduate of a predominantly white independent boarding school. I often felt "outside of the structures" in much the same way that Lorde suggests occurs in majority environments and I often felt a kinship with other women who were also outside the circle. Personal narratives are pedagogical tools that name oppression and describe how one survives within oppressive environments. Lorde is suggesting that survival techniques, while used in an academic environment, are not the academic skills taught in the classroom, but are rather born out of an experience (often shared with other women) of oppression and otherness. This

essay examines how African American women crafted an identity while navigating the private school environment. I will first provide a background for this essay that highlights my experiences as a student at Logan Academy. I will then provide a review of the literature focused on African American women in private schools and an explanation of womanism as the theoretical perspective grounding this essay. Next, I will discuss the face-to-face interview with Malika and the emergent themes that we uncovered. I include blocks of text from her interviews as well as excerpts from selected African American female authors to expand the notion of personal narratives and texts and to allow Malika to be in dialogue with the women who helped shape her academic and personal life at Logan Academy. I conclude this essay discussing the limitations and implications for future narrative research studies.

Background

Logan Academy is a predominantly white, coeducational, private boarding school in the northeast. The term "predominantly white" refers to schools whose "student, faculty, staff, and administrative bodies were made up of mostly Euro-American white people and students of color are a numeric and curricular minority" (Banks 2005, 179). In the years since my graduation from Logan Academy, I have often reflected on my four years contemplating the meaning of my time at the school. What was missing from my educational experience and what did I gain? When I received my high school diploma and drove down the front hill, I remember thinking that I would return. I did not know in what capacity, but I knew that I would return to offer support to the African American students who came after me.

I received valuable academic enrichment at Logan Academy, but I also realized that there was something culturally absent from my experience. I was one of eight African American females (out of 400 students) during my first year in 1987 and there was only one African American faculty member on staff, who appeared disinterested in the Black kids. In fact, when asked if he would supervise a Multicultural Student Union he said that we did not need a group like that. In retrospect, having a group like *that* may have provided us with a space where we could talk about issues that were specific to our lives. At Logan, I often felt isolated from my home and felt like I had no one to turn for guidance. I needed additional avenues of support and encouragement and one of my white teachers recognized that. Her name was Marilyn Tompkins. She was also my dorm parent, English department chair and field hockey coach—all of these roles positioned her to observe how I adjusted to my new environment.

One afternoon in my junior year I asked Marilyn if she would teach an independent study that focused on reading literature written by women. I along with two other young women, one African American (Malika Dodson) and one white (Mary Brown), enrolled in the course. As the English department chair, she was keenly aware of the absence of the female voice from the curriculum, and more specifically, the African American female voice and supported us as we explore these silenced voices. It was during this independent study that I chose to read Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston for the first time. Malika chose writings by Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni and Mary chose writings by Virginia Woolf and the "Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. There was something about the way that Janie, the female protagonist, struggled to find meaning in her world that appealed to me.

Hurston's novel is about finding one's voice and it was my first exposure to the power feminine energy. While lying under a pear tree Janie grapples with God, relationships, love, marriage, and her femininity. Janie finds both clarity and uncertainty under the pear tree. Through Janie's character and with the support of Malika Dodson I was encouraged to wrestle with life's challenges, to think critically, to question, to protest, to unite, and to love myself fiercely! For these lessons I am extremely grateful to Marilyn and Malika for creating the space where the power and beauty of literature encouraged me to find my agency.

Since this independent study I have re-read Their Eyes Were Watching God countless times. I cannot name any other writer that resonates with me the way that Hurston does. The beauty of literature, of African American literature more specifically, is that it authentically speaks to our existence with honesty and creativity. Historical and current realities are brought to life through the written word (Gordon 1985). As such, I will use passages from African American female writers, namely Zora Neale Hurston, Nikki Giovanni, and Ntosake Shange, throughout this essay to assist me in telling a story and to illuminate Malika's personal narrative. The following passage is one of many that I will cite throughout this essay that aptly describes the coming of age process for me and other African American girls at Logan Academy in the late 1980's. Hurston says:

> Oh to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her? Nothing on the place nor in her grandma's house answered her. She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made (Hurston 1937,11).

Waiting for the world to be made. Perfect! Malika and so many other African American girls were waiting for the world to be made at Logan Academy. Many of us had come from urban areas and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than our white Logan peers. And for many of us, Logan Academy was our first experience living and working with white people. I received a full four-year academic scholarship to attend Logan Academy and had only visited the school once at the end of my eighth grade year. Some foundations would send multiple students from the same foundation to the same school, as was the case for Malika. I, however, attended Logan alone and when my parents dropped me off it would be months before I would see them again.

I will never forget the drive up to Logan. It was late August and I went to school early to attend field hockey preseason—a sport that I enjoyed but only played in eighth grade for one season. The scenery was beautiful. Sweet corn roadside stands and fruit stalls selling jams and watermelon dotted the two lane highways. This was the first and only time my grandmother came to Logan. She passed away during my junior year. My father drove, I sat in the passenger side, and my grandmother sat in the back. My mother was meeting us at Logan. She was a dental student and was living away from home during the week to attend classes. She would come home on the weekends. As we approached the town Logan was in I began to experience and uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach—a combination of excitement, fright, and nausea. I was able to alert my father who pulled over in enough time for me to vomit outside of the car—this act embarrassed me because I thought I was grown and beyond the acts of a child. I drove the in the backseat, lying in my grandmother's lap for the rest of the drive to Logan.

As we drove up the front hill, I did not know what to expect. Would I make friends? Would my classes be too difficult? When would I go home? As these questions whirled in my mind, I saw my mother waiting by her car and the moment she saw me she knew that I was terrified. She gave me a reassuring look that did not answer any of my unspoken questions, but her look told me that everything would be fine.

I chose to situate this essay using my own narrative because like Janie in Their Eyes Were Watching God I was filled with an uncontrollable urge to grow up, while still being a little Black girl. Additionally, I began with this story because this essay is as much about me as it is about other little Black girls on their way to Logan. Malika Dodson, the subject of this essay, is now a 36-year old professional in the mortgage industry who spent four years at Logan Academy between the years 1986 to 1990. Malika is my best friend and her stories help to illuminate the lived experiences of African American girls at Logan. As an African American female graduate of Logan Academy, I can recollect instances of prejudice, racism, and sheer exhaustion!—having to negotiate two worlds (at least) is a heavy load to bear. My experiences as a student and later teacher/administrator at this private school prompted me to question if there are other women who have experienced similar feelings while attending private schools. It is my belief that there are unique facets to an African American woman's experiences in private schools that are worthy of exploration.

Literature Review

In order to present Malika's story in context I must first offer a brief review of the literature centered on African American girls in private schools and in predominantly white educational environments. I intend for this review to continue the dialogue around

the literature concerning African American students as a whole in private elite boarding schools, and further the conversation centered on African American girls and their experiences in elite private schools. There is an absence of qualitative analysis of these experiences. This review is constructed around three major themes that emerged from the literature. The first section, At the Table, But Not Belonging discusses the "outsiders within" and the "acting white" phenomena. The second section addresses the themes of Myth of Sameness and Racelessness, and the third section explores notions that African American students endure Psychological Injury as a result of constantly having to negotiate the private school environment.

At the Table, But Not Belonging

Psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum's book, "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race (1997), is a collection of her own life experiences and her teaching about racism and racial identity, as well as her research on Black children and families in predominantly white settings. She suggests that while students of color are "invited" to the table, a true place at the metaphoric table has not been deliberately created for them in private schools. Therefore, African American students must create their own spaces where they are comforted and feel empowered. Alan Peshkin (2001) asserts that the natural orientation of an American school is towards individualism. Additionally, he suggests that the natural orientation of a predominantly white independent school mirrors the students who attend that school, the board that governs the school, and the parents and donors who financially support the school. Therefore, the curriculum the school embraces mirrors the culture of the majority population and the process of socialization in a predominantly white school involves the

shaping of the individual to fit a socially engraved perceptive, cognitive, and behavioral mold that is defined by the majority, thereby shaping how the individual perceives, thinks, and behaves in the world (Wilson 1978).

However, while African American students can create their own spaces as Tatum (1997) asserts, Cookson & Persell (1991) suggest that African American students do not possess all the qualities associated with empowerment like their white peers. "Thus it is possible to be instrumentally and culturally empowered through the possession of a prep school diploma and still be economically and socially disempowered because of one's class or racial position" (Cookson & Persell 1992, 220). Cookson & Persell (1991) further assert that African American students are positioned as outsiders within the larger institution and are burdened with having to "act upper class" in order to fit into the culture of an elite private school:

> A part of the burden may stem from the students' realization that they can only 'act' the part. In a racist society, non-White persons are not as likely to be accepted; similarly, in a society based on ownership or non-ownership of productive resources (class), persons or lower class, can only act, but never really be, upper class themselves (Cookson & Persell 1991, 223).

Likewise, Martha Southgate's (2002) novel The Fall of Rome further confirms the ethos of the private school environment as being divided along lines of class and race.

This phenomenon of acting is discussed above in terms of class; however, Datnow & Cooper (1997) and Bergin & Cooks (2002) discuss accusations of "acting white." The term first appeared in 1970 in the work of McCardle and Young (quoted in

Bergin & Cooks 2002). Fordham & Ogbu (1986) and Peshkin (2001) are among many others who are examining the phenomenon when studying the academic success and well-being of African American students in predominantly white environments. While avoidance of "acting white" can be seen as a form of resistance for some African American students (Bergin & Cooks 2002), a student who is accused of "acting white" faces banishment from African American students inside and outside the school community. Horvat & Lewis (2003) reexamine this phenomenon and suggest that African American peer networks aid in the maintenance of a Black identity. Some students they interviewed "played down" their academic success to their peers for fear of "acting white"; while others shared their academic success and reported being supported by their peers.

The Myth of Sameness and Racelessness

Fordham (1991) suggests that the dominance of a Eurocentric ethos in private schools challenges an African American identity by imposing a set of norms that are foreign to an African American worldview. Furthermore, in order to cope in the private school environment, African American students consciously and unconsciously assimilate into the dominant environment. The majority of Fordham's data are taken from African American students' and their parents' experiences of private schooling in six independent schools in New Jersey. Fordham suggests that African American students are expected "to validate that the schools they are attending are committed to inclusion" without taking into consideration the importance of their racial integrity (Fordham 1992, 475). The parents and students in Fordham's study indicated that a sacrifice must be made, that African American students must "give in a little" and "hold

on" until the end of their school careers (Fordham 1992, 477). By being asked to make this sacrifice African American students are simultaneously asked to deny their racial identity—a Black racial identity is in direct opposition to the culture of the predominantly white private school. By being "less Black" (through behaviors), students can make it through, but not without inner and outer conflict. Racelessness embraces a discourse that effaces African American adolescents' historical yet evolving racial and cultural identity and to reconstitutes it as "Other" in the private school context (Fordham 1991).

Congruent with the theme of racelessness is the myth of sameness. Arrington, Hall, and Stevenson (2003) conducted a qualitative study of African American students in private schools primarily consisting of individual interviews with 65 male and female students in grades 6-12 and focus groups with upper-school students. Through the interviews with white teachers and administrators an idea emerged from the teachers that

> in the interest of treating all children equally, many of them don't want to focus on racial and cultural diversity…which sends the message to students that since 'we are more alike that different' there is no need to discuss race and diversity" (Arrington et al 2003, 15).

This myth of sameness thwarts any discussion of race and cultural difference, and prohibiting African American students from expressing themselves may lead to psychological injury (Proweller 1998); Horvat and Antonio 1999)

Psychological Injury

Horvat and Antonio (1999) suggest that African American girls who attend private, predominantly white and upper class schools endure psychological injury by living out their lives as outsiders within the race-and-class defined school organization.

Alexander-Snow (2000) furthers this idea in her qualitative study of two African American female graduates of a historically white boarding school. Alexander-Snow's research focused on how African American female graduates are prepared for "what they will encounter in traditionally white colleges and universities (TWCU)" (Alexander-Snow 2000, 110). Data suggested that the graduates were socially and academically prepared—one of the women enrolled at a TWCU and the other at an HBCU (historically Black college and university). However, Alexander-Snow's study found that the two African American female subjects reported being ostracized and alienated at their boarding school and when they were not fighting for respect in the dorms, they were fighting for a place in the curriculum.

Amira Proweller's (1998) ethnographic study of Best Academy uncovered similar themes. Best is "a historically elite, private, independent, single-sex high school for girls" (Proweller 1998, 5). Proweller's data collection consisted of participant observations and interviews with faculty, auxiliary staff, thirty-four students, and fifteen single and coupled parents. Of the thirty-four high school juniors five were African American, one was Puerto Rican, and one was Native American. The strength of Proweller's study lies in the thick description she uses when allowing the girls to tell their personal stories. Proweller includes large blocks of unedited text, primarily from the white girls, to allow them to respond to the interviewer's questions throughout the study. On the other hand, the reader does not hear the voices of the girls of color in the same way. For example, chapter four is dedicated to race at Best Academy and it is in this chapter that we meet African American girls, Wanda, Tess, and Lucy. There are limited first-person narratives as Proweller remarks, "African American students express that

they feel most comfortable with their black peers whom they are able, as they narrate, to be 'true to themselves'" (Proweller 1998, 123). In this sense the voices of the girls of color are further silenced as Proweller speaks for them. When Proweller includes the voices of girls of color at Best Academy she finds that not only do Black girls struggle with their dual identities—who they are at Best and who they are outside of the Academy—she also illustrates that "African American youth are inescapably positioned as expert witnesses to life on the 'other' side" (Proweller 1998, 160). These assumed and prescribed roles further marginalize African American girls.

Lisa Jackson (1998) suggests that as a result of this psychological injury the self is altered to internalize what the African American girl sees and hears about herself and how she sees herself fitting into or sitting on the margins of the larger school community. Jackson interviewed African American women in predominantly white institutions who report having to fight two battles—being Black and female—while trying to navigate their Blackness within these institutions.

Kathryn Riley's (1982) study, grounded in a feminist perspective, endeavors to respond to the psychological injury theme by making "women visible in fields where they have been previously ignored or overlooked" (Riley 1982, 63). This "making visible" process shows Black girls speaking for themselves in a south London inner-city girls' school. The young women discuss topics of gender roles, teachers, sexuality, and mothering their own children, to name a few. Riley (1982) tells a story using the words of the girls in much the same way that Lorene Cary's (1991) novel Black Ice tells the story of a young African American girl's acceptance and matriculation into an elite private school in New Hampshire. Cary's narrative draws in the themes discussed

above—fear, powerlessness, outsiders within—into an account that is reminiscent of other coming of age stories.

Theoretical Perspective—Womanism

The theoretical perspective that grounds this study is womanism, as it is the lens that allows for multiple experiences and stories to exist equally. Womanism is grassroots, vernacular, and related to everyday people. According to Layli Phillips (2006)

> womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension (Phillips 2006, xx).

Author/educator Michele Russell (1982) recognized that the conventional curriculum was inappropriate because it did not resonate from the experiences of the African American women in her class at the Detroit Downtown YMCA. She learned that teaching must pull on the daily experiences of simply *being* [emphasis is mine], one that places daily life as the principal subject of inquiry. By using womanism as the theoretical perspective undergirding this essay I am suggesting that research must also pull on the daily experiences of being and expose daily life in the private boarding school setting.

Though the term womanism surfaced 1979 with Alice Walker, a womanist way of being in community with the world has existed before there was a term to define it. While Phillips (2006) has "defined" womanism, she suggests that the definition of womanism is continually evolving because it is constantly under construction and the women within womanist discourse contribute to the growth of the perspective.

Womanism encourages emotional flexibility and is committed to the survival and wholeness of all people. As such, womanism functions by encouraging dialogue around various methods of social change and allows for the movement between methods depending on what works to achieve harmony. I am using womanism as a theoretical perspective to "recover our traditions, to attain equality, and to give expression to our social, political, and cultural contributions to American history and scholarship" (Davis 1999, 365).

Additionally, the concept of dialogue is central to how Olga Davis (1999) connects the southern kitchen to the academy. She suggests that the kitchen on the southern plantation represented a confined space where African American women were relegated to serve the master and the plantation's needs. The kitchen was where one would witness gender differences played out—white women used the kitchen to further dehumanize African American women. The kitchen also represented separation by its removal from the rest of the house. Davis asserts "like the southern plantation kitchen, the Academy is a historically located space of racialized and gendered oppression and domination" (Davis 1999, 370) and that as we create safe spaces for ourselves in these environments we are blurring the boundaries that have once confined us. Like womanist dialogue, this act of blurring is a revolutionary act and this essay explores how African American women altered the space of the elite private school to better manage their time spent at the institution.

Davis (1999) further suggests that the kitchen represented "a place of creativity" (Davis 1999, 368) where African American women utilize multiple literacies to communicate with one another (Richardson 2002). Elaine Richardson uses the term

literacies to include "vernacular resistance arts…that are created to carve out free spaces in oppressive locations such as the classroom, the streets, the workplace…" or the private school (Richardson 2002, 678). Though African American women were being watched, they strategically created ways to make the space of the kitchen positive. African American women talked at the kitchen table about their lives and struggles. They interrogated the dominance of the plantation. They planned their revolution and most importantly, the kitchen represented a space where they could resist without fear of reprisal and with the support of their peers. Logan Academy, at times, represented unfamiliar terrain and was a space where Blackness was not appreciated or acknowledged. Within Logan, African American women created their own safe spaces to discuss who they were and what they were experiencing on a daily basis. Davis suggests that scholarship is a form of activism, thus the stories that African American women shared while at Logan and after they depart through reflection is a form of activism as well.

The Interview

As a graduate of Logan Academy and former teacher, it was not difficult to build rapport with school personnel. I still maintain very close relationships with some of my high school friends; therefore, finding a participant for this study and gaining informed consent was not a challenge. Malika Dodson and I have been friends since 1987 and while Malika was one year ahead of me at Logan Academy, we engaged in the same school activities which included playing on the field hockey team and developing the independent study in female literature to name a few. At the time of the interview Malika was a 33-year old executive in the mortgage industry living in a northern city. She

attended Logan Academy on a full four-year scholarship from a private foundation. Malika is the youngest of four children and was the only one to attend Logan Academy. In the interview Malika said:

> I just remember being very poor…my parents were really struggling at that time. And poor in a sense of not even being able walk *into* a mall. Yeah! I never even picked up a tennis racket until I went to Logan Academy. I never picked up a basketball or played any sport until I went to Logan Academy. It wasn't that I never thought about it, but it was because we didn't have the resources in the public school system – we don't have access to that stuff. Grass! Where?

Malika said that she enjoyed the interviewing process, which consisted of two face-to-face interviews totaling two and one half hours. Malika also remarked about how therapeutic this process was and that if I did not stop her she would continue to remember more about her experiences. Malika trusted me with intimate details of her life and has confidence in me to tell her story. As a womanist researcher I respect this role and it is important to note that the interviews occurred in the quiet morning hours at Malika's kitchen table where we were equals, both trying to understand our shared and sometimes divergent experiences.

Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God opens with Janie returning to Eatonville, Florida after being on the muck with her third husband Tea Cake. Her return and the way that she returned caused quite a stir in the community. Townspeople wondered where she has been, yet Janie chose to remain silent only telling her best friend Pheoby why she has returned. It is through the intimate conversation between Janie and Pheoby that we learn about Janie's past, how she found love, and how she finally found

her voice. In much the same way that Janie told Pheoby her story "Mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf," (1937, 6) Malika trusted me to listen and retell hers.

Discussion

I coded Malika's interview transcripts for emergent themes and the following themes emerged from Malika's interviews: the independent study as a safe space where ideas of beauty and self-worth were explored; psychological injury; sameness/racelessness; and community. For each of the above themes I was able to refer to exemplar quotes from Malika's interview transcripts. The literature on African American women in private/independent schools previously reviewed and literature written by African American women is used to situate Malika's comments in a womanist and literary dialogue.

The Independent Study as a Safe Space

When I asked Malika to reflect on her reading of Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God she commented on several themes in the text that resonated with her. She said that she was most moved by Janie's resilience—her ability to endure hardship yet remains unbroken. Malika said, "the way he [Jody] tried to just crush her [Janie]…just crush her spirit, her drive, her desire to live…" reminded her of instances when she felt devalued and defeated. Whether it was an administrator whispering in her ear at graduation day, "Malika, I did not think that you would make it this far," or other acts of subtle and overt discrimination that she faced, voicing those feelings *through* [emphasis is mine] Hurston made her see that her experiences, while they are her own, are shared by other African American women at different times and in different places. For Malika,

when she felt informed and when she felt her experiences were validated, she felt beautiful. Through the independent study we were able to use the literature we read to expand our ideals of beauty. While Malika thought the Their Eyes Were Watching God was "one of the most beautiful stories [she] had ever read" she also understood that her own beauty as a Black woman was clearer because the readings provided a model on which to base her standards. Malika said she never dated at Logan and:

> to be reminded that not only are you beautiful but you are the bomb. You are the queen of the earth. That was something absolutely new to me and I'm not going to lie. I immediately fell in love with Maya and I Know Why a Caged Bird Sings. And I just couldn't understand why I wasn't forced to read this in high school. I was like oh my God, do you realize what I missed? Just the beauty…to me the book talked so much about beauty within and physically. The energy was so beautiful.

Malika had a similar response when she discussed Nikki Giovanni's poem "Ego Trippin." She sat trying to remember the verse that she loved and stated:

> I remember Nikki saying, 'I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal I cannot be comprehended except by my permission.' I never ever had this kind of confidence in myself. 'I mean…I…can fly/like a bird in the sky…'

Malika cites the spring semester of her senior year that she started feeling empowered and she said that this was as direct result of the independent study. She began to feel more confident in her abilities as a student, a young actor (she often performed in school plays), and as a woman with a voice. Witnessing confident women in the literature allowed Malika to see the confidence in herself:

> I never even knew that I was a phenomenal woman until I read that book and that poem that I was like you are so worth every ounce of who you are. And people need to know that. It completely changed my life. You could see that I am that way today. But I wasn't that way then.

When I asked Malika to explain what she meant when she stated "I wasn't that way then" she said:

> …Confident. Driven. All those things that I probably should have gotten when I was a freshman it would have completely changed my whole outlook of Logan. Had someone taken the time or even introduced these concepts and writers and made this part of the curriculum…wow! I love to read and The Catcher in the Rye is probably one of my favorite books. Flowers in the Attic, Lord of the Flies, War and Peace. I like Walt Whitman and I was introduced to some things I probably never would have read had I not gone to Logan and I loved all of that. Shakespeare – I absolutely love Shakespeare. Those are all wonderful, but they didn't do for me what Maya [Angelou] and Nikki Giovanni did because a lot of the books that we did read forgot about women…so there wasn't even a hint of woman-ness…just appreciating yourself as a woman or hearing another women's stories to make you feel driven or just plain good about yourself because I think in that environment you need that. You need that as a woman.

Psychological Injury

Malika spent a large amount of time reflecting on her first year at Logan, recounting negative encounters with racism, invisibility, and what it felt like to be powerless. I sensed anger and injury. She focused on an incident when her white roommate Molly stole money from her. Malika felt that she was treated differently because she was Black and there was also an elitist assumption that whatever Molly took can be replaced by Malika's parents. Malika remembers…

> So that $20 meant so much to me, and I'll never forget – I came into the room and I sat my purse down because my mom was on the phone. This was after the book incident. I had just come from the mailbox and I went to the bank and I put the money in my pocketbook, answered the phone,

> and when I came back to the room, my money was gone. And who was going to help me? I will never forget that. That was the worst feeling in my entire life because I thought now I can't buy detergent and now I can't wash my clothes. And I know my mother can't send me another $20 – not for another week or two.

Malika confessed, "but that first year was really, really hard because I realized racism is for real. It wasn't just something I learned in books and wrote papers about and plays in sixth grade." Malika felt her Blackness meant that she was insignificant when reflecting on another time when Molly stole from her. This time it was her English book. Malika involved her dorm parent with the hopes of a resolution, but soon realized "for real what the word nigger meant" and that her belongings and her sense of self were of no consequence.

> And even at that young age (I was only 13 years old and my birthday was a couple of days later) I was like how am I supposed to live in this room with this woman when she stole my stuff?... She was a kleptomaniac…. Make her pay for stealing what I barely even have! That was such a reminder that I was a nigger, but even much more of a reminder that to them I was just a poor nigger.

Reminiscent of Ntozake Shange's lady in green in <u>for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf (1975)</u>:

somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff
& didnt care enuf to send a note home sayin
i waz late for my solo conversation
or two sizes too small for my own tacky skirts
what can anybody do wit somethin of no value on
a open market/ did you getta dime for my things/
hey man/ where are you goin wid alla my stuff/
this is a woman's trip & i need my stuff/ (49)

Sameness/Racelessness

Nanny in Their Eyes Were Watching God says:

> Ah didn't want de white folks tuh hear 'bout nothin' lak dat. Dey knows too much 'bout us as it is, but dey some things dey ain't tuh know. Dey's some strings on our harp fuh us tuh play on an sing all tuh ourselves. Dey thinks wese all ignorant as it is, and dey thinks wese all alike, and dat dey knows us inside and out, but you know better. (Hurston 1937, 29).

Malika discussed how she felt very visible at times, while also feeling invisible to many of her white peers and teachers. Being Black, for her, was a novelty among the Logan community when it was popular or convenient. However, whenever they chose, Malika's color was erased thus, positioning her somewhere in the middle with a muddy consciousness and racial and ethnic identity. Malika understood Nanny's statement that "dey thinks wese alike" because she "didn't feel like any of the teachers there knew [her]." Furthermore, Malika felt that she was not prepared for Logan and the school was not prepared for Malika and for the multilayered self that she brought to the school. Malika stated the following:

> I wasn't prepared financially, I wasn't prepared mentally, I wasn't feeling like I was prepared academically. I'm starting to think back and I'm like you know this is ridiculous that I can't even believe that Mr. Brown [CEO of private foundation] spent all this money to prepare me for college and I am 33 and I don't have a college degree. And it's partly my fault. Life gets in the way, and I'm not going to blame Logan, but I don't feel like Logan prepared me at all. I absolutely don't.

Community

> A community is an environment where you can find a home in each other's heart and soul. It is a living entity with spirit as its anchor, where a

> group of people are empowered by one another, by spirit, and by the ancestors to be themselves, carry out their purpose, and use their power responsibly. Without all these elements, community suffers from power struggles, irresponsibility, and lack of accountability (Somé 1999).

This notion of community that Somé discusses is akin to the type of community womanists strive to create. In many ways, African American students at Logan were creating their own community. On more than one occasion, Malika has stated that it was the group that some of the African American students formed that saved her. We sat together in the cafeteria and visited each other's homes on long weekends and holidays. Malika felt that the "Black table," as it was called, represented safety for her and other African American students who chose to sit there. Malika credits her "survival" at Logan Academy to the community that she and other African American students created within the sometimes hostile and foreign environment. Malika remembers our friend Jacob who she knew before attending Logan as they were from the same city and attended Logan on the same scholarship. When Malika and Jacob reflect on their Logan experience, she learns that the community that Black students created at Logan was integral for Jacob's success as well:

> So when we talk about Logan, honestly the only thing that Jacob can talk about regarding Logan is us. He talks about us because that was the most profound and rewarding piece of his Logan experience. I never hear him talking about anything or anyone else. We took a couple of classes together and he struggled in math and I was there to help him.

Implications and Conclusions

According to Bloom (2000)

> narratives can illuminate how, in an individual life, different dominant ideologies and power relations in society are maintained, reproduced, or

> subverted. When we examine society through the lens of the individual, we can better understand society and resist hegemonic tendencies (Bloom 2000, 324)

By making individuals more consciously aware of the social and ideological roots of their self-understanding, they are able to alter, reject, or make more secure their tentative views of the world (Dhunpath 2000). A disadvantage associated with interviewing a friend is that Malika will only tell me what she wants me to know and this information is *her* [emphasis is mine] interpretation of particular events. It is the individual's conceptualization of essences associated with the phenomena in her life that is the most valuable and a womanist theoretical perspective allows for multiple experiences and perspectives to coexist within the same space. There were things I did not know about Malika's experience. She graduated in 1990 and we maintained a close friendship throughout our college and postgraduate years and yet I had never heard the story if her graduation day until the interview. I was at Logan at the time and I attended her graduation. I shudder to think of other events that wounded her that she is still holding onto.

Another challenge for me was limiting my commentary throughout the interview. While I have included a piece of my own Logan experience—the womanist perspective allows my voice to be heard along with Malika's—I wanted to be sure that I did not make my story her story. The act of bracketing is difficult to do particularly when the researcher is so close to the topic and to the subject as well. As a Logan graduate, I can remember many of the experiences Malika recalled in her interview. However, I had to

restrict my responses to simple nods that encouraged Malika to continue to tell her story (Peterson 1997).

There are many more stories to tell and subsequent studies will explore the life histories of other African American women's her experiences as well as the experiences of seven other graduates of Logan Academy. My future research will take me back to this site to continue to study the experiences of African American graduates. The absence of African American female voices from the literature on independent/private schools suggests that there is a need to explore the lives of these women. I will continue to integrate my own experiences, and like the independent study I took with Malika, I will suggest the creation of programs educators can craft to deliberately address the psychological effects of otherness, isolation, powerlessness, and the phenomena of "acting" that Cookson & Persell (1991); Fordham (1991); Proweller (1998); Tatum (1997); Datnow & Cooper (1997); Horvat and Antonio (1999), Alexander-Snow (2000); Bergin & Cooks (2002); and Arrington et al (2003) suggest occur in these institutions.

Ladson-Billings (1994) suggests that culturally relevant teaching fosters the kinds of social interactions in the classroom that support the individual in the group context. Students feel a part of a collective effort designed to encourage academic and cultural excellence. Culturally relevant teaching honors the students' sense of humanity and dignity. Self-worth and self-concept are promoted in a very basic way, by acknowledging the individual's worthiness to be a part of a supportive and loving group. I believe that what is necessary is an educative process that develops critical thinking and self-reflection in young African American women. A critical understanding of literature, history, media, and current events leads to critical action. When asked if she would

change anything or add to her experiences at Logan Academy, Malika said, “more black teachers. More black curriculum. Just much more diversity. And I would have actually liked somebody to take a true interest in me.” When a young African American woman learns to think critically about the messages she receives regarding her culture, history, beauty, and self-worth, she is more likely to become actively involved in social change. Additionally, understanding African American girls’ and women’s unique experiences in environments where they are among the minority will provide ways of coping with and navigating those environments.

Malika and I continue to believe that safe spaces for Black women are important in allowing women to explore their creativity and to problem solve. What is interesting to note, however, is that the new tools gained while in the safe space may not be used immediately, but later in life. Womanism allows us to use whatever liberation tools/strategies work for the given problem we are trying to address when appropriate. For Malika, she was able to realize that how three of her white male colleagues treated her at her job was very similar to how she had been treated by some white students at Logan. The white males formed an alliance in much the same way that a Chemistry class of white Logan students shared a Chemistry test amongst themselves ignoring Malika, for example. Malika was a manager and equal in rank, yet she was still left out of the decision-making processes. When she challenged them, she was called emotional, so she stopped challenging their behavior altogether. I asked her if her actions reminded her of anything, she paused and looked at me and said, “I can’t let this happen again, can I?” It was at that moment that her past Logan experience came to bear on events in her adult and professional life. At her kitchen table, Malika committed herself to be her own

advocate and while her job did not offer safe spaces in the same way that the independent study did, she utilized what she had learned in high school through a love of literature to address obstacles in her work.

In the beginning of Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston says

> Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly. (Hurston 1937, 1)

The act of telling one's personal story and choosing what elements to share and to omit is not only a courageous act but also an emancipatory one. A woman begins to shed her baggage that she has carried and she begins to understand the multilayered meanings of her experiences and how they influence her adult life. Are there elements of Malika's experience that she did not share? Probably. Her *active* silence or as Hurston suggests, her "remembering and forgetting" are all liberating actions. When Malika chooses to engage her memories of Logan she can and will.

APPENDIX D

LIFE HISTORY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Sequence One—Background

1. Tell me about your family growing up.
2. Tell me about the resources in your home? Did you grow up with enough, more than enough, or less than enough financial resources in your home?
3. How did you come to know about Logan Academy?
4. What years did you attend Logan Academy?

Sequence Two—The Logan Experience

1. Describe the kitchen table metaphor. *An historian describes the kitchen on a slave plantation as a space of resistance. Even though African American women where relegated to serve the "master" and the plantation's needs, these amazing women transformed this space to resist oppression, to be in community with other African American women, and to plan and strategize*….does this metaphor resonate at all with your Logan experience?
2. Describe your private boarding school experience.
3. Can you describe your social adjustment at Logan? Tell be about your friends at Logan.
4. Did you ever miss home? How often did you get to go home? Can you describe your interaction with your friends and family at home?

5. How did you do academically at Logan?

Sequence Three—Post Logan

1. Tell me about your college experience.
2. What do you do for a living?
3. Have you been back to Logan since graduation? How often do you go back?
4. When you tell people that you attended a private boarding school how do they react?
5. You entered Logan as a little girl and left as a woman. As you reflect back to your Logan experience, how has it shaped you into the woman you are today?

Probing Questions

1. What kinds of activities were you involved in before high school?
2. Could you describe in as much detail as possible a situation in which your blackness was made very visible OR invisible?
3. Can you think of other times when you felt marginalized? Can you say more about those times?
4. Can you think of times when you felt a part of the school community? Can you say more about those times?
5. How did you deal/cope with those times when you did not feel a part of the school community?

Additional Probing Questions

1. Could you say something more about that?
2. Can you give me a detailed description of what happened?
3. Do you have further examples of this?

APPENDIX E

GROUP CONVERSATION PROMPTS

African American literature was used to explore the experiences of African American female graduates of Logan Academy. The prompts below were chosen based on their relevance to the lived experience of the African American women who wrote them. These prompts were discussion starters and meant different things to different women. Care was taken to choose literature by African American women that would bring about critical reflection with reference to the participants' shared experiences.

I began the Group Conversation by welcoming the women and thanking them for their time. We had informal introductions over lunch, but I asked each woman to introduce herself to the group. To begin the conversation, I handed out the Group Conversation Booklet (Appendix F) and allowed them some time to read the quotes. I asked if anyone had comments on the quotes from their peers.

When it was appropriate, I passed around a selected quote and asked the women to read it silently. I allowed a few moments to reflect quietly and then asked one volunteer to read the quote aloud. After the prompt was read, I waited for responses. When the conversation around the first prompts lagged or began to move in a different direction, I introduced the next quote using the same method.

The Group Conversation flowed naturally and the prompts simply served as the impetus. I have listed all the prompts below as well as a few follow-up questions that I had available to ask the group, if appropriate. We did not use all of the prompts, and I noted the prompts that were used in the Conversation.

Alice Walker, 1974

How was the creativity of the Black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years Black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a Black person to read or write? And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist. Consider, if you can bear to imagine it, what might have been the result if singing, too, had been forbidden by law. Listen to the voices of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Roberta Flack, and Aretha Franklin, among others, and imagine those voices muzzled for life. Then you may begin to comprehend the lives of our "crazy," "Sainted" mothers and grandmothers. The agony of the lives of women who might have been Poets, Novelists, Essayists, and Short Story Writers, who died with their real gifts stifled within them.

Audre Lorde, 1979 (Used in the Group Conversation)

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And that fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.

Zora Neale Hurston, 1923

…I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. For instance at Barnard. "Beside the waters of the Hudson" I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.

…The cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads…I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right or wrong.

Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me.

Zora Neale Hurston, 1937

Oh to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her? Nothing on the place nor in her grandma's house answered her. She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made (p. 11).

Sobonfu Somé, 1999

The goal of community is to form a diverse body of people with common goals and empower them to embrace their own gifts, selves, and nature. Community holds a space for all its members to work at becoming as close to their true selves as possible.

…people come together to fulfill a specific purpose, to help others fulfill their purpose, and to take care of one another. The goal of community is to make sure that each member is heard and is properly giving the gifts he or she has brought to this world. Without this giving, community dies. And without community, individuals are left without a place where they can contribute. Community is that grounding place where people share gifts and receive from others.

ntozake shange, 1975 (Used in the Group Conversation)

somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff
not my poems or a dance i gave up in the street
but somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff
like a kleptomaniac workin hard & forgettin while stealin
this is mine/ this aint yr stuff/
now why dont you put me back & let me hang out in my own self
somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff
& didnt care enuf to send a note home sayin
i waz late for my solo conversation
or two sizes too small for my own tacky skirts
what can anybody do wit somethin of no value on
a open market/ did you getta dime for my things/
hey man/ where are you goin wid alla my stuff/
to ohh & ahh abt/ daddy/i gotta mainline number
from my own shit/now wontchu put me back/ & let
me play this duet/ wit this silver ring in my nose/

Nikki Giovanni, 1973 (Used in the Group Conversation)

I sowed diamonds in my backyard
My bowels deliver uranium
the filings from my fingernails
are semi-precious jewels
On a trip north I caught a cold and blew my nose
giving oil to the Arab world
I am so hip - even my errors are correct
I sailed east to reach west - and had to round off the
earth as I went
The hair from my head thinned and gold was laid
across three continents

I am so perfect, so divine, so ethereal, so surreal
I cannot be comprehended
except by my permission

I mean ... I ... can fly
like a bird in the sky ...

Additional Prompts/Questions

1. Tell me what it was like to be a female student at your school.
2. Tell me what it was like to be an African American female student at this school.
3. What do you think your being African American meant to other students at Logan?
4. What do you think your being African American meant to your teachers in this school?
5. Tell me about the dating scene at Logan.
6. When I say the following words or phrases, what comes to mind? Is there anything more you want to say about any of these words:
    1. Community
    2. Acting white
    3. Self-esteem
    4. Self-worth
    5. Beauty
    6. Womanhood
    7. Blackness
    8. Home
    9. Relationships
    10. Spirituality

APPENDIX F

GROUP CONVERSATION BOOK

Labov (1997) found that narrative analysis also occurs when a group is exposed to the life history narratives others and can react to them in a group setting. Thus, the Group Conversation was also an opportunity to analyze the texts from the life history interviews. I excerpted passages from each of the participants' interviews and assembled them in a keepsake booklet. Each of the participants received their own page in the booklet, however their names were removed and they were not required to indentify which page was theirs. The women were asked to read the stories of their peers at the beginning of the conversation. I asked each participant to select a narrative that made an impression on them and share that with the group. According to Labov (1997) exposing the narratives of others further extends the richness of the narrative by making private stories public.

GROUP CONVERSATION

LOGAN ACADEMY
OCTOBER 11, 2008

sharing our stories...

Bese Saka

"sack of cola nuts"

symbol of affluence, power, abundance, plenty, togetherness, and unity…

many voices speaking as one!

Participant One
I would describe the Logan experience as defining. I think that in a private boarding school you really have an opportunity to define yourself at a very early age. And so the real question becomes whether you're ready to do that or not at that age. And for me, I know that I was because I've always been very self-aware. So there was also a lot of exploration in that process like, "Okay, well, am I this? Am I that?" But at the end of the day, I did know who I was, who I am, and by the time I graduated, I was sure of it and I think sure of it in a sense that when I went to college, college was a breeze.

It is important to realize that you're not a victim and not being a victim empowers us to make demands and to feel our power in a place, as opposed to feeling like a victim, like that you just go with the whim of the winds that blow. You can't make it through that without some kind of belief in who I am and what I can do. It may take you a while to realize it, to have the awareness and the presence of mind to articulate it, but it's in there; otherwise, you're squashed. You won't make it.

Home is home, but you can make home wherever you are. And that's a skill, because in college I went abroad; I had to learn that again. Home is where you are. And so I just have a real good way of creating my little home and the little cocoon that I live in through my environment, my room, or whatever it might be and I make home. Sometimes home is my car. But it's important. And I think home is a fundamental human need, and the ability to make it where you are is an extraordinary skill, a survival skill.

Participant Two
I remember when I got there because I thought I was smart, I was acting like I was smart so probably when people looked at me, they probably looked at me totally different.

My brother used to tell me I talk like a white girl. I used to say, "I speak the King's English, so if that means I sound like a white girl, then I sound like a white girl."

It was great for me. I think that in my particular case, Logan laid some foundations for me that I probably would not have gotten from public high school. I think I got a lot of confidence being at Logan. Independence, definitely. Definitely independence, because you're away. You have to do things for yourself. I think that when I left Logan…should I say if I had gone to XX High, because that's probably where I would have ended up…it would have just been a different road for me. I think it would have been a different road. It probably would have been a longer road. I probably would have been less focused on what I wanted to do…I think I would have been searching more about what I thought I wanted to do, not really knowing.

Participant Three
So I think I felt like being Black made me invisible, and that's what their definition was of me…that my problems were not problems at all, at least not to them…I would have actually liked somebody to take a true interest in me.

I never even knew that I was a phenomenal woman until I read that book and that poem that I was like you are so worth every ounce of who you are. And people need to know that. It completely changed my life. You could see that I am that way today. But I wasn't that way then.

…Confident. Driven. All those things that I probably should have gotten when I was a freshman it would have completely changed my whole outlook of Logan. Had someone taken the time or even introduced these concepts and writers and made this part of the curriculum…wow! I love to read and The Catcher in the Rye is probably one of my favorite books. Flowers in the Attic, Lord of the Flies, War and Peace. I like Walt Whitman and I was introduced to some things I probably never would have read had I not gone to Logan and I loved all of that. Shakespeare – I absolutely love Shakespeare. Those are all wonderful, but they didn't do for me what Maya [Angelou] and Nikki Giovanni did because a lot of the books that we did read forgot about women…so there wasn't even a hint of woman-ness…just appreciating yourself as a woman or hearing another women's stories to make you feel driven or just plain good about yourself because I think in that environment you need that. You need that as a woman.

Participant Four

How would I describe it? My private boarding school experience. I would say it was definitely an experience and I have a lot of good memories from Logan. The most that I think that I got from Logan was a good friend. And also more than the education and the learning and all that, you really learn how to deal with different kinds of people. I think a lot of my independence grew out of my experiences at Logan because I'm now and I've always been very independent.

You definitely have to recognize that in a lot of ways, Logan wasn't real life. It was like surreal. It was cool, but it was going to be over one day. It was going to be over. You just had to know that and keep moving…I think that's so important and so important of the experience with Logan is knowing how to get along. And I don't know if I emphasize that because being in corporate America, you have to know how to get along to get stuff done. Otherwise, you can't, I guess, fight every battle and just be – I don't know – just be so against everything. You've just got to learn how to fit in, at least for the moment, to get to the next day. And then you'll realize that what was so important yesterday, it wasn't today.

Blackness and Logan, you don't really put those words together except for maybe lack of. Yeah, maybe lack of. And also what might be interesting is that I think maybe a lot of the kids, a lot of the Black kids that do go to Logan…I want to say toned down their Blackness if you can say that…Not that being so Black is so bad, you know what I mean?

Participant Five

I did not date ever. I did not have a boyfriend ever. I didn't have my first boyfriend until I got to college. I wasn't really social.

In my freshman year I still had relaxed hair and was still pretty much trying to fit in. By the time we got to sophomore year, I'd given up completely on trying to fit in. So, it kind of turned into, "You want crazy? I will give you some crazy Black woman for you." My speech lately has become so relaxed just because I've had to speak so formally and carefully for so long…

Rough. It was rough. It was rough, rough, rough, rough because there was a part of me that wanted to fit in. And lot of it was reactionary because I didn't. So it was like, "Well, I don't fit in, I'm not going to fit in. You don't want to be my friend? Fine, but you're going to see me." It's hard enough growing up in a Black neighborhood as a Black woman and growing into your body and appreciating your hair and not considering yourself ugly and growing up with the color complex. It's exponentially harder, I think, to do that in an environment where nobody looks like you and the standard of beauty or what Logan's weird standard of beauty was like nowhere, not even in the same universe as the one you live in.

You can't tell me no. You can't tell me no. People been trying to tell me no since I was 11. You can't tell me no. I'm going to be fabulous. I don't care what you think. I don't care what you say. I'm going to be fabulous. I'm going to be happy. You're not going to convince me that I'm deluded. You're not going to convince me that I'm wrong. No. I'm the one saying no. No. No, no, no. Then you have the option of listening, or you can just walk away and move on out of my face.

Participant Six

As a whole, I think academically, of course, it was amazing. I think I was nurtured by the faculty. I think Logan did everything that they could do to make it a wonderful experience. I think where it was difficult was being a teenager growing up in an all white environment where you want to do things like date and be accepted.

In terms of interacting with other Black kids, it was very clear that they were family, but I knew that there was a vernacular that didn't come naturally to me. I knew that there were things that were just very easy for them so that means they have the stamp of legitimacy that I don't. So there was this girl who was white. She was this six foot tall Italian girl from the Bronx or something like that. To me, she was almost more legitimately Black than I was, because she would come in, and the way she was talking, and I remember being like, "Oh, I need to talk like that. I need some of that". So I tried so hard to put, "You know what I'm saying?" into everything, which is horrible because it's a verbal tick to this day. I remember my graduate advisor in college was like, "No, I do not know what you're saying."

In college, I got angry. I got very involved in community service. I guess when you're around more people who are like you, then what you say *is* Black enough, and the way you talk *is* Black enough, and "Oh, you guys aren't saying I talk white. You guys aren't saying all this stupid shit that little kids say in high school". All of a sudden it was, "Girl, please!" Whatever. No, this *is* the way we talk and it's fine.

I was definitely made to feel special at Logan, and I hope everybody had that experience. I hope everybody was made to feel that way.

Participant Seven
That was one of my best experiences. Coming from Philadelphia and not really having much experience with multicultural situations. In the beginning, I loved everyone. "Oh, you're so nice". Their big thing was my skin. "Your skin is so beautiful". "Okay, thanks". I thought it was a compliment until you realize that, "Why are they making such emphasis over your skin?"

And I remember once – I don't remember who the guy was. Someone called me "raisin" in the gym…But I just didn't understand the racial undertones and that everybody don't like you. They're really saying something bad to you…So one day at the dinner table, it just hit me. I don't even remember what this guy said. But whatever he said, he ended up with one of those big metal pitchers of milk all over him. I don't know…Maybe it's because of something I read because my English teacher he had us reading everything, and it may have been something I read. I don't know what it was. But I just started realizing that the people that you thought were complimenting you were really kind of joking with you. No, not joking with you but making a joke at your expense.

Mr. Allen told me I was flunking theology. He said, "Miss X you will not get by in life with that beautiful smile and those sparkling eyes. So let's get to work". So he found out I knew how to write poetry. I always wrote. So he told me, "Well, if you write such and such for me, and I like it, you're going to pass theology". He liked the book so much, he showed it to the English teacher. I still think about him now…But, when it comes to really having to say something, he made it possible for me to express myself. That might be when I started really becoming a little rebellious and taking notice of what people were saying to me. I think it was the talks that he and I had may have ignited that little bit of fire in me.

Participant Eight
I was up there at Logan, but *I* was up there. It didn't mean just because I was up there, they [my parents] had money to support me because they didn't. I used to have write home for money, $5.00 here, $5.00 there, so I was without quite a lot, and then looking around, and see everybody else. People just have everything pretty much everything they want and everything they need. That was conflicting for a while, to see the haves – what I consider haves – and have-nots, and people who were privileged and took for granted what they had, and here I am, like, "Oh, my God, if my dad could just send me $5."

One time, a whole group of us put together a play, and we asked if we could do it for Vespers and we did "A Raisin in The Sun." I think that was the biggest thing we did to keep our culture alive. We tried to do things like that. We tried to keep our hair the way it was. We tried to wear our styles…That's how we kind of stuck together. I corn-rowed my hair… it was hard. There was no place to find hair care products. Nothing. If we didn't bring it, we didn't have it. So, that was a struggle, too. Wow.

Yeah. I wanted to do well. It's not like the teachers made me feel stupid or anything or dumb or anything…I did well in sports and I felt like I was doing okay socially and I wanted to do well academically. But then after a while, I was really thankful that I made it through school and I was able to graduate. There was so many people that weren't able to do that.

I went there this past year, and maybe I saw one person I knew. The year before that, maybe I saw two people I knew. So I just wonder where all those people are. Everybody couldn't have disappeared off the face of the earth. I guess that's one of the things that's stayed with me down through my alumni years because I felt like that was such a rich part of Logan's history, and I'm not sure if they see it as that, and if they do, what are they doing about it?

I think the way I made it through… I did a lot of praying and things like that.

APPENDIX G

CONVERSATION WITH ZORA

If she were here, I believe that Zora Neale Hurston would understand and support the work that I am doing with African American women. She valued community and her anthropological research supported the continued growth of the people that were so dear to her. Zora's folk! Below, I have envisioned a conversation that I would have with her about my study.

Zora: As a Black woman, I applaud you and the women in your study! What made your interviews, life history interviews?

Tiffany: Life History interviews can span a person's life cycle, or they can encompass a portion of a life. Because I was most intrigued by the women's lives at Logan, the interviews focused on that period. Focusing on this 3-4 year span allowed for deep reflection and an opportunity for the women to revisit that time in their lives in methodological way.

Zora: Okay, why did you choose womanism and not Black feminism to ground your study? I don't fit easily into a box, you know that, Tiffany, so why such theories?

Tiffany: Zora, you know I know you don't fit into a box! Womanism is not rigid. I think that your life's work authentically speaks about the history and culture of African people and is womanist in nature. You thrived on dialogue! So does womanism. Your research focused on the stories people told you and on people doing what they do in everyday life. So does womanism. You understood that our ordinary lives were important. I brought your words into this study to show how much you meant to my growth as a woman. I think it was comsically ordained and when I did that, I learned that you spoke to other women in the same way. Zora, my sister, don't run away from such a term!

Zora: You use the words ordinary and mundane. Some people may wonder what is so important about studying ordinary people. How will you respond to this?

Tiffany: Yeah, I thought I would need to define these terms. When and where do we see oppression?

Zora: Well, everywhere and everyday…

Tiffany: Exactly. Patricia Williams said, "Like clockwork, black people must put aside the activities of everyday life and subject ourselves to the cyclical inspection point of

proving our worth, justifying our existence, and teaching our history, over and over and over again" (pp. 51-52) Why must *we* have to do this? Why must our lives be a constant negotiation of having to make others (whites) feel comfortable [read less afraid] of us? Why is that my problem?

Zora: Well, you know me. I would say that it is not your problem at all.

Tiffany: Well, you are right. My womanism helps me to understand that my focus needs to be on ending all forms of oppression. Well, my womanism also allows me to be mad. My womanism also gives me the tools to use when it seems I have to answer stupid questions about my hair, my skin, my nose. My womanism knows that because it is in everyday, mundane life with ordinary people that resistance happens! We need to recognize that these acts of resistance can serve as lessons.

Zora: Alright, I seem to have hit a nerve!

Tiffany: It is my soapbox. I feel that if more work was done to examine everyday life AND how people resist being acted upon, we scholars would learn more and have more strategies for challenging oppressive behavior and actions.

Zora: So what did womanism do for the women in the study?

Tiffany: Womanism created a space for their stories to exist. They knew that attending a private school made them unique within their communities, but they thought that was it. Their experiences were shared in a space where they could be teased out and examined. And where they began to make sense of things that they did not understand then, but understand better now.

Zora: You used a quilting metaphor when you were discussing how to present the narratives of the women. Quilting in the African American community is very significant. Can you say more about that? Does quilting relate to womanism?

Tiffany: Yes it does! The polyrhythmic nature of African American women's quilts speaks directly to the polyrhythmic nature of African American women's lives. We move in different directions at one time and overlap the threads of other women's experiences. Thus, quilting provides a non-linear way of examining women's lives that does not create "dichotomies, ambiguities, cognitive dissonance, distortion, and confusion in places where none exist" (Barkley Brown, 1989, p. 929).

Septima Clark once said, "I know I am not weaving my life's pattern alone. Only one end of the threads do I hold in my hands. The other ends go many ways linking my life with others." I know that my story is linked to the women in my study and one of my roles is that of weaver or quilt maker.

Zora: DuBois and Li (1967), King and Mitchell, (1995), and Brock (2005) used the Group Conversation method. Did you find anything different?

Tiffany: For me, the Group Conversation was an opportunity to be engaged in my study in a very real way. Brock said that she was not removed from her dialogue. Likewise, King and Mitchell's "Afrocentric group conversation method elicits reciprocal dialogue and creates the conditions for the researchers to learn with the participants about what 'we' do and to reflect on why 'we' do it (p. 5). These same concepts held true for me too. However, because my group comprised of women in their 50's to women in their 20's the Group Conversation provided a way to examine Logan over time and the choices we made over time as well.

Zora: Now that your study is over, are you pleased with what you found, because you still seem… restless…?

Tiffany: Restless? It is interesting that you use this word…

Zora: (Now smiling with and impish grin). Not restless in the sense of a grandmother telling her meddlesome granddaughter, "Go sit your busy body down somewhere!" No, I mean that you don't seem settled…that you ain't done.

Tiffany: ¡Yo tengo una inquietud! I have a restlessness for more! Even as I write this, I am reflecting on the stories the women shared with me. I am happy that I am able to share those stories with others. In that sense, I am pleased. But, I know that there is more work to be done!

APPENDIX H

A NOTE OF THANKS

I felt honored to have been chosen to tell the stories of the eight women in my study. At the conclusion of the Group Conversation, I presented each woman with a thank you card (at right) and a piece of amber that I handpicked while visiting the Dominican Republic. Amber has healing properties and promotes clarity of vision. It was my goal to convey my gratitude while also encouraging the women to continue their process of growth in all areas of their lives.

Words cannot express how grateful I am to you for sharing your time and positive energy. Without you, this dissertation study would not have been possible. Your life story will be forever etched on my heart. Please accept this small token of my gratitude. Let this amber charm serve as a constant reminder of your strength and creativity.

In the Spirit of Change,

Tiffany

Healing Powers of Amber

Amber is a gentle healing stone that imbues the body with vitality and has the power to draw disease and negativity out of the body. By absorbing pain and negative energy, amber allows the body to rebalance and heal itself. Amber alleviates stress and purifies the spirit and heart.

Amber promotes inner peace and joy and it enables confidence and creativity by bringing wisdom, mental clarity, energy, and balance. Amber is excellent at removing self-imposed obstacles and enhances decisiveness. It