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## CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND HIGHER EDUCATION: THE MEANING OF COUNTERSTORYTELLING FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR AT PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

Hanna Jackson

*University of Pennsylvania*, [hannaleejackson@gmail.com](mailto:hannaleejackson@gmail.com)

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# CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND HIGHER EDUCATION: THE MEANING OF COUNTERSTORYTELLING FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR AT PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

## Abstract

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Lina Hartocollis

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CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND HIGHER EDUCATION:  
THE MEANING OF COUNTERSTORYTELLING FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR  
AT PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

Hanna Jackson  
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John L. Jackson, Jr., PhD

Dissertation Chair

Walter H Annenberg Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication

Richard Perry University Professor

Former Dean, School of Social Policy & Practice

University of Pennsylvania

Dissertation Committee:

Lina Hartocollis, PhD, LCSW

Dean of Students

Director of the Doctorate in Clinical Social Work Program

University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy & Practice

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By

Jackson, Hanna

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND HIGHER EDUCATION: THE MEANING OF COUNTERSTORYTELLING FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR AT PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS**

Hanna Jackson

Chair: John L. Jackson Jr., PhD

This research explores the meaning of counterstorytelling for recent alumni of color who graduated from a predominately white institution (PWI) and participated in a research or scholarship program during their undergraduate studies. Utilizing in-depth, semi-structured interviews, the researcher collected descriptions from 11 alumni of color. An improved understanding of the meaning of counterstorytelling can enable educators to create academic programming that better supports students of color.

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This project is dedicated to my son.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

*“We have never had any colored students here, though there is nothing in the University statutes to prevent their admission. It is possible, however, in our proximity to the South and the large number of Southern students here, that Negro students would find Princeton less comfortable than some other institutions” (Du Bois, 1900).*

*-A letter from a Princeton University Administrator to W.E.B. Du Bois*

### **The Importance of Belonging**

The dominant and pervasive narrative of “you don’t belong” for students of color across historically white higher education institutions has existed before students of color stepped foot onto college campuses and has persisted to the present day. This perhaps has been best exemplified in the recent “I, too, am [Princeton, Harvard, Oxford]” social media photo campaigns. These campaigns have highlighted the faces and voices of students of color on these college campuses. As the students share, “Our voices often go unheard on this campus, our experiences are devalued, our presence is questioned-- this project is our way of speaking back, of claiming this campus, of standing up to say: We are here. This place is ours.” (“I, Too, Am Harvard,” 2014, para. 1). In the last few years, students have organized protests of racial injustices at universities across the United States, including the University of Missouri, Yale University, and Princeton University, demanding that university administrators, faculty, students, and community members work to create more inclusive and racially just learning and living environments.

There is strong evidence that campus racial climates and the sense of belonging have a significant impact on the academic and social experiences of students of color (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Hurtado, & Carter, 1997). Students of color



experience racial microaggressions or subtle forms of racism on a daily basis that significantly impact their stress levels and academic performances (Smith et al., 2007; Solorzano et al., 2000). Studies show that students of color attending predominantly white institutions are less likely to graduate within five years, have lower grade point averages, experience higher attrition rates, and have lower rates of graduate school enrollment than their white counterparts (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2000; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993).

To improve campus racial climates, racial attitudes, and intergroup relations, many universities have implemented diversity education on their campuses (Chang, 1999; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003; Smith, 1997). Many of these programs have been part of student development initiatives and implemented in the social spaces of campus, including intercultural centers, multicultural centers, and residential colleges (Volkwein & Carbone, 1994; Chang, 1999; Hurtado, 1992). While the literature advocates for more diversity in the faculty and curricular change, many higher education institutions have been slow to address racial injustices in scholarship, curriculum, and academic departments. Historically, academic programming for underrepresented students has been centered on a deficit model that focused on working to 'close the achievement gap' between white students and students of color and to improve retention rates for institutions (Gregerman, et al., 1998; Gullatt, & Jan, 2003). More recently, studies show the positive impact of scholarship and undergraduate research on the academic outcomes of students of color (Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman, 2002). However, universities have focused on quantitative outcomes of retention and graduation rates that serve both the institution and the student rather than the meaning that students of color experience in engaging in scholarship and gaining a sense of belonging as a scholar in the academy. There is

value and meaning beyond retention and graduation rates in the experience of scholars of color that can be illuminated by the narratives of their experiences as scholars.

Stemming from critical race theory, counterstorytelling is a tool for revealing and resisting the racialized biases of society and everyday experience (Salter & Adams, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Counterstorytelling is both a method of telling the story of marginalized communities that are often silenced and a tool for analyzing and challenging the dominant discourse of those in power (Delgado, 1993). Furthermore, counter-narratives have the ability to build community in underrepresented groups. In academic communities, students of color realize they are not alone and are able to challenge and transform established belief systems, demonstrate possibilities beyond dominant discourses, and can teach others, allowing for the construction of new meanings and narratives (Delgado, 1989). Within scholarship and research programs, counterstorytelling has the potential to be a powerful tool for students to challenge the dominant discourse of 'you don't belong', find community in the academy, and flourish as scholars.

To study the meaning of counterstorytelling, the following research question will be investigated: How do students of color construction of meaning through counterstorytelling shape their experiences as scholars and in their pursuit of postgraduate opportunities? This research study is exploratory with the specific aim of addressing the lack of scholarship on the meaning of counter-storytelling for students of color at predominately white institutions (PWIs). Through utilizing semi-structured in-depth interviews, this study seeks to share themes that emerge from the following questions: 1) What are the lived experiences of recent alumni of color when they were students at their PWIs and are there common elements to their experience that can be identified? 2) How do alumni of color's understanding of themselves as scholars become

affected, if at all, through participating in a research or scholarship program? An improved understanding of the meaning of counterstorytelling for students of color who participate in research and scholarship programs has the potential to empower educators to support students of color more effectively and to develop strengths-based academic programming that speaks to the specific needs and interests of students of color.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### *Critical Race Theory: History & Definition*

To better understand racial justice issues in higher education, critical race theory will be utilized as a theoretical framework. The critical race theory movement studies the relationship between race, racism, and power and places race issues in a broad perspective including economics, history, context, group and self-interest and politics (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Moreover, critical race theory embodies notions of activism by not only trying to understand the social context of race but to change it by discovering how society organizes itself along racial hierarchies and transform it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical race theory can be employed to understand the historical, political, and systemic aspects of race in higher education and how this understanding can help move institutions forward by dismantling systems of white privilege and creating racially just campuses.

Critical race theory emerged out of a movement in the mid-1970s facilitated by activists and scholars from a broad array of disciplines, including law, education, social sciences, humanities, and ethnic and women's studies, to study and transform the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings and Tate; 1995; Lynn, Yosso, Solorzano, & Parker, 2002; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993). Following the 1960s civil rights era, early critical race theory scholars, such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado, saw the need to address the subtler forms of racism that were emerging and began building on two previous movements: critical legal studies and radical feminism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical legal studies asserted that not every legal case

has one correct outcome, emphasizing that one line of authority over another or interpreting one fact differently could lead to different outcomes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). From feminist theories, critical race theories borrowed notions of the relationship between power and the construction of social roles and the acknowledgement of the collections of patterns and habits that create patriarchy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Stemming from the civil rights movement, critical race theory is also concerned with redressing historic wrongs and shares in the notions of nationalism and group empowerment (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

In addition to feminist and critical legal studies theories, critical race theory also derives concepts from European philosophers such as Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In particular, Foucault's (1990) work on the relationship between power and knowledge is resonant in critical race theory. Foucault (1990) argues that belief systems become powerful when more people accept particular views as truths and these views become normalized or part of the dominant discourse. Because this power lacks concreteness other discourses can challenge it (Foucault, 1990). Foucault asserts, "One needs to be nominalistic, no doubt: power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society." (Foucault, 1990, p.93). Critical race theory also sees power as a strategic situation in which the white dominant group adheres to particular beliefs as 'truths' to gain privileges and advantages in society. Furthermore, critical race theory assumes that this power can be challenged through other discourses, which can be seen as the foundation for the argument for counterstorytelling or non-dominant discourses having the ability to dismantle white privilege and power in society.

*Racism: Business as Usual*

Critical race theorists argue that “racism is ordinary, not aberrational-“normal science,” the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011, p. 7). The ordinariness that defines the nature of racism emphasizes the difficulty of eradicating racism while at the same time promoting the belief that racism has been addressed. In addition, the effects of this subtle form of racism is powerful in keeping people of color in positions of inferiority while maintaining positions of superiority for Whites. The “ordinary business” of historically white institutions creates harmful spaces of everyday oppression for students of color through racial microaggressions.

Racial microaggressions can be defined as the

many sudden, stunning, or dispiriting transactions that mar the days of women and folks of color. Like water dripping on sandstone, they can be thought of as small acts of racism, consciously or unconsciously perpetrated, welling up from the assumptions about racial matters most of us absorb from the cultural heritage in which we come of age in the United States. These assumptions, in turn, continue to inform our public civic institutions— government, schools, churches—and our private, personal, and corporate live. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p.2 )

Racial microaggressions speak to the subtle forms of racism towards people of color and exist in both academic and social spaces in the university environment. White students may not see these experiences as racism because of their subtlety, but it is constant and widespread for people of color. In taking the form of ordinariness, racism becomes difficult to name and expose. “..[I]f racism is embedded in our thought processes and social structures as deeply as many critics believe, then the “ordinary business” of society-the routines, practices, and institutions that we rely on, the effect of the world’s work-will keep minorities in subordinate positions. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 22).

### *Racism: Ordinary and Systemic*

Critical race theory asserts that racism is not only ordinary but is also “a systemic force embedded in the enduring structure of society” and is “inscribed in everyday worlds that continually tune (and reflect) racist subjectivity” (Salter & Adams, 2014, p.785). Wallerstein (2010) states that business as usual at universities is characterized by universities’ control of resources and budget. “At the university, the continued pre-dominance of White academics (except perhaps in historically Black or tribal colleges) may reflect, often unintentionally, institutional biases against faculty of color who may connect more readily with their communities of origin or other disenfranchised groups.” (Wallerstein, 2010, p.42). For students, racial microaggressions are offensive mechanisms used against African Americans and constitute the majority of interactions between white and black individuals and groups (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yossa, 2000). Students of color are often perceived as being intellectually inferior and subsets of students of color, like African American males, are criminalized on their campuses (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007). For students of color at historically white institution, racism is an everyday experience that they confront in the classroom and on campus through institutional systems of hierarchy, including faculty, staff, and public safety.

### *Critical Race Theory: Addressing Racism in Higher Education*

Because critical race theory locates the root of racism in institutions and systems rather than in the individual’s beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes, critical race theory proposes to address racism with solutions that go beyond “simple prejudice reduction, multicultural tolerance training, or changing hearts and minds” (Salter & Adams, 2014, p.785). Many of the interventions that higher education institutions have employed focus on the micro-level of cultural competency training or prejudice reduction rather than addressing systematic structures

of racism within the institution. Critical race theory demands dismantling the systems of privilege and corresponding ways of being that reflect dominant-group understandings and serve the interest of continued domination (Salter & Adams, 2014).

### *Interest Convergence & Affirmative Action Policies*

One of the major tenets of critical race theory is interest convergence or that "*broad support for civil rights and racial justice emerges only when it aligns with interests of White Americans*" (Salter & Adams, p. 786). Critical race theory asserts that White people must "willingly disinvest in constructions of reality that afford them privilege.... [and believe] that doing so "is in the own interest" (Salter & Adams, 2013. p.787). Throughout the history of U.S. education, African Americans and people of color have contended with forces that have limited their access to educational opportunities and resources. Since the 1954 landmark Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, "efforts have been made to achieve greater desegregation at all levels of formal education" (Neetles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986, p.289). However, Bell argues that the underlying reasons for support in this case were not to protect the rights of Black Americans but rooted in Cold War propaganda strategy that sought to deter the influence of international communism on vulnerable countries in the 'Third World' that were comprised mostly of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Furthermore, 1954 marked the end of the Korean War and WWII, where African Americans served alongside their white counterparts in settings where cooperation and survival were more important than racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Bell argues that the U.S. was concerned about mass domestic unrest when they return to the United States after their service (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p.19).



Nearly a decade later after *Brown v. Board of Education*, affirmative action policies were issued and significant barriers to higher education for students of color were lowered. However, affirmative action policies remain controversial and students of color continue to face many barriers and obstacles in attaining higher education and succeeding within higher education. Critical race theory scholars, like Delgado, argue that affirmative action is motivated by political objectives such as social stability, a diverse workforce and integration and that affirmative action policies are seen as a tool for socially engineering society from one state to another *without* acknowledging that people of color have been treated unfairly in employment practices, deprived of their land, and enslaved (Tate, 1997). One outcome from this is that universities have defined diversity broadly on their campuses, leading to more attention on first generation students and low-income students than students of color. Furthermore, while multigenerational Black Americans and Black immigrants or children of Black immigrants share common experiences, recent findings show that Black immigrants or children of Black immigrants have better social outcomes of education and income than multigenerational Black Americans (Massey, Mooney, Torres, & Charles, 2007). While Black immigrants or children of Black immigrants comprise roughly 12% of the Black population in the U.S., they comprise 23% of the Black population at universities, and 40% at selective institutions such as Ivy League schools (Massey, Mooney, Torres, & Charles, 2007). Universities have used affirmative action to shape diversity as they define it rather than redressing the wrongs of historical policies and practices that have limited the opportunities of multigenerational Black Americans.

Furthermore, affirmative action debate often “frames the issue so that even small accomplishments are seen as painful, requiring careful thinking by liberals and conservatives alike about the opportunity being denied White citizens” (Tate, 1997, p.224). Often, White

students see students of color as ‘taking *their* spot’ in the admissions process, as though *the spot* was originally designated for them instead of *a spot* to be competed for. *Grutter v. Bollinger* in 2003 and more recently the 2012 University of Texas affirmative action case demonstrate this critical race theory concept well. Delgado also called attention to the affirmative action mythology of the role model with its major premise being that if a person of color is hired and they are a good role model, the next generation of minorities will benefit from this (Tate, 1997). Delgado argues that this was instrumental and forward looking, stating that to be a good role model meant that one must be an assimilationist and requires one to lie, promoting careers to children of color was similar to promoting a career in the National Basketball Association (Tate, 1997). He argued that the “current educational conditions for children of color-diminishing federal and state support for scholarships devoted to these children and increasing campus harassment-have limited real opportunity.” (Tate, 1997. p.225)

Delgado (1984) also notes that affirmative action policies do not necessarily remedy the lack of scholarship dealing with civil rights by minority scholars. He argues,

The moment one makes a statement, however, one is reminded that it is these same liberal authors who have been the strongest supporters of affirmative action in their own university communities, and who have often been prepared to take chances (as they see it) to advance the goal of an integrated society. Perhaps the two behaviors can be reconciled by observing that the liberal professor may be pleased to have minority students and colleagues serve as figureheads, ambassadors of good will, and future community leaders, but not necessarily happy with the thought of a minority colleague who might go galloping off in a new direction. (Delgado, 1984, p. 574)

Perhaps, even white liberal authors would not be particularly pleased with the thought of competing for tenure track positions and publications by an emerging group of scholars of color.

*Color Blindness*

More recently, there has been a backlash against affirmative action policies (e.g. *Grutter v. Bollinger*) and movement toward color blind ideology in higher education. Stemming from theories of neoliberalism, color blind ideology is the idea that one should make decisions and observations without regard to race and reflects concepts such as freedom from government interference, meritocracy, and choice (Salter & Adams, 2013). Salter and Adams (2014) argue that “these manifestations of neoliberal individualist subjectivity are not “just natural” or available for all humanity but instead reflect the particular experience of people – most prototypically, propertied White men – whose identity positions (and socioeconomic correlates) afford them the experience of abstraction from context” (p.785) Therefore, neoliberal individualism not only reflects White American understandings but also serve White American interests and desires (Salter & Adams, 2013).

In many ways, neoliberal discourses are a tool for obscuring evidence of racism and for the production of ignorance, reflecting the understanding and promoting the interest of people who are in positions of power (Crenshaw, 2011). White Americans tend to prefer to not regard race over engaging in race consciousness (Salter & Adams, 2013). This leads to the denial of racism and less support for anti-racist policy (Salter & Adams, 2013). In higher education, many universities embrace discourses of ‘meritocracy’ and do not engage in a collective racial consciousness that acknowledges a history of oppression and racism.

### *Critical Race Theory and Counterstorytelling*

Critical race theory acknowledges the difficulties in responding to racist acts (Delgado, Stefancic, 2012). They use the example of hate speech to discuss the complexities of addressing

racism through speech. “One difficulty with this approach is that it may be physically dangerous to talk back” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 27). There is always risk involved for people of color in challenging the dominant discourse of racism. However, counterstorytelling is a powerful tool based in critical race theory for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the dominant discourses of racial privilege (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Counterstories have the potential for disrupting the status quo and engaging racial reform by challenging the dominant discourse. However, it is not merely a response to the dominant discourse. As Ikemoto(1997) argues, “By responding only to the standard story, we let it dominate the discourse” (p. 136). There are countless untold stories of the experiences, histories, and perspectives of people of color and counterstorytelling has the ability to help strengthen and create traditions of social political and cultural survival and resistance (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) Within higher education, counterstorytelling can inform research methodology that counters “deficit storytelling” in the literature about people of color and ground research methods in the experiences and knowledge of people of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). As Anzaldu (1990) argues, “If we have been gagged and disempowered by theories, we can also be loosened and empowered by theories” (p. xxvi).

### *Conclusion*

Critical race theory offers a lens through which to understand the historical, political and social underpinnings of race issues in higher education. Though there have been movements like affirmative action policies that have increased structural diversity, critical race theory demands a careful examination of the context in which civil rights policies are motivated and achieved. With the recent emergence of student protests across university campuses in the United States, higher education administrators, faculty, students, and community members are tasked to create

more racially just campuses. Critical race theory provides universities with guiding principles to understand and address racial issues from a systemic perspective that acknowledges the historical implications of racist policies and dismantles the discourses of white privilege.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Racial Microaggression and Higher Education**

African American students and students of color report encounters of oppression and discrimination in their everyday college experiences at historically white institutions (Allen, 1992; Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yossa, 2000; Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998; Steele, 1997). Racial microaggressions can be defined as “stunning, automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority” (Davis, 1989, p.1576). These pervasive subtle forms of racism have had a significant impact on students of color in and outside of the classroom. Pierce (1995) argues that these microaggressions “may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence” (p.281).

One example of the way racial microaggressions manifests itself in higher education are in racial stereotypes and “stereotype threat”. Stereotype threat is a social-psychological predicament that rises from the fear of being judged on the basis of a negative stereotype that can trigger anxiety that interferes with performance (Steele, 1997). Stereotypes are embedded in the thoughts and perceptions of others and play an underlying force in white and people of color’s daily interactions. Research on standardized tests show the significant impact of stereotype threat on students of color (Steele, 1997). When African American students were prompted to indicate their race before taking the Graduate Record Examination, their test scores were substantially lower than when they were not asked to note their race (Steele, 1997). Stereotype threat is the

internalization of oppression that leads to psychosocial stress and lower performances in academia for students of color.

Racial microaggressions pervade academic spaces. Many students of color feel invisible within the classroom setting and feel that faculty maintained low expectations of them (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). One student explains,

I was doing really well in the class, like math is one of my strong suits... We took a quiz... and I got like a 95... and he [the professor] was like, "Come into my office, We need to talk," and I was like, "Okay," I just knew I was gonna be [told], "great job," but he [said], "We think you've cheated... We just don't know, so we think we're gonna make you [take the exam] again."... And [then] I took it with just the GSI [graduate student instructor in the room and just myself, and I got a 98 on the exam. (Quoted in Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p.66).

Furthermore, students of color often experience being excluded from study groups or lab groups by their white counterparts because they were seen as being intellectually inferior (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Many students color perceived that White students believed that they only existed on their campuses because of affirmative action (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Dealing with these negative stereotypes and assumptions about their intellectual abilities everyday has had serious implications for students of color. In addition to feeling inferior, students indicated that they felt "drained by the intense scrutiny of their everyday actions received in the context of negative preconceived notions of [people of color]" (Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000, p. 67). By constantly being on the defensive with a heightened sense of self-awareness, students of color experience racial microaggressions with very serious consequences of psychosocial stress and lower academic performance.

In addition, the curriculum and scholarship in higher education is Eurocentric, excluding the experiences, histories, and knowledge of people of color (Bernal, 2002). “Although students of color are holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel as if their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings” ( Bernal, 2002, p.106). The perspective of Euro-Americans is held as the norm and the experiences and perspectives of people of color are ignored and delegitimized in higher education (Bernal, 2002). The Eurocentric perspective overtly and implicitly assumes White superiority, colonialism, and ideals and values such as meritocracy, objectivity and individuality (Bernal, 2002). Educators come to their classrooms with established views of acceptable actions and values expressed in behavior patterns that are typically based on the majority culture” (Freeman, 1997, p.546). These beliefs become a way of knowing or understanding the world, allowing the dominant discourse in higher education to continue to affirm and uphold white superiority and refuse to acknowledge a history of oppression and systemic racism in education and society. “For example, the notion of meritocracy allows people to believe that all people—no matter what race, class, or gender—get what they deserve based primarily on an individual’s own merit and how hard a person works” (Bernal, 2002, p.394)

Studies demonstrate that racial microaggressions also exist outside of the academic setting and in social spaces (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007). Campus and local police have often imposed racial microaggressions on African American males by increasing surveillance and control through using the excuse that African American males “fit the description” or seem “out of place” (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007). *Troy*, a student at Harvard University explains,

On freshman week, last year, I was walking around the campus just to look at it because I hadn’t been up here since sixth grade. I was just looking at what the buildings look like, and I was stopped by one of the HUPD [Harvard University Police Department] officers.



And he asked me who I was and why I was here. I told him that I was a freshman looking around. He asked me to show ID, which I did, and then he said, “Okay, be more careful next time” and drove off. (Quoted in Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007, p. 564).

One study showed that black males in historically White institutions were viewed with fear and contempt, resulting in campus and local police profiling and harassing black students (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007). In response to the racial microaggressions in social spaces, African American students reported frustration, shock, avoidance or withdrawal, disbelief, anger, aggressiveness, uncertainty or confusion, resentment, anxiety, helplessness, hopelessness, and fear that can be defined as racial battle fatigue (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007).

The literature on race issues in higher education have clearly indicated the harmful effects of racial microaggressions on students of color and call for the need for social action and interventions to improve racial campus climates. However, the literature has not fully explored how critical race theory and counterstorytelling can be employed to understand the historical, political, and systemic aspects of race in higher education and how this understanding can help move institutions forward by challenging systems of white privilege and creating racially just campuses.

### *Addressing Racial Injustices in Higher Education*

Multicultural education has been implemented across universities in the United States to address issues of race and inequities on campus (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Chang, 1999; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003; Smith, 1997). This is evident in the countless centers for diversity & inclusion or multicultural affairs at universities. However,

multicultural ideology can be problematic or as Salter and Adams (2014) note, detrimental to the cause of racial justice. They argue that discussions of multicultural understanding and tolerance of diversity emphasize celebrating racial or cultural others and may reproduce a construction of White identity as a race-less or culture-less, failing “to illuminate the White-washed ecologies of racism and the possessive investment that White Americans have in constructions of reality that afford them privilege, they constitute epistemologies of ignorance that serve interests of ongoing racial domination” (Salter & Adams, p. 787). Most multicultural centers and programming on university campuses are utilized by students of color rather than their white counterparts, designating multicultural or diversity issues a responsibility of people of color. In social justice courses on race, White students often identify as not having a culture or being culture-less with little awareness or acknowledgement of the privilege they are afforded by the dominant culture or race.

A well-known theoretical model for multicultural education suggests four stages towards achieving a multicultural education:

*Stage 1: Mainstream Curriculum* - traditional, Eurocentric, male-centered curriculum, which largely ignores the contributions and perspective of non-dominant groups.

*Stage 2: Heroes and Holidays* - diversity is “celebrated” by exposing students to cultural information and artifacts from diverse groups (e.g., Black History Month and Women’s History Month).

*Stage 3. Integration* - curriculum moves beyond diversity heroes and holidays to include significant information about non-dominant groups. (e.g., African American Studies)

*Stage 4. Structural Reform* - diversity is woven seamlessly into the mainstream curriculum and is presented in the form of multiple perspectives thereby encouraging students learn to view the curriculum’s major ideas and events through different cultural lenses. (Thomson & Cuseo, 2012)

While these stages seemingly can end in structural reform, the stages, as critical race theory would argue, are not necessarily linear. Having a celebration of “heroes and holidays’ is not a step towards structural reform. Rather, it can further marginalize students of color by designating race issues as merely historical events rather than current issues that affect everyday people in daily interactions through systemic oppression. Furthermore, these ‘heroes and holidays’ designate diversity issues to specific and numbered spaces and times that do not allow for multicultural issues to be integrated seamlessly into the fabric of the curriculum and community, and in some ways, gives exoneration to universities as having ‘addressed’ diversity issues on campus. Most universities are fixed on stage 2 with no promising movement towards the end goal of structural reform. Some universities have included concentrations or majors in ‘cultural studies’ after much effort by cultural studies scholars but still remain predominately rooted in White-male centric curriculum (Rosaldo, 1994).

Universities have also created counter-spaces or “sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained”, such as minority fraternities, cultural organizations, or study groups, to address hostile racial campus climates (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 70). Solorzano et al. (2000) assert that “Academic counterspaces allow African American students to foster their own learning and to nurture a supportive environment wherein their experiences are validated and viewed as important knowledge” (p.70). However, these counter-spaces often exist outside of the classroom experiences where “[m]arginalized students are often familiar with their groups’ voices being silenced in the classroom discourse or with having their personal and/or group experiences and beliefs discounted” (Solorzano, et al., 2000, p.71). Furthermore, in order to

create counter-spaces, students of color often have to separate themselves from their white counterparts, creating pockets of safe spaces on campus instead of improving the overall campus racial climate. Critical race theory would argue that counter-spaces allow for the continued racial domination of Whites on campuses and do not address the structural systems of White privilege.

### *Academic Programming for Underrepresented Students*

Early on, academic programming for underrepresented students focused on remedial academic programs and tutoring, stemming from the assumption that underrepresented students possessed a deficit of academic preparation and cognitive abilities (Boykin, 1994; Levin & Levin, 1991; Kulik, Kulik, & Schwalb, 1983; Nelson et al., 1993). More recently, undergraduate research programs have been utilized to reduce attrition rates, increase graduation rates and the pursuit of graduate study among underrepresented students (Gregerman, et al. 1998; Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman, 2002; Nagda, et al., 1998; Davis, Barlow and Villarejo (2004). One study indicated that participation in undergraduate research opportunities increased retention rates for some students and more specifically was strongest for African American students and for sophomores rather than first-year students (Gregerman, et al., 1998). The study argued that undergraduate research with high faculty engagement addressed the issue of the lack of integration or isolation of the students of color within the institution as a primary factor for underrepresented students departing the university as an important factor in contributing to student departure (Gregerman, et al., 1998).

In a quantitative study on an educational intervention program, Biology Undergraduate Scholars Program, that was designed to decrease the attrition of underrepresented students in the sciences at the University of California, Davis, Barlow and Villarejo (2004) found that

undergraduate research greatly increased the odds of positive graduation outcomes and participants were more likely to pursue graduate study than were university graduates overall. The intervention included academic enrichment, advising, and research experiences in the first two years of college. In another quantitative research study investigating the relationship of undergraduate research participation and the pursuit of graduate education, Hathaway, Nagda, and Gregerman (2002) found that students who participated in undergraduate research were significantly more likely to pursue graduate education. The study evaluated the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program that was design in 1988 to increase the retention and improve the academic performance of underrepresented students of color at the University of Michigan (Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman, 2002).

Lopatto's (2004) research findings indicate that undergraduate research participants were significantly more likely to pursue graduate education. The study attributes additional research activity, attending racial or ethnic workshops, taking interdisciplinary courses, participating on research projects, and interacting with faculty as important factor that can influence graduate education pursuit (Lopatto, 2004). Studies show that the faculty and student relationship plays a significant role in academic achievement, student retention, and institutional satisfaction, but also in students' decisions to pursue further education ( Nagda et al., 1998; Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman, 2002).

While these studies indicate the importance of academic enrichment and undergraduate research as a tool for supporting underrepresented students, they are limited in scope as they do not account for challenging the dominant deficit notions and narratives of students of color as scholars by taking into account these experiences beyond the individual interactions of the faculty-student relationship.

## **Counterstorytelling and Higher Education**

Counterstorytelling is a powerful tool stemming from critical race theory that can be used to expose, analyze, and challenge the dominant narratives and stories of racial privilege (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The literature on counter-storytelling and higher education is limited. However, one focus of the literature on counterstorytelling and higher education has been primarily on highlighting counterstories through personal narratives or third person narratives, including the experiences of students of color (Fernandez, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Williams, 1991; Montoya, 1994; Espinoza, 1990; Williams, 1988; Stinson, 2008). Personal or autobiographical narratives of authors who write about their own experiences like Patricia Williams's "The alchemy of race and rights: Diary of a law professor" are powerful examples of how counterstorytelling can be used to challenge dominant discourses from a personal perspective. Other studies, like Solorzano and Yosso (2001) shared the experiences of third person narratives, employing critical race theory and counterstorytelling to examine the experiences of racial and gender discrimination by Chicana and Chicano graduate students. Stinson (2008) also documented the counterstories of four successful African American male students who study mathematics.

A portion of the literature on critical race theory also focuses critical race theory as an analytical framework to inform research methodology and scholarship (Delgado, 1992; Roithmayr, 1999; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Espinoza, 1990). Stating that social science research has historically upheld deficit, racialized notions of people of color, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) argue for the importance of utilizing counterstorytelling as a method for developing new theories and approaches to research that offers space to conduct research grounded in the experiences and knowledge of people of color.

Furthermore, there have been critiques in legal studies of critical race theory's use of stories and narratives (Farber & Sherry, 1997, Bernal, 2002). Critics argue that using personal stories or narratives as alternative ways of knowing and understanding is an argument about subjectivity versus objectivity, asserting that critical race theory places more value on personal stories than traditional scholarship (Bernal, 2002). "The proliferation of stories makes it impossible for others to debate....An infatuation with narrative infects and distorts [their] attempts at analysis. Instead of scientifically investigating whether rewarding individuals according to merit has any objective basis, [they] insist on telling stories about their personal struggles" (Simon, 1999, p. 3).

However, as Delgado (1993) and other critical race theorists argue majoritarians tell stories about merit, causation, blame, responsibility, and social justice—do not seem to them like stories at all, but the truth" (p. 666). Dominant discourses in history and higher education are seen as based on facts rather than stemming from a Eurocentric perspective that upholds white privilege. Counterstorytelling provides opportunities for challenging dominant discourses in scholarship and curriculum, providing opportunities and spaces for students of color to share their narratives, perspectives, and research interests as legitimate, academic, and ways of knowing.

While the existing literature demonstrates the importance of employing counterstorytelling to share autobiographical experiences of scholars of color, the experiences of students of color, and as a framework for research methodology and scholarship, the literature has yet to explore the significance of the meaning of counterstorytelling for students of color in higher education. The potential of understanding the meaning of counterstorytelling has the ability to create academic spaces and programming that focuses on challenging deficit notions of

students of color in higher education. Most importantly, it creates opportunities to strengthen scholar communities of color to pursue research and academic paths that allow them to flourish and are representative of their perspectives and experiences.

### *Conclusion*

The literature demonstrates that racial microaggressions and hostile campus racial climates impact students of color in increasing their psychosocial stress and negatively affecting their academic outcomes. Universities have worked to address these issues through multicultural education in social spaces and academic enrichment programs to support the retention of underrepresented students. Counterstorytelling has been a powerful tool employed by scholars to share their personal narratives, illuminate the experiences and narratives of students of color, and to create new theories and research methodology. However, the literature has yet to explore the meaning that students acquire through counterstorytelling. In understanding the meaning of counterstorytelling for students of color, there is potential for creating a culture in academic spaces that cultivate and nourish counter-storytelling narratives that allow students of color to flourish in the academy.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Research Design**

This research study aims to understand the meaning that recent alumni of color attribute to their experiences in research and scholarship opportunities during and after their undergraduate studies. By utilizing a narrative approach, this study collects and relies on the narratives of participants of the study and will focus on the experiences of the participants as told through their own perspectives. As Daiute and Lightfoot (2004) argue, narratives have the capacity to express experiences and knowledge and represent a collaboration of cultural values as well as personal viewpoints. A narrative approach to qualitative research also provides opportunities for deeper understanding through storytelling (Freeman, 2004).

#### *Sampling and Recruitment*

This study utilizes purposive sampling to recruit participants through the researcher's network in higher education institutions from being a higher education administrator at multiple institutions in the last ten years. In addition, the researcher's former work in undergraduate research and fellowships allowed for contact with alumni of color who have participated in research and scholarship programs. Snowball sampling was also employed to recruit additional participants through participant referral as study participants were able to identify recent alumni of color who participated in research or fellowship programs. Padgett (2008) suggests a minimum of ten participants for qualitative data collection; this study recruited eleven participants for data collection.

#### *Inclusion Criteria*

Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) recent alumni of color who graduated in the last five years from a PWI between 2012-2017; (2) recent alumni of color who have participated in research and/or scholarship program during their undergraduate studies. Recent alumni of color are defined by the following: a person who self-identifies as a person of color and graduated from a four-year college in the last five years (2012-2017). A research or scholarship program is defined as any academic program that encourages and supports academic scholarship for the study participants. Recent graduates were targeted for this study because of their relative closeness to their undergraduate experience. Their memory of college is still recent as well as their experiences of their research and scholarship experiences. Alumni were chosen to understand postgraduate decisions.

#### *Human Subject Research/Institutional Review Board (IRB)*

There is minimal risk associated with participation in this study. This study does not pose a risk more severe than those encountered in everyday life. Students of color who participate in research and scholarship programs are often asked about their experiences of their institution and their programs so the risk of discomfort anticipated for this study may be routinely experienced by participants. However, one potential risk may be emotional distress resulting from answering some of the questions of the study. The researcher was prepared to make mental health and support referral information available should a participant express or demonstrated a need for further support. The participants were provided with the opportunity to stop the interview at any time. Furthermore, confidentiality was ensured through anonymity with all participant names, institutions, and any identifying information. For example, national scholarship programs and universities and colleges were given pseudonyms for use throughout data collection, analysis,

and dissemination. When sharing data analysis with mentors or others for the purpose of seeking assistance with coding and conceptualization, only information that had been de-identified was shared. The researcher obtained IRB approval from the University of Pennsylvania to ensure all standards of ethical practices were met.

### *Recruitment*

Recruitment and data collection began after the University of Pennsylvania's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the protocol (see Appendix A). The researcher presented the study to alumni of color that were identified as potential participants by the researcher. The researcher offered a brief description of the study by email (see Appendix B). If the alumni of color expressed interest, an interview was then offered and scheduled to be taken place over Zoom, a confidential and private virtual meeting room. Informed consent for participation and the digital recording of interviews were obtained by the researcher from all participants before the interview meeting. Once consent was obtained, the participant completed a basic demographic form (see Appendix D) and then the interview was conducted. Because participants resided throughout the United States, all interviews were recorded utilizing the record function through utilizing Zoom technology. At the start of each interview, a brief summary of the study was presented, and terms of confidentiality were reviewed. All participants were provided the opportunity to stop the recording at any given time and to ask any questions before the interview commenced. Throughout the consent process and the duration of study participation, the researcher stated the following: "At any time during the interview, you can choose to not answer any question, and you may stop participation at any time. You may also ask me to stop the recording at any time." This was part of the ongoing conversation between the researcher and the

participant to inform the interviewee that participation is voluntary and there is no penalty if the participant chooses not to join the research study or chooses to end participation at any time.

### *Data Collection*

A demographic questionnaire was utilized to collect general demographic information from each participant (see Appendix D). Furthermore, a semi-structured interview guide allowed participants to describe their experiences and the meaning these experiences have had in their lives (see Appendix E). The interview guide offered open-ended questions and was flexible in order to collect narratives of counterstorytelling. The first section of the interview guide (Appendix E) was developed to capture the academic experiences of the participants as a student of color at the undergraduate institution. The second section of the interview guide inquired about the experiences of the research and scholarship program and the meaning attributed to being a scholar. The third section of the interview guide addresses the impact of the research and scholarship program on the student's sense of belonging at the university and postgraduate decision. The interview guide ends with a final reflection on any advice participants would give to current students of color at their institutions, allowing for the participants to share any insights from their experiences. All participants were also given the opportunity to add any additional insights or thoughts that were not covered by the interview guide at the end of the interview.

Because the participants reside all over the United States, the interviews took place over Zoom, a confidential and private virtual meeting space that utilizes encrypted technology. All communications on Zoom are established over a secured network using 256-bits TLS encryption standard and all shared contents are encrypted using AES256 encryption standard. Only the participant and the researcher were present, and all interviews were recorded utilizing the record function on the Zoom technology.

## *Data Analysis*

For this study, it was critical to acknowledge and emphasize the collaborative relationship that exists between the participant and researcher in order to provide an accurate analysis of the participant's narrative through interview responses. To minimize the influence of the researcher's position in the study, line-by-line coding of eleven transcripts was completed by this researcher to determine a preliminary list of codes. These codes were then defined and categorized to develop a codebook (see Appendix F). A second round of coding was used to refine the codes and test their efficacy.

## **Reflexivity Statement**

This research study was conceptualized initially by the researcher's experiences both as a student of color who attended predominately white higher education institutions and as an administrator of scholarship and research programs with specific aims of increasing access to these academic opportunities to students of color. Over the last twenty years of being a university student and higher education administrator, it became clear that the experiences of students of color in the academy in terms of their academic experiences and their sense of belonging as a scholar were limited in the literature and research. Furthermore, in navigating my experiences as a doctoral student, I became more conscious of how the academy was in many ways inflexible in its understanding of what is scholarship and who is a scholar. In developing this dissertation study, I had the opportunity to engage in active self-reflection on my experiences as a student of color engaging in research and scholarship in the academy. This opportunity of reflection allowed for a more complex and multistoried narrative of my experiences and identity as a scholar - hopefully a parallel process of what I would be engaging

my research participants to explore through the interview process. Throughout the dissertation study process, I returned to my own experiences and narrative and openly questioned my bias, which inherently exists in research, but must be examined and addressed throughout the process. One particularly challenging area of bias was my former work as a fellowships advisor and being open and receptive to the criticism and challenges that participants shared about their fellowship experiences. The acknowledgement and critical examination of my bias and personal connection my research both allowed for a meaningful development of the research study and a rigorous and systematic approach to data collection and analysis.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

#### **Organization of Findings**

The purpose of this study explores the meaning of counterstorytelling for recent alumni of color who graduated from a predominately white institution (PWI) and participated in a research or scholarship program during their undergraduate studies. The findings were developed from coding eleven semi-structured interview responses from recent alumni who self-identified as students of color. The following themes emerged from coding the interview transcripts: (1) sense of belonging; (2) creating academic paths; (3) academic and professional possibilities (4) establishing a scholar community; (5) belief in the academy; (6) responsibility

#### **Description of Research Participants**

Participants were recruited based on their self-identification as students of color, their participation in research and scholarship programs, and having graduated in the last five years from a predominately white institution. Five women and six men ranging in the ages of 22 and 28 participated in this study. Nine of the eleven participants were either graduate students in master's or PhD programs or had already completed their master's degree. Two participants were considering graduate programs. All participants self-identified as students of color and provided their own responses to how they self-identified (see Table 1.). However, it is important to note that some research participants provided more context in their self-identification as students of color.

Several participants noted the tension that exists for them as a person of color was caused by other's perception of them as people of color. Esther explained, "Sorry, just to backtrack a

bit. Just recently I had to acknowledge that I am technically white Hispanic and that was very difficult for me to accept. I know my parents would never feel that way. But the sociologist in me also doesn't want to be skewing this information, so I have to fill out that damn bubble. I also recognize my privilege as being light skinned, but I also don't think I'm ever read as white.”

Some participants acknowledged their experiences of being a student of color who had a lighter complexion and how their experiences might be different while still being rooted in the experiences of being a person of color. Keith raised the invisibility of his experience as a student of color and whether other students of color recognized his experiences as being those of a person of color.

Asian people aren't really discussed; they're just kinda there. I don't know. Are they oppressed or aren't they? And either way, who cares? 'Cause no one ever talks about it. ... So I wondered if the other black and Hispanic students would look at me and say, "This guy seems like he's on our side, but what does he really know about the experience?" Similar to how you'll look at a white person who's very liberal or very progressive and be like, "Well they're saying all the right things, but do they really understand or are they just a parrot?”.

Robert who also identifies as Asian American shared, “There were definitely some times when I felt like the presence of Asian Americans in a program for underrepresented minorities was deemed inappropriate. There were some people who were kind of not okay with it. I obviously disagree with them, but it was hard into to take that personally.” While these research participants self- identified as being a person of color, they also acknowledged the challenges or complexities of their self-identification based on the perception of their experiences as people of color by other racial groups.

It is important to recognize the nuance of self-identification among the participants in the study and the tension that might exist through self-identifying and perceptions of their identities



as students of color. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the participants who shared about these tensions are people of color who are not Black/African American participants. This tension is perhaps a reflection of the black and white binary that often exists and dominates the American discourse on race that excludes the multi-storied nature of race relations and the multiple identities and cultures that are represented in the United States.

Beyond the identity of race, many participants also noted the importance of intersectionality in their identities in how they experienced their undergraduate studies. Esther explained, “But my queerness always complicates my identity as a student of color”. The participant noted that the intersection of their identities as queer and a person of color often meant that they did not feel a sense of belonging in the majority White culture at their institution but also within their own racial and cultural group.

I actually ended up finding, my communities by the time I left [my college]. My community was mostly comprised of queer people of color. By that I mean mostly queer black women or black men, a few folks who were Chinese, but only two other queer Latinos I knew on campus. That was my group, but it was our identity. I was doubly marginalized within the queer community as not light and also within the POC [people of color] community as not straight. [My community of queer people of color] really gave me the space to just exist and not be questioned.

This more complex and nuanced understanding of the experiences of students of color is paramount in the discussion of the lived experiences of students of color and to acknowledge intragroup differences while also discussing the work that needs to be addressed in intergroup differences. Matthew shared,

... The identity that was most prevalent [at my college] was probably socioeconomic status. Race was a part of it, too, but I know I came from a Mexican American family where most people look like me and most people were not as well off as the people at the university. I remember one of my professors

said that the average income for the class survey the year before was like \$250,000 that the family made, which blew my mind. I grew up with parents that ... I don't know how much they made, but I know I started working at the university and I told them my salary, which was like entry-level salary, they were like, "Whoa, you're making a lot of money."

While it is difficult to discuss poverty and low socioeconomic status without discussing race in the United States, it is important to recognize the intersection of these identities and the experiences of students of color who also identify as having low socioeconomic status as being unique to the intersection of identities. This may be even more pronounced in the academy where in many privileged institutions, the students of color may at times often be recruited from wealthier communities.

Bianca shared the differences that exist within the black community at their institution.

While discussing the causes of continued education disparity between Black Americans and Black immigrants, Bianca noted how different their belief systems were.

... I remember literally the guy that I was dating at the time saying things like, "...Black Americans just need education, and they just need," this or that to like do whatever. And I was like, "What?" ... their true beliefs just really came out a lot. People really believed that they were doing better, even within the black community, because my mom was this, or I did that. And it was just like.... "Oh, I wonder then how black American and black immigrant students experience and navigate their racial identity differently?"

Again, we see here the importance of understanding and exploring intragroup differences - practices that are often dismissed within the academy and society because they bring a much more multifaceted narrative that the dominant discourse cannot hold. Moreover, it is the dominant discourse that perpetuates these singular narratives that we continue to see upheld within communities of color. In the example above, the concept of Black Americans just needing

education as a solution to a history of oppression reflects the dominant discourse that perpetuates racism not only in White communities but also within Black communities.

Though the sample size was relatively small for this study, it is important to acknowledge the complexities, intersections, and nuances in the identities of the study participants. Perhaps it makes for the strong argument that multi-storied narratives are paramount because they have the ability to capture the lived experience with richness and nuance. For example, participants were asked how they self-identify in terms of race and was left a blank space to fill in. Participants wrote a variation of how they self-identify which is telling and important to keep in mind in understanding the findings (see Table 1).

**Table1: Participants Demographics**

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Graduation Year	Gender	Self-Identification of Race	Major/Minors	First Generation Status	Current Academic/Professional Status
Robert	24	2016	Male	Asian American	History/Medieval Studies	No	PhD Candidate
Lydia	23	2016	Female	Black	English/American and African Studies	No	Researcher
Esther	26	2014	Female	Mexican American (White Hispanic)	Sociology/Gender and Sexuality Studies	Yes	PhD Candidate
Wanda	28	2012	Female	Black	Global Interdisciplinary Studies and Sociology/African Studies and Spanish	No	Master's/Working
Jasmine	27	2013	Female	Black American/First Generation	Political Science, Arab and Islamic	No	Master's Working

				African American	Studies, Global Interdisciplinary Studies		
Bianca	22	2017	Female	Black American	Sociology/ African American Studies	No	Master's student
Seth	25	2014	Male	Black	Political Science/ Africana Studies	No	Masters/ Working
Rick	26	2014	Male	Black	Political Science	Yes	Master's
Keith	27	2013	Male	Asian	Criminal Justice	No	Research Analyst
Aaron	22	2017	Male	Black	Independent study: Africana Studies	No	Working
Matthew	27	2013	Male	Latino/Hispanic	Management/ International Business	Yes	Graduate Student

### **Sense of Belonging**

Throughout the interview process, participants shared about their experiences of belonging at their universities both in terms of the academic experiences and their social experiences. While the focus of the study and interview questionnaire was primarily on academic experiences, students naturally discussed the social aspects of their experience. This may be because all participants of the study attended primarily residential colleges which may have a broader and deeper impact on the student experience beyond the classroom than perhaps a non-residential institution. Aaron explains,

I went to a high school that was very similar in socioeconomic and racial ethnic makeup as [my college], but at my high school, at the end of the day, I could always go home, whereas at [my college] I was there 24/7. So

I had no separation from the institution, and I think that ... Some of the pressures that come with being a student of color at a space like [my college] can become overwhelming and that can very adversely affect your academic work.

The inability to separate from the institution because of the residential component weighed heavily for participants and influenced many of their shared experiences during the interview process. For example, students of color cannot even ride their bikes across campus without their presence being questioned by their peers. Jasmine shared, “[O]ne of the college boarders, the people that man the doors at a college, stopped me, told me to get off my bike, and basically carded me thinking that I stole a bike. He was like, "Oh, you know that a lot of bikes get stolen here?" I was like, "This is my bike." He's like, "What are you doing?" "I'm biking home. I'm literally a student here. I'm on a street." It's just a very elite place, and that sort of elitism is based on exclusion.” When students of color are being excluded where they live and study and where their very presence is being questioned and needs to be proved, how could these experiences not have meaning and impact on their sense of belonging in the academy? These toxic forms of racial microaggressions leave imprints on students of color. The interview responses demonstrated this as many participants recounted these social interactions as some of the first examples they shared of their experiences as people of color on their campuses.

Matthew shared that his college was “definitely for white students” and there was a dominant culture on campus that inherently excluded the culture of people of color. Success was defined by participating in dominant culture social activities and not being seen or present for events hosted by people of color.

It can feel, at times, like the school is definitely for them[whites] and we're just being invited to come [so that the college can] try to be a little bit more of a

diverse campus. But a lot of times, I feel like we did have people of color try to present things for the rest of campus, but other students wouldn't show up. And that was always tough, too, when you're trying to put on an event cause you're like, "Oh, this is part of my culture" and then other people don't come to the event. ... Sometimes because being at these cultural activities are not the mainstream, I felt like if they showed up to that, then they were all of a sudden not keeping up with that image of ..what everyone else does. They're told, "This is inappropriate, this is how everyone else got here, and so they're just following the same pattern of going to college, joining a fraternity/sorority or joining ...different clubs and stuff that everyone tries to get into and they feel like if they don't get into one of those clubs, [then they aren't successful].

When students of color feel that their culture represents a path that doesn't represent success, in other words that their culture represents failure, it is difficult to feel a sense of belonging or confidence as a scholar at their institution. Matthew felt that he was only invited to attend his college to be a diversity and affirmative action statistic. When he arrived to campus, he experienced a lack of respect and acknowledgement for the value that he brought intellectually, socially, and culturally to his institution. This demonstrates the importance of this study: to devote research to the experiences and meaning of students of color rather than just the statistics and numbers that higher education employs as being a commitment to diversity. Wanda also shared about her experience of being a diversity statistic. "[O]f course they had to get one picture of the black student. And I was on the cover of the freshmen orientation handbook. And I was just like, "Wow." I mean we joked about it, 'cause we were like they need to put a person of color on the front of it." It is painfully clear to students of color that their presence on their campuses are meant to fulfill a diversity requirement and that their value is their image rather than their intellect, experiences, and perspectives that they bring to the academy.

Wanda also gave a powerful example of how her college was only for white students when she reported a racist incident perpetrated by white student to the administration and they did not respond with action. "So she[administrator] of course was so concerned. And she told

me he was one of the student ambassadors... And she was like, "We definitely don't want someone like that representing our university, but we're going to look into this." And then of course nothing happened. I literally never heard from her again, he was still a student ambassador. So I definitely had experiences like that with the overall administration...I was just like, "Wow, this university is white." The lack of trust in the process and administration and the recognition that their college was for whites denotes the lack of a sense of belonging to the institution where white students can say and do whatever they want at the expense of students of color and the administration will allow it. The expression of the university being for whites was used throughout the interviews.

### **Representation Matters**

A reoccurring theme in the interview responses was the observation and impact of the lack of representation of people of color amongst the faculty and their peers. As Jasmine shared emphatically, "... the academic spaces I took up, it was very, very, very, very, very white, very white." Many participants began their response to the first interview question that asked about their academic experiences as a student of color at their undergraduate institution with an observation about the lack of racial and cultural representation among their peers and the faculty. Robert explained, "I lived in the quads, so it's like the 20 students who live on your hall, so for me it was the four or five rooms, I guess, that were on my hall. I think there's one African American girl, and there's one other Asian American girl, one Canadian Asian girl, and one Korean girl. Then there were no other [people of color] I think all the boys were white. Oh my God, yeah, literally all the boys were white.", but I think that for me was really impactful of coming to a university, one that was less diverse than my high school. "Wow, this university is white." The lack of diversity in the residential hall signaled to the participant that their university

is white, an observation made repeatedly by many participants of this study as noted earlier. In this case, the phrase, “Wow, this university is white” is directly quoted from two different participants that attended two different institutions. The statement beginning “Wow” demonstrate a stunning aspect of the realization that their university is white which is in line with the definition of microaggressions as the “stunning, automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority” (Davis, 1989, p.1576). The lack of representation in the student body and in the prior example, the lack of institutional support to address a racial bias incident signified to the research participants that their institution were designed for white students only. The realization of this is both stunning and harmful.

Participants were also clear about how this lack of representation had an impact on their sense of belonging and confidence in the academy. Wanda shared “...I definitely think I would've had a different view, or different level of confidence if I saw a woman of color, or I should say even just a black woman who was achieving these academic accolades.” The lack of peers and faculty of color at their institutions and more specifically people of color receiving academic opportunities and awards like research experiences and scholarships impact the level of confidence and identification as a scholar for students of color. Many participants noted that there was a severe lack of faculty of color and the negative impact it had on their experiences of feeling supported as a scholar of color. Robert shared, “The one thing that was kind of negative about the history department that I didn't realize until later was, I don't know if there's a single full Asian faculty member in the history department. There certainly aren't any medievalists. It was nice that [my advisor] was black, and that helped, to see another person of color succeeding, and to have them as a sort of role model, but I don't think there are any other Asian Americans.”



Having faculty that looked like them and from diverse backgrounds was incredibly important to participants and was a repeated theme that was raised in the interview responses. Wanda noted, “Cause there were times when I sought outside help in terms of academics. But I never felt that I could find that support that I needed. And maybe it was literally the one African American professor that there's probably I don't know how many at [my college], maybe a handful.”

### **Discipline Matters**

In terms of academic experiences, participants expressed that discipline matters. Many participants shared that they chose their academic discipline largely because they felt supported in these departments. These disciplines fell mostly in the social sciences, where participants felt like their professors understood their experiences to a certain extent and where their ideas were valued. Wanda explained, “I think it was also maybe studying sociology as well. Being in a space where most of my professors who I interacted with were already in this space of questioning society, and questioning structures... I never felt that I didn't have that support, or the space to kind of just question everything... I think it becomes difficult for students of color if we can't just ask questions, like straight up ask, "Is this happening because of X, Y, and Z?" For this participant, being in an academic space where faculty supported and invited questioning society was paramount. This theme of the importance of being able to ask questions was highly valued among many of the research participants and was reflected in the disciplines that participants chose to study. Aaron shared, “ And so I think that I really enjoyed my classes because they kind of gave me an opportunity to question ... You never think to question all these things that are actually culturally distinct, but you just don't think of it as that way, because you grew up in it. And so I think I just enjoyed that aspect of my academics.” The ability to question

cultural norms in an academic space remained critical to many participants in the study. Unfortunately, it also limited participants to what they could choose to study as well. For example, Aaron created his own major in order to curate a schedule of classes that could afford this opportunity to think deeply and question with a critical mindset. Most participants noted that this was not invited in all disciplines or courses.

Participants noted that often certain academic spaces were the only places they could turn to when facing racial microaggressions in other courses and disciplines. After experiencing a racial incident in another classroom, Bianca shared the following:

And I remember going to the African American Studies Department and just crying, and just going to my professors and administrators there, and confiding in them about it, because that was more of an academic safe haven. Even though sociology was a department here I felt like, as far as like some of the scholarly concepts, I really was aligned, and a lot of the subject matter was interesting, I felt most empowered academically in the African American Studies Department. And I felt safe there, and I felt like there they were looking out for my humanity.

While it is important that the African American Studies department in this case felt like a haven where Bianca's humanity was valued, it is equally important to note that the participant felt that other academic spaces on campus did not value their humanity or did not allow them to feel safe. In this case, not even the sociology department at this institution could provide this safe space for students of color. All spaces on campus should feel welcoming and safe, valuing the experiences of all students in the classroom.

Participants who took courses in STEM fields were very clear in sharing their challenges with the departments. Aaron shared, "I remember going into class, especially the STEM classes my freshman year, and just feeling very out of place. It wasn't always because I didn't understand the material, but I just had this sort of very ... I guess, for the first time in my life, a profound

lack of confidence in myself and my abilities.” It is important to note that there is an overall lack of representation of faculty and students of color in the STEM fields. The lack of support in these fields for students of color that leads to a lack of confidence could be an important factor in students of color choosing other disciplines as Aaron ultimately chose as well. Matthew expressed frustration and disbelief when faculty and students in the business school allowed for racial slurs to be posted on their whiteboard with no action.

...[T]hey would write the N word on the board and somebody left it up there and it had been up there for, not just whatever class someone wrote it, but there had been multiple professors who must've been using that class and there must've been a bunch of students, so there are many eyes who have seen the N word on the board, and no one erased it or took it off or covered it up or anything. I think it might've been written in permanent marker, I'm not sure, but it wasn't until someone from ... and this was in the business school, so it wasn't until someone from the liberal arts school, like a professor, was in there that called about it and said, "Oh my god," and covered it up.... Being in the business school as a student of color made me feel like ... the experiences in some of the other classrooms of the university were different, because I also remember in the other classes, the teachers would always have the students introduce themselves, their name, and who they were, and we'd all know each other in the classroom and there was some class discussion, whereas the business school, I never would sometimes know the people sitting next to me.

For Matthew, discipline mattered deeply in how he understood this violent act of hate and the way it was handled. He saw the business school had no response as though nothing had happened; it was another ordinary day and very much in line with the ordinary and harmful nature of racial microaggressions. However, he observed the difference in the way a professor from the liberal arts college was quick to react and take action. As a business school student, the difference was not lost on him and made him think more critically about the everyday interactions that occur in the business school where there is not an emphasis on relationships or understanding across differences.

Bianca explained that she decided to choose social work for graduate school instead of a public policy program based on her policy courses during her undergraduate studies.

“[S]ometimes people use the cloak of scholarship and knowledge as a weapon of oppression really, to silence advocacy that would take place on behalf of people that are negatively affected by different things... I remember, that was something that helped me to realize, "Oh, I don't think I wanna go to an MPP[Masters of Public Policy] program, because economics is the language of public policy, and it's not always a human centered analysis. And people use that language to justify both policies that I consider to be helpful, and also extremely harmful. And that was something that pushed me more towards a social work program with a strong policy and administration track, because at least I know everyone in that space is... at least trying to be more socially just. I know I'm gonna be in a program with a lot of white people, and there's probably gonna be a lot of liberal racism or white privilege or fragility and other things. But at least they're trying... And so I think that even the choice of my graduate degree is very much influenced by what I experience in my undergraduate degree and what I do or don't want to experience going forward, like whether I feel like fighting with an institution. And any program you do in America, you probably will end up having to push back a little bit as a student of color, or a relatively conscious student of color. But how much do you wanna have to push back?”

In the examples above, it is particularly important to note that the disciplines that seemed to be difficult to navigate for students of color or were unwelcoming were disciplines not only outside of what is normally associated with the social sciences, but disciplines that are often associated with financial stability and are highly valued in the United States: STEM fields, economics, and business. It is not a coincidence that these fields are not supportive of students of color as they are pathways to social and economic mobility.

Beyond STEM fields and business, the academy can be a challenging place to find any departments or disciplines that support the academic interests and experiences of students of color. Aaron could not find a major in any academic department at his institution and had to create his own major. “... I couldn't see myself in any of the departments at [my college], and that was frustrating ... I genuinely couldn't even see myself in any of the departments and see myself

or the work I wanted to do, the questions I wanted to ask, I couldn't see them housed in any particular department.” Lydia noted that there was a limitation on the courses offered that resonated with her. “One frustration towards the end, there were sort of fewer classes I could take and that there were situations where I had stretch courses that necessarily wouldn't be considered as departmental [course], but I had to because that was all that was given to me. So in that sense, I think as far as just sheer coursework, it was a bit limiting.” Perhaps students of color can find it challenging to find relevant courses or departments because the academy was never intended for their interests or experiences. Wanda observed,

... the required courses, all of that was really lacking these conversations, or these dialogues about race and immigrants. In one of my immigrant integration class, we didn't talk about race until like week seven. And I was like, "How can you talk about immigration, especially in a European context, and not have discussions about race." And then the week that we got to race, where race was the topic, he brought in another professor to speak about it. And I was like, "Oh that's why, because you don't know how to talk about these things."

In this example, the curriculum reflected the lack of expertise, experience, and value of the intersection of race and immigration by the small amount of space it was given in the syllabus and classroom and by the fact that the instructor could not instruct on this important subject. It demonstrates what often happens in the academy of giving only a small acknowledgment to a history of oppression that has present day impacts on issues across disciplines. By giving race space at all on the syllabus is like checking off a box that it was covered, not dissimilar to how students of color are treated as statistics in representing diversity on college campuses. However, similar to using statistics as a representation of diversity, simply checking the box does not reveal the depth of the subject matter that the topic deserves. Most importantly, students of color notice that their experiences, perspectives, and interests are disregarded in the academy.

## Creating Academic Paths

In order to mitigate the challenges that students of color face in the academy, many participants noted that creating their own academic paths provided creative and supportive outlets for their academic and scholarly interests. While it is problematic that students of color have to forge these paths as many times their white counterparts do not have to create their own academic opportunities because universities cater to their interests, history, and experiences, it also suggests how important it is to participants to engage in scholarly research and work that resonates with and interests them. At many institutions creating an independent major is an enormous amount of work, time and commitment that falls mostly on the students, requiring initiative and persistence in creating curriculum that should have already been established and available to them. Student can also face the challenges of “red tape” or bureaucracy, needing approval from faculty and administrators on coursework that may not be recognized as valid or valued in the mainstream of the academy. However, students of color still choose this path because of the meaning it provides to them. Aaron explained,

I think things got a bit better once I declared my own independent concentration... Once I created my own major and I developed a more intimate relationship with faculty, and I started enjoying my classes a lot more because I knew that the faculty I was working with saw something in me. They valued me and I valued their work as well. So I think once that transition happened, I don't know. I just felt I had a more positive an academic experience at [my college] following it. So yeah. Once I was able to sort of steer my own ship, I had a more positive experience.

For Aaron, creating his own major was critical to having a positive experience at his college. The word ‘value’ in his quote is noteworthy; he expressed the significance of his faculty seeing potential within himself and his work. Sadly, this was not the experience he was receiving throughout the university. While the responsibility of creating diverse and inclusive courses, major, and curriculum should not lie with students, the amount of work and initiative students of

color are willing to invest in their education demonstrates the need and significance of such opportunities for students of color.

Robert also shared how he was carving his own path in his field where he often felt he did not belong because of his racial identity.

“ I think that there is power in just doing western European medieval history and showing that we can do literally anything anyone else can do. Anything that any white person could do. Especially as an Asian American person. There's always this presumption that we can't speak English very well, and there's always a presumption that we have different cultural affects that are mutually exclusive with conforming to white society.”

For Robert, being the only Asian American studying medieval history often meant being perceived as having nothing to contribute to the field.

Many participants discussed not having opportunities to study topics and take courses that represented their interests of perspectives. Ricky shared, “ With those courses, a huge disadvantage about them was the fact that they ... what we read about and what we learned in those courses were very Eurocentric. Let's say for example, during American History, we would discuss the founding of the United States and how that perhaps came about, at least in the context of the course due to people from Europe coming over to North America and settling here, as it was phrased.” Lydia similarly shared that she had to ‘curate’ her courses to have supporting faculty and coursework that was representative and that at times there were semesters when she could not fulfill her requirements for her major in African Studies.

### **Power dynamic**

In navigating and creating new pathways in the academy, participants also shared a recognition of the power dynamics that exist between themselves and faculty that can be

particularly challenging. Esther noted, " But the power dynamic of sometimes with faculty who say or do problematic things. But you can only advocate for yourself to the extent that you're willing to put your grade at risk." Negotiating situations and relationships when faculty were perpetrators of racial microaggressions or racial bias were notably difficult. Bianca shared that a professor had used the N word in class and found it incredibly upsetting. What became even more problematic was the professor's inability to allow for a dialogue about how that could be upsetting.

...[I]n responding to kind of dissension about it, the professor was like, "This is a sociology class." And she was like, "Well what matters is that language is all about power, and what matters is the context and the intent of the social actor." And she was using these sociological terms to explain why it was basically okay for her to say the N word. And I was just like, one, you don't even acknowledge the power dynamics that you're creating by even setting this conversation up this way, as if it's a teaching moment and not a discussion, and you hold the knowledge and the right answer about what's right and wrong and acceptable in this situation. And so that was upsetting. And then one of my classmates is trying to say something to her about it and kind of interject or protest. And she just kept cutting her off. She literally cut her off to say language is about power. And I'm like, "Do you not see the power dynamic here? You're not even letting people say their piece, before you jump into defending yourself." And this professor was kind of like known, and probably identified as being more liberal, more on the side of social justice. And so I think there was a sense of them not being able to do wrong, or not seeing themselves as a part of the problem in that situation. And like, that was really upsetting. And I really wrestled in my head about whether I would say something to her about it, because I actually had a relationship with this professor. And I would go to her office hours, and we would talk, and she would give me advice on my independent research.

The inability of the professor to allow for a conversation on the topic and for students to express their experience of the word being used in class was an act of power in itself. Furthermore, the concept of a liberal racism in the academy needs to be further explored. For faculty who are in social justice oriented fields or have research areas that are focused on marginalized populations,



it is difficult for them to own areas of growth. The concept of being an ‘expert’ who teaches students who are non-experts can lead to this dynamic.

Bianca went on to share that she ultimately did not follow up with this professor because she did not want to harm their working relationship.

“And I asked another sociology professor who was black for advice about it, and I think that they just gave me some things to think about as far as of the cost benefit analysis of having the conversation. And I eventually just didn't have the conversation. I don't know if it was like, I guess I decided not to, and maybe I just didn't get around to it. But I just, I don't know. I guess I didn't think it would be the most helpful. 'Cause at that point, that teacher, that professor was in my corner. That professor was someone that supported me, and like, saw me as someone who was aligned with her. And I felt like if I had pushed back, I didn't know how it might jeopardize that relationship. And so I just didn't.

She went on to note that this professor gave her research opportunities and invited her to present at conferences alongside of her. Bianca shared candidly that it was highly unlikely that the professor would have provided this kind of support had she confronted the professor about her response to the N word being used in class. “I got the opportunity to present her comments on her behalf at this national conference, in part due to that relationship. And I don't know if that would've happened if I had gone into her office and said, "... I'm really offended that you used this language in class," And so I think that was tough.” When students have to limit their expression of ideas, perspectives, and experiences in the classroom because they fear that the consequences will limit their academic opportunities, there is a strong sense of the immutability of racial issues in the classroom and the academy at large.

### **Tokenism: A Singular Narrative**

Liberal racism amongst faculty continued to be a theme as participants shared a common experience of being tokenized by peers and faculty. Esther shared that a professor “kept pushing

me towards studying Mexican stuff just because I was Mexican even though it was completely out of my wheelhouse and I had no interest in studying it.” Several participants shared that faculty and even faculty of color often pressed them to study disciplines or research topics related to their own identities. Jasmine explained,

... I was focused on Middle East Studies. So, right off the bat it was, oh you're someone who's African, African-American, why don't you care about your own people? ... In academia, I feel like white people are allowed to study anything and nobody associates culture with them. So they just have the right to study whatever they want it doesn't matter what they're interested in. It's like, you can fantasize, you can be obsessed with anything, no one's going to look twice at you. But if you are of a certain background and you want to study another background, they're just like, either you're distancing yourself for some sort of weird psychotherapy reason why, you hate yourself, self hate...Or, you're like invalidating someone else's culture because you have a lens that you bring your own in. So I battled that a lot in the academic space. Especially by ... yeah, one of my department heads gave me a lot of grief. Ironically. She was also of color. But I think a lot of the challenges I had in the academic space as a person of color, just came from taking up a very token role. I was just the only black person, right?

Students of color not having a choice in what they want to study without being labeled or criticized was a common theme across participants. Even faculty of color pushed students to study topics that focused on their racial/ ethnic identities, placing the same limits on their scholarship as were perhaps placed on them or selfishly wanting them to contribute to their fields of study or perhaps wanting to protect them from the difficult and racialized experiences in different fields. Regardless of the reasoning, it is important to acknowledge the outcome and impact it has on students of color of making them feel like they can only study the disciplines that fall within their identities and that they could not offer anything to other fields. Or making them feel guilty for not pursuing fields that are related to their identity as though they somehow abandoned their communities and where they are from’. Aaron shared that even though he was studying an area related to his ethnic identity that people continue to even further limit his

studies by assuming that he primarily studies race in the context of his studies, when in fact, his interests were about nationalism and social justice. “This one happened a lot. I took African studies, and I was just interested in themes of nationalism and social justice as they related to urban spaces on the continent. The question of race, I guess, indirectly shaped my work, but it was never my primary focus or agenda, and oftentimes they'd be like, "Oh, oh yeah, African studies. ...And people just sort of expect you to write or think about race, and to me, that became frustrating at times and also limiting.” The assumption that student of color should only study areas that pertain to their identity and race perpetuates the dominant discourse of you don't belong in the academy or you can only belong in the academy if you study this sliver of research that you have personal experiences with. Otherwise, you cannot claim expertise or you must have abandoned your identity and community, and you have nothing to offer any other disciplines. This tokenization is incredibly harmful and needs to be taken into deep consideration when discussing academic disciplines with students of color. It is also an example of the power dynamics between faculty and students of color in the academy and the harm that occurs when a faculty only allows for academic interests to exist in spaces that relate to a student's racial identity. It sends a toxic message that students of color don't belong in the academy.

Beyond the faculty, participants also shared consistently that they felt tokenized by their peers. Jasmine noted that she felt like her peers were not listening when she spoke in the classroom because they assumed that they knew what she was going to say because of her race.

I feel like every person of color experiences this, but for example you'll be in class, right? And you say something, and maybe it slightly touches on race,... I'd be like, "Well are they really gonna hear what I'm saying, or are they gonna hear what I'm saying as a black woman who has a specific perspective and sees the world in this way?" ...But in college, I think I definitely wasn't that bold in

expressing my views in certain settings... There were definitely times [in college] when I was like, "Wow, this person's not listening to me because they see my face, and they see that I'm black." And they're like, "Okay, we know what you think, you don't even have to say your opinion."

### *Invalidation of Intellect and Scholarship*

In addition to participants finding only a few academic disciplines as valuing their experiences and inviting critical lenses and question of the dominant culture, participants also shared that their ideas and research interests were not taken seriously. The idea of a counter-story even existing as scholarship or research was questioned in academic spaces for participants.

Bianca explains,

...I think I struggled with a lot of self doubt about whether my scholarship was valid. Or I don't know, like true knowledge, even all the way through my senior thesis, I think so much of my struggle in the first semester was just literally questioning whether or not I had a valid topic. "Is this even scholarship because it's informed by my personal experience?... Kind of just questioning the whole validity of my whole idea, or like questions, and like it was, once that passed, then I was really able to, you know, I don't know, go more full throttle into what I was doing.

The lack of confidence or doubt that participants experienced made it difficult to navigate the research process and to feel that they had a place in the academy as a scholar. Esther also shared, "Initially I was extremely self-conscious about people's conceptions of what they call me search and this is idea that any research you do that captures any part of your personal identity is somehow less valuable than that from which you're removed from." When students of color study topics outside of their identity, they are seen as having nothing to offer or abandoning their identity and community. However, if they study anything remotely related to their personal experiences, then they are not *really* doing research; it's merely self-exploration. In this paradox,

students of color literally have no place in the academy because regardless of what they study, it is always diminished and devalued. On the other hand, nobody questions their white counterparts and their choice of research and discipline; they can choose whatever field they like within the academy without criticism, scrutiny, or devaluation.

Jasmine shared how frustrating it was that the expectation was for her to not be intelligent. "... but the places that were most challenging when it became quite obvious that, either someone didn't expect me to be as smart. They were just like, "Oh, that was really smart of you." They wouldn't say that of a white colleague, or, "Oh, wow that was such a eloquent way to put that. You're so articulate." In the academy, white students often assume that students of color are there because of affirmative action rather than because of their academic merit. As a result, their white counterparts are surprised at their ability and intellect, demonstrating that they assumed that students of color did not have much to offer in terms of their academic abilities. Ricky shared a similar experience of his white counterparts underestimating his intellectual abilities. He stated that his intellect was threatening to them and so they would diminish his accomplishments through paternalistic language or categorized as the exception to the rule. He often would hear the following remarks from his white classmates,

"You're articulate, you're smart, you know ... you're not like the others." It was almost as if being a person of color, well specifically African American who could compete intellectually. It's almost like I was seen as an anomaly or something like that ... an exception or something that just is out of character ... which I had felt highly offended by.... and that can be a reason right there why we need to have an understanding of contributions of people of color, not only in the building of institutions in the US, but also inventing things in the academy, in both scholarship and in a number of different areas."

Seth similarly shared that his white counterparts would be surprised by his intellectual ability. “A lot of that's for obvious reasons, because of the way in which people react to black folks and black men in particular who can walk and chew gum at the same time.”

### **The Meaning of Scholarship and Research Opportunities**

The findings in this study revealed that participants experienced extensive racial microaggressions throughout their academic and social experiences. In addition to understanding their experiences as students of color at their respective colleges, this study also seeks to understand the meaning that participants experienced in participating in the scholarship and research opportunities. The following themes emerged from this portion of the study: academic and professional possibilities, community, echo chambers and responsibility.

### **Academic and Professional Possibilities**

Many participants shared that their scholarship or research opportunities were essential to them pursuing further studies. As Keith explains, “, it definitely had a huge impact for a number of reasons, because just the experience shows you what is possible in the profession.” Understanding the ‘nuts and bolts’ of how to pursue academic and professional opportunities through participating in these programs was invaluable to many participants. Bianca shared, “I'm able to be a lot more strategic because I have a lot more information about what it actually entails to do these things. ...And so now it's like maybe I'll do this, I can literally look into the future. And not look into the future like I know what it is, but just think about the future and say like, "yeah. I might wanna run for congress someday. And it's not like a far out thing. It just might be the thing that happens. And because of being able to be personally connected to people that do these things.”

Many participants shared the notion that just learning how to navigate the academy was valuable from their research/scholarship program. Esther explained,

I'm first gen. My dad got as far as second grade in Mexico. My mom got as far as sixth grade in Mexico and then they migrated. I have two older brothers, the oldest just finished high school and the other has a master's. So I can't count on my family to reach me anything about academia. [The scholarship program] has taught me nearly everything that I know about academia... So I know I have a lot of folks looking out for me, but [the scholarship program] has been a big part of that.

Similarly, Aaron shared that the value of learning how to successfully navigate the academy was critical his development. "I think one thing we sort of learned in [this program] is not to romanticize the academy in many ways. For example, if you want to teach, you need to go to certain schools. You need to get PhDs from certain schools, researching under certain professors, and to get access funding. So you need to sort of have made certain connections while you were an undergraduate. You needed to have been present at certain conferences." The logistics of how to pursue a career in the academy was a repeated theme throughout the interview responses. For participants, this knowledge made their paths concrete and possible. As discussed earlier, many participants had already been creating their own academic paths due to the limited nature of the academy for the experiences and interests. In many ways, scholarship opportunities further provided the tools and knowledge to make these pathways a realistic possibility.

### *Financial Support*

The financial component of their scholarship was often named as being critical to pursuing their academic and professional goals. A common theme for many participants was coming from low-income, first generation families where the financial benefits of the scholarship allowed them to take more risks, study what they were truly interested in, and pursue graduate

studies. Matthew shared, “so the fact that I didn't have to worry so much about financially, where a lot of my friends did, and so I kind of knew where they were coming from, but in a way, I felt like I had this safety net with the scholarship.” Similarly, Ricky explained that “there was a financial component, the money aspect certainly enabled the possibility of me to go to [graduate school]. So without it no I would not have even considered it really.”

Jasmine noted that it allowed her to take risks . “[T]here's a certain safety blanket that lets you take more risks once you get these scholarships. Once you have these scholarships you're like, "I can take these risks." Many students of color often feel the need to follow traditional or professional paths because there is often financial security in them for themselves and their families. Robert shared that that he would not have been able to pursue the field of medieval history as a career path if it had not been for the scholarships he earned.

The embarrassing thing is that these scholarship programs have affected my trajectory, insofar as I could not have justified doing medieval history unless I got the [scholarships]... Those are the things that matter, and if you want to be guaranteed a job after these five to seven years in a Ph.D, you need to have these sorts of signifiers. I'm not going to give my life to a Ph.D without expecting a job at the end... [B]ecause I need my resume to be perfect if I want to have a chance at getting any of these jobs. I can't explain to my parents who are working class and Asian, I can't be like, "Yeah, I'm going to go try to be a medieval historian, but it probably won't work out." There is a pretty high threshold that I need to clear in order to justify to them, and to myself, passing up on all these other career opportunities, to go do this....If I hadn't gotten the [scholarships] then I wouldn't have studied medieval history.

For students of color who come from working class background, the threshold is high for justifying the pursuit of an academic career. While one could argue this is the case for any student or low-income student, it is particularly challenging for students of color because of the



barriers discussed earlier in this paper. Robert shares, “it's quite powerful to research a field purely because I'm interested in it, purely because I like it, purely because I think it's important, that is so overwhelmingly white. I can do the history of white people just as well as anyone else, and I think that there's something quite powerful in that, in proving all these people wrong.”

The financial support along with the academic and research opportunities often led to a sense of freedom to choose nontraditional pathways for students of color.

[The scholarship program] taught me that it's not just about a strict economic sense of success. But it's also that... that white people feel a very intense sense of freedom of the imagination that allows them to pursue so much without thinking about anything. I think innovation comes from feeling that you can be comfortable in your ideas and that they're worth it. And so, I think that that's what [the scholarship program] taught me is that in order to think creatively, you have to be in a space that nurtures that creativity.

Not having to think as much about their financial stressors and being in an academically supportive environment allowed for many participants to see more possibilities in their academic and professional goals.

### ***Network & Social Capital***

In addition to the critical financial benefits, participants also named the importance of having a network and the social capital that allowed them to navigate the academy and professional pathways with confidence. Matthew explained, “ it made me feel like I just had this whole group of people behind ... That I had social capital. That's the word that I want to use. Being a [scholar] gave me social capital on campus. Sometimes I wouldn't use it often, but being able to talk to professors and someone else would say, when I was doing ... "Oh, he's a [scholar]," or at events where faculty would see ... I think that may have changed the perception a little bit about my intelligence and I think those impressions are important.”

Many participants shared that the importance of networking became apparent from these scholarships. Bianca explains, “I think becoming a part of that network has also changed how I think about my future too, because I knew that I wanted to make a difference as far as social justice work. But I, once again, don't come from a family of politicians or people that are necessarily in public service.” Because many participants were the first in their families to pursue academic paths, the network from these research and scholarship program were critical to helping them navigate these pathways. Bianca noted, “I network a lot, because I realize the value that these networks have played in my development thus far, and my kinda like moving towards different things. Being able to talk out options with people that have either just more years under their belt, or have either worked in the field or considered doing the thing that you're doing. It's so valuable to thinking about what next steps you might take.”

Esther similarly noted that networking was an essential tool she gained from these academic programs. Interestingly, she notes that networking was something she had to learn as it was counter to the role that students of color often assume at college of humility, gratitude and deference.

I can think of so many instances that I was able to get exactly what I wanted because I knew someone, who knew someone, who knew someone. That first person was willing to vouch for me, or advocate for me, or pull strings for me in some way, shape, or form. Saying it aloud now, I'm recognizing in some ways it's the cultural capital that affluent kids have just ingrained in them, that they have what they want. But the more quickly you begin to recognize the power in that without thinking that it is exploitative or disingenuous the more quickly you're going to be able to thrive [in the academy]. This is what people understand. This is how the roles work. Doing favors is the language of the elites and it took me like four years to figure that out. It was because I was being humble and I was like as a student of color your role is to be a role of deference and humility and it's like no, that has to go.

The notion of credentialing through these research and scholarship opportunities also became apparent in the narratives. Jasmine explains,

They're credentialing... I can just shoot an email off to CEO and these people who have power, and it's because I can put a comma after my name and end it with a scholarship title. I think, first and foremost as person of color, I've ridden those coat tails out and I know for a fact that, as a person of color, it means a lot more to me as a credential, because people can't take it away. They can't assume something about me based on the color of my skin, based on how I present myself because I have something else that the world has validated for me.

Having these scholarships behind their names, students of color have the power to be seen and valued. It gives them validation in a way that simply attending a university cannot for students of color.

### **Confidence**

In participating in these programs, participants cited a level of confidence in their identity as a scholar. Keith shares, "I felt like that[receiving a research grant] was validation of I guess intellectual capacity." Similarly, Lydia shared that participating in a research program for underrepresented students validated her research and intellectual ability. "It was really important for me to feel like the thesis work that I was doing was important. And the ideas that I had were important. And that studying African American and African characters in books was just as important as someone doing the 700th study of Virginia Woolf. Like just as valid.". She expressed that she found that validation in the scholar community of her program.

In encountering racial microaggressions in the classroom, Matthew shared that being a scholar helped affirm that he belonged in the academy. After hearing that his friend felt that he was only admitted to the college because of his race, Matthew shared,

It was very racially charged, obviously. This was discrimination, racist, and I had overheard this conversation when I came into it with a friend and just thinking about the fact that he was saying this and I'm thinking in my head, you kind of wondered, "Am I a product of affirmative action?" And then I'd be like, "No, I'm a scholar. I got here because of my academics, because of the service that I did outside the classroom, and I belong here." At those times when I was challenged by others, I felt very strong about this idea of being a scholar. It was really part of my identity and it really helped me.

Ricky expressed a sense of competency and confidence after receiving a nationally competitive fellowship. "So after winning the [scholarship] I felt that I could compete with people that I didn't think I could compete with before. I had the chance to engage with people from universities around the country. Whether it's the Ivys, or other prominent universities throughout the nation. I thought, I could compete with them. So that was a huge change for sure. My ambitions changed, my confidence changed, and the [scholarship] certainly made a huge difference for my overall understanding of myself." Many participants noted a confidence in themselves as scholars as well as their ability to navigate their opportunities.

The feeling of limitations in the academy that were discussed earlier were to some extent mitigated by these scholarship and research opportunities. These academic programs helped participants establish networks and discover their potential and confidence to pursue their field of interest. Bianca shared that she felt the programs gave her the ability to see a limitless future with the support of a scholar community and network.

I feel really confident in that because of just like being a part of programs that have pushed me to [network] You have to reach out to a mentor as a part of the [research] program. The whole value of the [scholarship] community is the network...there are endless possibilities for my career.... Yeah, just doing these programs that are very different in their emphasis, realizing that I don't have to be limited, and I don't have to be one dimensional as far as like what I want to do in the future.

Jasmine similarly shared “ I do feel like I have more people behind me and more people in my corner based on these scholarships because I can just shoot an email if I don't know something or ... I know people are going to take me very seriously and I think that sort of security allows me to be a lot more confident.”

Having a strong understanding of what an academic path actually entails was empowering for participants and helped them navigate the path with more confidence. Esther explained,

I got equipped with so much information about what it could practically look like to pursue this path to the point where now I'm just like, "Yeah, I might get my doctorate." And it's, there's no clouds about what that would mean, what that experience would be like, what the application process was like, what it requires. Everything is clear to me, and it's just a matter of whether I decide to do it or not. It's not like I can or can't, or I don't have this experience or that background. Or I don't have the capacity. None of those are considerations to me like they were at the beginning.

Aaron shared that participating in the research program showed him that he had something to contribute to the academy. “It's taught and reminded me that I'm capable, I think especially because in my first two years or year and a half at [my college] I didn't always feel capable. But I think being a scholar, a named scholar at that, reminded me that I was capable. I had something to offer...I think with students of color at institutions like [my college], we often sort of forget and undermine what we bring to the table and what we can offer. He goes on to share that planted the seeds for pursuing other fellowships and a research career. “I think I would not have

even had the idea of applying to other fellowships and other programs. I think [the research program] very much laid the seeds and was the foundation. Yeah, [the program] showed me what I could do and what my true potential was.” Wanda shared a similar insight, “So I don't think I would've even have thought of [applying to graduate school abroad]. It is because of the whole [scholarship] process,... I probably wouldn't have known that I could get my master's degree outside of the country at an institution.” For many participants, scholarships and research opportunities provided the resources, confidence, and network to pursue academic degrees and programs that they would have never considered before.

### **The Importance of Scholarship/Research Community**

Participants were also very clear across the interviews of the importance of having a scholarship or research community that values their research ideas and scholarship. Wanda discussed the benefits of being part of a research program designed for underrepresented students.

I think that it was being in a space like [this research program], where I would have an idea and I would share it, and somebody would say, "That's a good question." And I'd be like, "It is?" Or I would share findings, and they'd be like, "Those are legitimate findings," and I'd be like, "Oh they are?" And I think just being in a space that was very affirming just helped me to come to the realization that I had important research questions ... And also being in a space where other people were exploring their interests that maybe wouldn't be traditional because they were not white, you know what I mean, and they had different experiences that also informed their research in a kind of, it as a space where we were all affirmed. And I got to see what brilliance looked like through lenses that maybe have not traditionally been represented in academia.

Esther shared about how engaging in the research process continuously with positive support helped provide the pathway to continue in the academy post- graduation.

And I think that has a lot to do with going through a program where I repeatedly was creating questions and finding answers, and sharing those answers, and presenting my research, and getting all this positive feedback about my contributions to the field, even as an undergraduate scholar. And so, that would be what I would say about [the research program] and kind of that track.

Having a space to practice the process of scholarship or research was paramount to participants and provided an academic experience that they were not receiving in the classroom. Esther explained, “ [The research program] really constituted a support system for me, and also, it just helped me asked questions that I would not have been able to ask in a formal classroom or even a precept setting or environment. And also, because it was so small and we were all students of color, there was also a certain intimacy and safety and security that that space awarded me that other spaces fundamentally couldn't.” Lydia explains, “ And wow, I wish I had been in [scholarship program] earlier because I have never been in a more validating space intellectually. I think a large part of that had to do with the fact that it was just ... It really meant something to be a part of an environment or an intellectual space where your ideas and your imagination was nurtured and encouraged.”

Many participants noted a strong sense of belonging through research programs. Aaron noted, “I think my sense of belonging in an academic capacity, yes. Yes, for sure...when you're independently concentrated, you really just are on the periphery because ... Yeah. So I think [the research program] kind of brought me in.” Similarly, Ricky shared that he

found the community to be enormously inclusive. The foundation represents scholars of various backgrounds, of various racial, ethnic backgrounds, and they allow for them ... allow for these current scholars and former scholars to hear from people who have been successful in their professional careers. So I've found having that exposure to people who look like me and seeing their success to really encourage me emotionally but also to show me what I'm capable of doing, and what is possible for me to achieve.

However, not all experiences within research and scholarship communities were positive. Participants who participated in underrepresented research programs shared many strengths of the program in finding community and support for their research and scholarship. However, participants noted the frustrations of being a minority in programs where there was a majority of white scholars. Robert shared,

I can't explain how to be a little humble or to learn how to ask other people questions...[White men] don't ask you questions about how you're doing, they don't care about what you're doing. You say something about what you're doing and then they respond by saying five things about what they're doing. That's social, but that's also academic. I just can't float an idea with them and expect to get meaningful input or help or even interest. That's frustrating. I can't help but think that there is a racial component to it. I think it comes down to entitlement and respect, really.

Ricky also shared that while his counterparts in the scholarship program tended to be outspoken and progressive on many issues like class, race tended to take a backseat in conversations.

I do not want to generalize, but while people tend to be ... let's say forward thinking on issues such as climate change, which I think is important. You know, or economic policy, you know they are forward thinking on that. But when it comes to racial issues they don't seem to be on board as much, ... I don't want to say they don't care, I don't think that would be inaccurate, but it's not a priority. It really doesn't seem to be a priority. And I don't think that's true of all [scholarship and scholars]....The white students are who I'm alluding to, yeah.

Seth shared that he was the only black person in his scholarship cohort and when a presentation on race and education was made at orientation, nobody stood up against the speaker's racist rhetoric.

[The presentation] just felt tacitly racist in this way. I'm sitting there, I was like, is anyone else listening to this? It wasn't just us. There was the public was there as well, and then there were other scholars who were, whether they had already done their PhDs, they're doing some research in the UK.



A couple folks gave him some pushback. They're like three questions in, and I'm like, so I'm going to have to do the thing. I'm going to have to expose this man because no one else either is willing to or has the ability or the context or the courage. It was just like, all right, well, okay, this is how this thing is turning where not only am I placed in the position where I have to just listen to this, but I have to be the one, the one who didn't necessarily have the same preparation as all these other students here, who didn't even know what [this scholarship] really was until my senior year, all these other disqualifying things, that I have to be in this space and show up as a leader in this way. It was like, okay, well, this is nothing new.

Furthermore, participants also discussed how it was difficult to be critical of their programs because there was an expectation of gratitude that was placed on them in receiving the scholarship. Robert explained. "A lot of my white friends will be like, "Don't hate on the [scholarship program] too much, because it's giving you all these great opportunities." In other words, students of color should be grateful for any opportunities and should not complain if they encounter racial issues or any issues with the program. As Esther noted earlier, students of color often assume roles of deference and humility. Matthew also expressed a similar concern of how gratitude can lead to complicity for students of color.

I think that happens for a lot of students of color who are coming from a place where they're just really grateful to be here. Sometimes we don't question why some of the things are the way they are, and I see students now, the staff kind of, sometimes, ... not fighting the battle like, "Hey, maybe you should go talk to them about this late fee that has to do with your financial aid not coming in on time. That's not your fault that it didn't come in. Maybe you should argue it a little bit and see what happens." But a lot of times we're just a little bit more ... not as aggressive I think when it comes to arguing against the status quo or against power dynamics.

There is perhaps an expectation of being a token scholar in this sense, to express gratitude but not criticisms or a different perspective. Jasmine noted that being token scholar in her program

she was often asked to speak on topics of race as though she was the gatekeeper of what is and what is not acceptable on these issues. “but then you can't complain about being gatekeeper. That's what makes it annoying.”

Fortunately, participants were able to find communities of support outside of their programs. Robert shared, “[Y]ou do not take for granted the communities of people of color that you have...don't underestimate your professors or your advisors, especially women and people of color, their capacity to just understand, and to just get it, without you having to explain every little detail.” Furthermore, in response to what they would share with students of color in terms of how to navigate the academy, all participants consistently a shared theme of community. Aaron suggests, “I would say find community. Find community. Yeah. Find community. Find the home. Find someplace to go back to, to recharge before you reenter. Find a place that will provide you sustenance. Find friends you can trust and you can share yourself with. “ Wanda discussed the importance of having academic mentors. “But I definitely think college was the first time that I really understood what a mentor is. So I would definitely tell them to try and find that one professor that you know, is just as critical as you are. And they should be critical, I'd tell them to be critical about everything. You know, about ... really anything that's presented in front of you. Always be critical of it.” Having faculty mentors who understand the importance of questioning and support this level of inquiry and critique was very important to many participants.

### **Belief in the Academy**

While many participants discussed community, mentorship, and networking, in helping them successfully navigating the academy, many participants, even those that are choosing academic careers, expressed frustration and a deep lack of trust in the ability for the academy to

change. Esther shared that though she was following a tenured track faculty career, she was keenly aware that the academy was slow to change in its view of who is a scholar and what is scholarship. "... I recognize that this is going to be a problem forever. I really don't think that even 50 years from now this problem is going to be solved. It existed since the beginning of academia, it's going to exist until the end of it." However, she placed her belief in the value of incremental change and its overall impact over time. Some participants acknowledge the limitations of the academy in terms of being relevant to their own communities. Aaron shared, "I want to produce knowledge, but I want to produce knowledge in a way that's accessible to the people who need it most." While one can say that this is a general criticism of the 'ivory tower' or academy, it is important to also recognize that the academy has been and is inaccessible to marginalized communities and it doesn't support the production of knowledge or scholarship on topics and areas that affect the most vulnerable populations.

Bianca noted that it was demoralizing to think about institutionalized racism as part of the academy. "And so it's like, how to be encouraged about your future when you know that you're not gonna be able to overthrow the whole system that you've identified as unjust, and unfair to people that are impoverished or of color, things like that. It's just like what story do you tell after you realize that ... I don't know." Participants also used the words echo chamber to describe the academy, where mutual understanding has no place in scholarship. Jasmine explains,

I just think that I've seen enough of the academy to know it's pretty much an echo chamber. Whether you're siloed by field, siloed by credential, siloed by institution, it's very siloed. As somebody who did enter disciplinary work her entire career in the academy, I found that nobody really wants to seek mutual understanding because that threatens their dominance. ... I really want to make an impact in the world, and I really want to see change in my lifetime. I also want to be a part of change and I think the academy holds probably none of that. The biggest thing I get from academia, ... is credentials. I know for a fact, as someone

of color, I need as many validators as I can get because I'm already starting laps, miles behind.

Jasmine describes the academy as a silo that is motivated by power and dominance. She shared a strong lack of belief in the academy as a conduit for change. Rather, Jasmine said she would pursue a doctorate only because she would need it as a credential or a validator.

### **Exhaustion and Responsibility**

A reoccurring theme throughout the interviews was the narrative of exhaustion when it came to being a student of color in the academy. Participants repeated used words like 'violence', 'frustration', 'tired', and 'exhausted' to describe their experiences of racial issues in the academy. Aaron noted, "When it comes to surviving the academy as a person of color. I'm reminded of how difficult it was, and I imagine that continuing along this sort of cavalier path could be exhausting." In this case, the academy is something to 'survive' as a person of color and requires creating and forging paths that can be overwhelming. This dismal outlook on the academy resonated throughout the interview responses. Seth shared that always explaining himself and just being a student of color in the context of his scholarship program was labor.

That presents itself as a challenge insofar as not just the disappointment but the labor, the labor of constantly being or having to do the work of providing a counter-narrative, rather a corrective actually to whatever un-nuanced perspectives that folks have, whether they be racist or sexist or classist or you name it. I think it's just realizing as you move up the ranks and return to these spaces where you anticipate or expect there to be a level of outrage that you share but namely, a level of willingness to engage on these challenges of identity and being potentially ostracized in a way.

While carrying a negative view of the academy, many participants shared that they felt a strong sense of responsibility in creating new pathways for the next generation. This sense of responsibility was often described with a certain amount of heaviness. Aaron explained,

I think because I knew that I was a pioneer of sorts in what I was doing, I think there was pressure to make sure I did really well because I wanted other students to come after me. I wanted to make sure that I was leaving a path that other students could follow if they wanted to pursue African Studies. So I think sometimes I did internalize that pressure maybe a bit too much. Ultimately, I just don't want students of color to come to [my college] and have to suffer what me and a lot of my peers suffered through.

Words like 'suffer', 'internalize', and 'pressure' indicate the amount of challenges participants went through while at their college in forging new academic pathways for themselves and others. Similarly, Lydia shared that she feels an immense amount of responsibility to ensure that other people of color feel confident in their studies and ideas.

I feel an intense responsibility. ...I'm responsible for making sure that other people who look like me can feel that same confidence that I feel now because I know how hard it is. I think it is really important for me to be confident in my ideas. ...And so, I feel a deep sense of responsibility. I feel a deep sense of privilege. I know that a lot of people don't grow up to think the way that I do. I think that ideas, especially ... and I can only speak as a black girl, but especially for black girls, are squashed pretty early on. I think imagination is not nurtured and ...so I feel this very deep sense of privilege but also this deep sense of responsibility not to forget how I felt before. And so, there's both a freedom and there's a constraint in that but I think either way, I'm very lucky.

Bianca noted that becoming aware of the barriers that she faced as a person of color felt overwhelming even though it also motivated her to challenge institutions of oppression. "It can feel like I've undermined my self-efficacy, because I'm 20 times, 100 times more aware of barriers than I was before. And I think being aware of those barriers empowers me to be someone who fights to take them down. But then in the process of that, I have to face that at a personal level as well. And that's just like, I think, kind of annoying. And it's like I don't know what story to tell myself or to tell others that makes that any better."

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **DISCUSSION**

The objective of this study was to understand the experiences of students of color in the academy and the meaning of counterstorytelling from participating in research and scholarship programs.

The following research questions were explored in this study: 1) What are the lived experiences of recent alumni of color when they were students at their PWIs and are there common elements to their experience that can be identified? 2) What is the meaning of counterstorytelling for students of color from participating in research and scholarship programs?

#### **Academic versus Social Experience**

This study revealed that the academic and social experiences for participants was very much intertwined. While the interview questions and focus of the study were primarily on the academic experiences of students of color, participants often shared about their social experiences on campus as well. There may be a few reasons why this occurred. First, all of the participants attended residential colleges and most participants lived on campus for all four years of their undergraduate experience, some of the participants were required to live on campus all four years because of their academic scholarship or they received generous financial award packages for housing on campus. Inevitably, as many participant explained, one cannot escape the impact of the social experience when a student both studies and lives on campus. The impact of the social experience on academics has been explored in scholarship (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Hurtado, & Carter, 1997 ). This remained to be consistent in the findings of this study.

While the social experience is paramount to the experiences of students of color and influences their academic experiences, it is possible that participants automatically began discussing their social experiences in the academy because it has been primarily the focus in research on and programming for students of color. Most multicultural, intercultural centers at universities and colleges are organizationally structured to fall under student development or campus life. The majority of scholarship on the experiences of students of color is on their social experiences with public safety, in the residences, and on campus in general (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Hurtado, & Carter, 1997). The scholarship and research on the academic experiences for students of color have often focused on statistics: retention, admissions, attrition etc. rather than the meaning of their lived experiences as scholars. The meaning of the academic experiences for students of color, in it of itself, is a counterstory- a narrative that is subversive to the dominant discourse of ‘you don’t belong’ in the academy. Participants may not be invited, encouraged, and are silenced when it comes to discussing and critically examining their experiences with research, scholarship, and the classroom experiences as people of color. The interviewer often had to re-emphasize the academic nature of the questions. Most participants had to pause and give more thought and time for reflection when it came to their academic experiences, while their social experiences were often the first ones they offered. While it is possible that their social experiences were more poignant and powerful than their academic experience, when participants were invited to reflect on their academic experiences, the narratives were powerful, painful and revealing.

When participants shared about their academic experience, there was a sense of defeat and immutability of the academy. This may also contribute to their preference to speaking about their social experience more readily than their academic experiences. Unlike their social

experiences, where there are often institutional pathways to navigate racial issues (although still flawed), their academic experiences of racial microaggressions seem to have no navigable pathways and contain much more risk with power dynamics. Academic counter are not just peer-peer interactions, it often involved faculty interactions that contained more power dynamics and higher risks in their grades and future career goals. Many participants expressed that addressing curriculum and disciplines that did not include their perspectives and interests was exhausting and often times defeating. They described the academy has an echo chamber with very little if no room for change.

### **The Lack of Institutional Support**

The narratives in this study demonstrated the lack of institutional support participants experienced in pursuing their academic interests. Often, these questions are not even considered in the scholarship on higher education: what do students of color want to study? What are their academic and research interests? Is there institutional support in the academic departments, faculty, and curriculum to support these interests and goals? Largely, the questions surrounding students of color academically have been about admissions in terms of diversity and affirmative action, retention, and attrition. However, in this study, it was clear that participants felt frustrated by the limited nature of faculty, curriculum, courses, and coursework that matched their interests. There was also lack of support in their pursuit of academic topics outside of their racial and cultural identities. Many participants said their institutions were for white students and they were only invited to be a statistic of diversity.

### **The Scholarship Experience**



The narratives demonstrated that the scholarship and research opportunities they participated in provided confidence, pathways, networks and credentialing that were necessary to pursue their fields of study and academic and professional goals. However, this study also revealed that there was a stark contrast in the experiences of participants in programs that were for students of color versus programs consisting of majority white recipients or scholars. Participants who spoke about their experiences in research programs for students of color shared a sense of community that was pivotal in encouraging them in their research endeavors. They also discussed the importance of learning the ‘nuts and bolts’ of how to navigate an academic career. Participants who shared about their scholarship and research experiences in majority programs shared frustrations at the elitist nature of the programs and the lack of understanding and inclusivity in these programs fostered. They also felt that they were expected to be grateful rather than critical of their scholarship experiences. Nevertheless, all participants shared that they would not have been able to pursue their academic or professional paths and take professional risks without their scholarship award and credentials.

### **Echo Chambers**

Participants’ responses revealed that they had very little hope for the academy. Many discussed how they carved out an area of interest or research for themselves or found a small community of support for their academic interests. However, as a whole, they felt that the academy was an echo chamber that would allow for at the most incremental change in terms of academic diversity and inclusion. The findings were particularly interesting in this case because though they had a very negative outlook on the academy, they were wholly invested in their education and paving the path for the next generation. This commitment to the academy despite its inability to change perhaps demonstrates the value of research and scholarship in it of itself.

Though the institution might be slow to change, students of color still gain something positive from engaging in research and scholarship, whether it's producing knowledge and research on areas of their interest or contributing to the incremental long term efforts of change in the academy. As Esther, PhD candidate, shared, “..I'm finding different ways to justify the merits of my work and I have a lot of really, really great mentors to help me do that.”

### **Responsibility & Community**

This study also revealed that regardless of their negative experience of the academy, participants often were invested in their own experience and the experiences of the next generations of scholars of color. They all shared that their ability to navigate the academy and thrive in it despite the many challenges they faced as people of color was through the strength of finding a community of scholars, whether in faculty mentors, peers, or both. An although exhausted by the challenges and microaggressions of the academy, many participants shared that they were committed to making the path easier for those that followed them. Regardless of their lack of belief in the academy, there was still a heavy commitment to providing opportunities for students of color in the academy. Some shared that they wanted it to be easier for the next community of scholars of color. Perhaps, too, there is an understanding that regardless of how challenging the academy is, that it holds value in credentialing as all participants acknowledged in their own experiences, that is critical to achieving their goals. Also, some participants shared that believing in incremental change was enough and that they found spaces to feel supported and thrive as scholars.

Nearly all participants shared that community was a key to their success and ability to ‘survive’ the academy. Many participants shared that this was the most important advice they would give to a younger students of color. It was also one of the major components of their

scholarship and research program that they either touted as nurturing and supporting their intellect and academic goals or discussed as being problematic to their scholarship experience when there was not a supportive academic community available in their programs.

### **Implications for Practice**

Participants narratives demonstrate the importance of supporting research and scholarship of students of color both in the classroom and through academic programming. Historically, colleges and universities have developed models of supporting students of color through a deficit lens such as remedial and retention programs. Scholarship and research opportunities are strength-based approaches that provide academic opportunities beyond the classroom experiences, build confidence through positive mentorship and workshops on navigating the academy, and engage students in the process of developing as scholars. As many institutions are growing their undergraduate research programming both curricularly and co-curricularly, it is paramount to ask critical questions of inclusivity from the onset of the development of these programs and curriculum. The questions of what is research?, who is a scholar? in the academy are too often taken for granted by the dominant discourse that discredits students of color and their research interests.

Furthermore, the importance of research programs specifically for students of color have shown to be incredibly helpful to participants. Programs, like the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Research program, needs expansions and more funding to support more students across more institutions. Scholarship programs also need to reexamine their selection process and beyond selection processes, scholarship programs to need to examine the program experience itself and how they support scholars of color in their programs. As the narratives revealed, supportive scholarly communities for students of color are critical to their ability to thrive in the academic

setting. Academic programs, whether for underrepresented or not, should reflect and integrate components that support community for students of color. This study also suggests that higher education administrators need to critically examine where the primary discourse on diversity and inclusion lives in the institutions. Are resources and programming geared towards just campus life, or is there a concerted effort of resources, dialogue, and action for examining academic programs, curriculum, scholarship, and initiatives?

### **Limitations**

Though this is a pilot study, a limitation of this study is sample size. While the narratives of each participant were rich and provided much depth and context, there are still challenges associated with a limited sample size, including representation across racial groups. Furthermore, though all participants self-identified as people of color, participants disclosed in their responses the complexities and nuances in identifying as a person of color. Participants were also very clear that the intersection of their identities also had a large impact on their experiences in college. The scope of the study did not allow for the exploration of these intersections in depth.

It is also important to note that this study was limited to the experiences of students of color who attended four-year residential colleges and were awarded prestigious academic scholarship and research opportunities. While qualitative studies are not designed to be representative, this study, in particular, focuses on academic experiences that are rare for all demographics across colleges and university and more specifically, for students of color.

Another potential limitation of this study is the concept of code switching that one of the participants shared in his interview response. Robert explained,

I code switch a lot, and I think that it's really easy to get trapped in this sort of gotcha-moment, where yes, the way I talk about my experiences to you would be different from even the way that I talk about my experiences with [my advisor] or the way that I talk about my experiences with [my professor] or how I talk about my experience with my Asian friends in London versus my Asian friends [at college]. I think one of the important things is that, and I don't mean to [mess with] your methodology or anything, but ... Every conversation I have about these experiences are constructed around sort of the relationship that I have with the person I'm talking.

Code switching was a topic that was touched upon by many participants, not specific to this study, but in general about their experiences in the academy. It is important to note that because people of color who attend college are often in positions where they have to code switch academically or professionally to 'belong', there may be elements that impact their interview responses in this study based on their response to the interviewer on this topic.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The findings from this study demonstrate a need for further research on the meaning of counterstorytelling for students of color who participate in academic experiences that focus on 'enrichment' rather than 'remediation'. The study could be expanded on to include more participants that would allow for deeper connections and implications for the study. Also, it would be interesting to further develop observation and research questions on the experiences of scholarship and research programs specifically for students of color rather than programs that are historically dominated by their white counterparts.

### **Conclusion**

This study revealed that the narratives of students of color are powerful counterstories that demonstrate both the challenges and complexities of the experiences of students of color in

higher education and the commitment of students of color to pursue their academic and professional interests and provide pathways for the next generation. Scholarship and research opportunities provided networks, resources, and confidence to pursue academic goals. However, they also presented similar challenges of the university in being a token minority in majority white scholarship programs. Community was highly valued for all participants and a means of survival of the academy for many participants. Moving forward, institutions and research should consider supporting students of color through a strengths-based approach to programming that includes scholarship and research opportunities that are inclusive and diverse.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**IRB APPROVAL LETTER**

University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board 3800 Spruce St., First Floor Suite 151  
Philadelphia, PA 19104 Ph: 215-573-2540 (Federalwide Assurance # 00004028)

26-Jan-2018

Lina Hartocollis lhartoco@sp2.upenn.edu

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR : Lina Hartocollis TITLE : Critical Race Theory and Higher Education: The Meaning of Counterstorytelling for Students of Color SPONSORING AGENCY : No Sponsor Number PROTOCOL # : 828878 REVIEW BOARD : IRB #8**

Dear Dr. Hartocollis:

The above-referenced research proposal was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) on 25-Jan-2018. It has been determined that the proposal meets eligibility criteria for IRB review exemption authorized by 45 CFR 46.101, category 2.

This does not necessarily constitute authorization to initiate the conduct of a human subject research study. You are responsible for assuring other relevant committee approvals.

Consistent with the federal regulations, ongoing oversight of this proposal is not required. No continuing reviews will be required for this proposal. The proposal can proceed as approved by the IRB. This decision will not affect any funding of your proposal.

Please Note: The IRB must be kept apprised of any and all changes in the research that may have an impact on the IRB review mechanism needed for a specific proposal. You are required to notify the IRB if any changes are proposed in the study that might alter its IRB exempt status or HIPAA compliance status. New procedures that may have an impact on the risk-to-benefit ratio cannot be initiated until Committee approval has been given.

If your study is funded by an external agency, please retain this letter as documentation of the IRB's determination regarding your proposal.

Please Note: You are responsible for assuring and maintaining other relevant committee approvals.

If you have any questions about the information in this letter, please contact the IRB administrative staff. Contact information is available at our website:  
<http://www.upenn.edu/IRB/directory>.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

**Kelly  
McGeehan** Digitally signed by Kelly  
McGeehan  
Reason: I attest to the accuracy  
and integrity of this document  
Date: 2018.01.26 13:22:22 -05'00'

IRB Administrator



**APPENDIX B**  
**RECRUITMENT E-MAIL**

Dear [Participant]:

I am writing to you to gauge your interest in participating in my dissertation research study on the meaning of counter-storytelling for students of color. Your participation will be **voluntary** and your responses **confidential**. You are being asked to take part in this research study because you meet the criteria as a recent alumnus(ae) of color who participated in a research and/or scholarship program and graduated in the last five years from a predominately white institution.

If you agree to be in this study, we will conduct one interview with you via Zoom, a virtual and confidential meeting space. The interview will include questions about your experience at your undergraduate institution, your experience of your research and /or scholarship program, and how this program has affected your understanding of yourself as a scholar and your decisions regarding your postgraduate plans. The interview will take about 45 minutes to complete. With your permission, this interview will be recorded.

I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. There are no benefits to you. Being a student of color at a predominately white institution can be challenging, this study has the potential to better understand these experiences and create academic programs that better meet the needs of students of color.

Please be assured that the records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report we make public, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researchers will have access to the records. If we record the interview, we will destroy the recording after it has been transcribed, which we anticipate will be within two months of its taping.

**I would like to reiterate that taking part in this study is completely voluntary.** You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide not to take part or to skip some of the questions, it will not affect your current or future relationship with me. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time. This study has been approved by the International Review Board of the University of Pennsylvania to ensure the ethical treatment of research participants.

If you are interested in participating in this study or have any questions, please let me know by emailing me. Many thanks for your consideration.

All my best,

Hanna Jackson

## APPENDIX C

### CONSENT FORM

You are being asked to take part in a research study of the meaning of counter-storytelling for recent alumni of color who participated in a research and/or scholar program and graduated in the last five years from a predominately white institution. We are asking you to take part because you indicated interest in the study to the researcher. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

**What the study is about:** The purpose of the study is to learn about the meaning of counter-storytelling for recent alumni of color who graduated from predominately white institutions and participated in research and/or scholarship programs.

**What we will ask you to do:** If you agree to be in this study, we will conduct an interview with you via Zoom, a virtual and confidential meeting space. The interview will include questions about your experience at your undergraduate institution, your experience of your research and /or scholarship program, and how this program has affected your understanding of yourself as a scholar and your decisions regarding your postgraduate plans. The interview will take about 45 minutes to complete. With your permission, we would also like to record the interviews via Zoom.

#### **Risks and benefits:**

I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

There are no benefits to you. Being a student of color at a predominately white institution can be challenging, this study has the potential to better understand these experiences and create academic programs that better meet the needs of students of color.

**Your answers will be confidential.** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we make public we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researchers will have access to the records. If we record the interview, we will destroy the recording after it has been transcribed, which we anticipate will be within two months of its taping.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide not to take part or to skip some of the questions, it will not affect your current or future relationship with me. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

**If you have questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Hanna Lee Jackson. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Hanna Jackson. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at **215.573.2540** or access their website at <https://irb.upenn.edu/> .

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Your Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview recorded.

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of person obtaining consent \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name of person obtaining consent \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study.*

**APPENDIX D**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Background Information**

Please answer the following questions and e-mail your responses to Hanna Jackson. Thank you.

1. What year and term did you graduate (i.e. Spring 2014)? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Did you attend a predominately white four year college? Yes/No (circle one)
3. Which research or scholarship programs did you participate in during and/or after college? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your current status in terms of profession or academics (i.e. graduate student, consultant etc.) \_\_\_\_\_
5. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
6. How do you identify yourself racially? \_\_\_\_\_
7. What was your major? \_\_\_\_\_ Minor? \_\_\_\_\_
8. What are the highest levels of education completed by your family members (i.e. some high school, high school diploma, associate's degree, college degree, master's degree, etc.)?

Family Member	Education
Mother	
Father	
Sibling	
Sibling	

## **APPENDIX E**

### **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

#### **Critical Race Theory and Higher Education:**

#### **The Meaning of Counter-storytelling for Students of Color**

1. Please tell me about your academic experiences as a student of color at your university.
2. Can you describe any challenges that you may have encountered in being a scholar in the academy?
3. Students of color I have spoken to who have participated research and scholarship programs have different experiences in their programs. How have you experienced your research and/or scholarship program?
4. What has being a scholar meant to you?
5. What does the program mean to you? Has that changed over time?
6. How did you see yourself as a scholar before the program? During the program? After the program?
7. Can you describe how you fit in at your university as a scholar after participating in your program?
8. Has your approach to your education or professional goals changed since participating in the program? If so, how?
9. What advice would you give to a student of color at your former university?

**APPENDIX F**  
**CODEBOOK**

<b>THEME</b>	<b>CODE</b>	<b>DEFINITION</b>
<p><b><u>Sense of Belonging:</u></b> The experience of belonging both academically and socially on campus.</p>	Social Experiences of Belonging	Participants’ perspective and feelings of belonging surrounding their social experiences (ie. residential life, cultural events, daily social interaction with peers) at college as students of color.
	Academic Experiences of Belonging	Participants’ perspective and feelings of belonging surrounding their academic experiences (ie. classroom experience, advising, research and scholarship) at college as students of color.
	Representation Matters	The impact of not having peers or faculty/staff of color on campus.
	Discipline Matters	The perspective that certain disciplines in the academy are more supportive of students of color than others. The limitation of supportive disciplines, courses, and faculty for students of color.
<p><b><u>Creating Academic Paths:</u></b> The response of participants to challenges of being a student of color in the academy.</p>	Power dynamics	The challenges of navigating the professor and student relationship in addressing racial microaggressions or issues in the classroom.
	Tokenism: A Singular Narrative	The experience of being tokenized by peers and

		faculty to represent or study their racial or ethnic community.
	Invalidation of Intellect and Scholarship	Participants' experiences of research be devalued or invalid. Experiencing patronizing remarks about their intelligence.
<p><b><u>Academic and Professional Possibilities:</u></b> The opportunities that stemmed from participating in research and scholarship programs.</p>	Financial Support	The ability to take more risks and pursue academic paths of their choice because of the financial support of the scholarship programs.
	Network and Social Capital	Experiences of gaining social capital, credentialing, and a powerful network to further navigate academic and professional paths.
	Confidence	Experiences of validation and sense of belonging in identity as scholars.
<p><b><u>Establishing a Scholar Community:</u></b> The importance of having a scholarly community of support.</p>	Validating Scholarly Communities	Experiences of sense of belonging, ability to ask research questions, validation of research and intellect in scholar community.
	Challenges of Predominately White Scholarly Communities	Experiences of invalidation in scholarship programs by white peers.
<p><b><u>Belief in the Academy:</u></b> The believe in the academy's ability to change to be more inclusive and equitable.</p>	Incremental Change	Perspectives that the academy is largely a static institution with only room for incremental change that does hold value.
	Echo Chambers	Perspectives that the academy only seeks to continue the dominant discourse.

<p><b><u>Responsibility:</u></b>  The commitment and weight of being a scholar of color in the academy and paving a better path for future students.</p>	<p>Exhaustion</p>	<p>The experience of being tired and frustrated by the racial microaggressions in the academy.</p>
	<p>The Heaviness of Responsibility</p>	<p>The intense pressure and responsibility of paving a better path for futures students of color and being pioneers in their field of studies or institutions.</p>