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From With−In The Black Diamond: The Intersections of Masculinity, Ethnicity, and Identity−An Epistolary Autoethnographic Exploration into the Lived Experiences of a Black Male Graduate Student

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FROM WITH-IN THE BLACK DIAMOND: THE INTERSECTIONS OF
MASCULINITY, ETHNICITY, AND IDENTITY–AN EPISTOLARY
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION INTO THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF A
BLACK MALE GRADUATE STUDENT

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by
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Dear Opal & Ralph and Evelyn & Bennie,

To my grandparents Opal and Ralph Jones and Bennie and Evelyn Harris Sr., your unconditional love was and still is ever present in my life. Words cannot express the purpose you have given our families and your children.

Your legacies live on today and always through my work and this dissertation.

-From Your Grandson Vincent T. Harris

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Along this journey there have been names and voices I've come to know very well

names like: Dancy, Strayhorn, Harper, Cuyjet, Kimmel, Daly, Ellis, Crenshaw, Cross,

Johnson, McCune, Collins, Smitherman, DuBois and Walker…Although, theses

scholarly names and voices have guided my thoughts and controlled my heart so that I

could release my own lived experiences thorough their work on to these pages. The

following names have been with me before this journey, some I have meet along the way,

and others I will continue to know for the rest of my life. It is for these reasons that I

acknowledge you:

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My Mother Shelia Jones Harris and my Father Rickey E. Harris, Sr. since birth
you knew I was somewhat of a different kid, It seems like you knew some kids belonged
in the front singing loud and literally I was that child. I am thankful for you two raising
me under one roof with two parents. Mom thanks for teaching me "There is NO! dumb
question!" Look Mom all my questions have gotten me to this point and guess what?
Those letters you wrote for my brothers and me paid off. This dissertation is full of
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Loren before I stepped foot in your classroom qualitative research was simply a definition to me, however your style and approach expanded the beauty behind research and caused a seismic shift in my approach to this work, you are truly a blessing to my academic life.

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Roland your passion is contagious and every time I am around you I am filled with a renewed sense of why this work –our work– is valuable and salient through the lenses of higher education locally, nationally, and globally… "Good Stuff!"

Kenny your driving guidance should certainly be emulated, thank you for believing in me and showing me that race is not about skin color it's a complicated and critical construct we must strive to continue to challenge always and in all ways.

<div align="right">

-From Vincent T. Harris,
A Son, Brother, Friend,
Practitioner, & Scholar

</div>

P.S. " 'If you can?' said Jesus. 'Everything is possible for him who believes.' "
<div align="right">–Mark 9:23 (Holy Bible)</div>

Lord God, thank you for giving me life, for daily grace, for being my steady foundation/rock on which I stand, most importantly your love and acceptance of me into your kingdom just as I am, brings me continued peace and joy. This is all for your glory.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

In order to align the goals of the study with the subsequent findings, the following

terms, which have been defined by scholarly literature and personal creation, are

highlighted:

African American:	A person of African descent, born in and a citizen of the United States, whose U.S. ancestry dates back to the enslavement era. – i.e. a Black American, as distinguished from a Jamaican, Haitian, or other Diasporic African. (Smitherman, 1994, p. 44)
Black:	Interchangeable with African American. Still preferred by some Blacks and widely used, but *African American* is becoming the label of choice. Likely to trigger resentment if not capitalized. (Smitherman, 1994, p. 60)
Black Diamond:	Represents the exact center of a diamond a suffocating, tight, closed, intimidating space boldly shaped by gendered institutional practices, cultural pressures, individual and personal expectation related to identity and sexual orientation among Black gay male college students (Harris, 2015/personal definition).
(BGMCS):	Black Gay Male College Student
(BGMGS):	Black Gay Male Graduate Student
Gay:	Those men who have emotional attachments and sexual interaction with other men (Morrow & Messinger, 2006, p. 85)
(GBQQ):	Gay, Bisexual, Queer, and Questioning
(GLBTQ):	Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, & Questioning, Acronym for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. Sometimes "Q" is added to include those who are questioning their sexual orientation (Morrow & Messinger, 2006, p. 472)
Gender Expression:	How a person outwardly manifest, or express, gender (Morrow & Messinger, 2006, p. 472)

Hegemonic
Masculinity: Is defined in opposition to emphasized-femininity, and
                 marginalized masculinities, it is viewed as a configuration of
                 dominant culture and guarantees the dominant position of men and
                 subordinate position of women and marginalized masculinities
                 (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).
                 Note The main properties of hegemonic masculinity is its (invisible) public consent; it is a routine practice; it is
                 normative (its agreed upon) but NOT normal (in a statistical sense); it's almost impossible to embody this dominate
                 conception of masculinity; and at the heart of the properties is the internal struggles by men who are in constant pursuit
                 of developing their own masculinity in an attempt to reach the ideal form of hegemonic masculinity.*

Homophobia: 1.) Fear, hatred, and rejection of GLBTQ people or those presumed to
                 be GLBTQ (Morrow & Messinger, 2006, p. 472). 2.) In America, the
                 fear of ostracism may be greatest in the black community, where
                 masculinity is especially prized (McCune, 2014,p. 32).

Identity: Relates to organized sets of characteristics an individual perceives
                 as definitively representing the self (Morrow & Messinger, 2006, p.
                 85).

(PWI):   Predominately White Institution

Quare
Theory: 1.) A lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered person of color who
                 loves other men or women, sexually and/or nonsexually, and
                 appreciates black culture and community 2.) one for whom sexual and
                 gender indentities always already intersect with racial subjectivity
                 (Johnson & Henderson, 2005, p. 125)

Queer: Deviating from the expected or normal, something that is strange. A
                 historically slang term for gay or lesbian (Morrow & Messinger,
                 2006, p. 473).

Questioning: The process of people exploring their sexual orientation (Morrow &
                 Messinger, 2006, p. 473).

Sexual
Discretion: Black masculinity and the politics of passing is an attempt to situate
                 the down low and black men's private sexual practices within a
                 larger historical and cultural framework, while also attending to the
                 labor and black masculinity as an organizing structure for how
                 communities are constituted, as well as represented in media
                 (McCune, 2014, p. 5)

ABSTRACT

From With-In The Black Diamond: (Black Diamond) autoethnographically explores the lived experiences of a Black male who navigates his way through a predominately white higher education institutions while existing within marginalized spaces related to his gender, ethnicity, and identity. Black Diamond uses epistolary writing techniques to explore question research question:

1. How has a Black Gay male graduate student studying Higher Education negotiated his way to and through predominately white higher education institutions?

In order to support the answering of this question I will argue that the most influential reasons higher education literature rarely addresses controversial topics related to GLBTQ college students' are due to: (a) gender norms and masculine ideals; (b) ethnicity and cultural phenomena; (c) and the politics of identity and sexual orientation, as they are expressed at a PWI in the South. Higher education literature avoids studies that marvel the lived experiences of BGMCS in the South. These students' truths, my own momentary truths, as it relates to achieving what success means to me which exploring my own interactions with other straight Black males are rare if not nonexistent. This avoidance is largely a result of homophobia in the Black community, which seeps into the campus culture at a PWI in the South.

CHAPTER ONE: GREETINGS (INTRODUCTION)

Dear Vincent,

On February 19, 2013, you had the honor of attending what you did not realize at the time was one of Maya Angelou's last performances. As you stood up from your front row seat at the LSU Student Union Theater, with each step down the darkly lit exit, you left transformed, you looked intrigued, and as you inhaled the chilly Louisiana air you exhaled a renewed appreciation for poetry. You reflected on one of your favorite poets, Langston Hughes, and his iconic poem "I, Too". Filled with the echoes of Angelou's poetry and the memories of Hughes' proclamation, you were inspired to write your own interpretation of I, Too:

I, Too, am a Black man

I am the less masculine brother
They send me to live in a closet
When family comes
But I contemplate
And reflect well,
And grow stronger.

Tomorrow,
I'll be open the closet
When PRIDE comes
Nobody will dare
Say to me,
"Live in the closet"
Then.

Besides,
They'll realize how much of a son, brother, and MAN I am
And be ashamed–

I, Too, am a Black man.

Published in 1945, Hughes' poem was a plea to be recognized as an American during a time when the oppression of his skin color and gender did not afford him the same rights and liberties as white Americans. Similarly, your rendition explored your experience as a Black gay male struggling too, particularly in accepting your own identity amidst oppressive worldviews held by your family and those predominantly white institutions that you attended in the South.

Jagose (1996) wrote, "those [you] who see identity as fluid, [and] the effect[s] of social conditioning" as independent of culture, hold a constructionist worldview (p 8), as opposed to those [your family and some individuals on campus] who hold an essentialist

worldview, believing that identity is biological and permanent, relationally dependent on one's culture (Jagose, 1996). Existing within a family, whose values regarding identity do not reflect your own, is indicative of your existing in an in-between place (Edwards, 2010). You find yourself existing in a space where you too struggle to live as the [Black] man, son, brother, grandson, uncle, and cousin your entire family expects. You balance these expectations alongside being the friend, classmate, dude, partner, and bestie (sic) that your fictive-kin value (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010).

Comparable to Edwards (2010), you found yourself existing in this in-between place, not to cultivate a comfortable space or a "unitary core self" for other Black males like yourself to exist among, but rather as a space of counteractions (p.120). However, you hope to one day help create a place where your identity and your story are valued in your family and in the institutions in which you work. A place where your cousins, nephews, and your own future kids can also have a safe space to openly share their lived experiences and their identities. Although at this point you are not sure if they even want to have such a space, you would rather a space exists, resulting in future family members leaving their closet door open. The space represents awareness, which leads to acceptance, tolerance, and support. The responsibility is yours. As an occupier of this in-between place, this closeted, trapped space, use your work, use this dissertation, as a lighthouse for future family members, friends, college administrators and professors, but most importantly for Black Gay male college students to find their way to a place of internal acceptance (Edwards, 2010).

As a researcher you can relate to Dancy (2010) and Strayhorn (2010) who stated the Black male college experience consists of anti-academic phobias, hypersexual stereotypes, and unfair racist categorizing. Existing hegemonic norms associated with being a man encourage Black male college students to stay within the margins of masculinity (Dancy, 2010; Kimmel & Messner, 2013; Strayhorn, 2010). You struggle to stand along these margins everyday. You recognize, however, that you are not stumbling alone. There are hundreds, no, thousands, of Black gay male undergraduates and graduate students, student–leaders, and student–athletes who occupy this in-between space, reluctantly experiencing simultaneous moments of pride and shame. This suffocating, tight, closed, intimidating space, known to many as a closet, but to you a Black Gay male in college, forms an invisible outer shell, known as a Black Diamond.

What happens to a student of color when both his ethnicity and sexual orientation identities are historically oppressed? How does the intersectionality of a Black male student's race, gender, and sexuality construct this in-between place? This Black Diamond is cut, shaped, and polished by various phobias you encountered in college and also from your family. Being Black, gay, and a man, each designation has its own individual meanings, all of which are hyper-emphasized on a college campus. Inside this diamond stands a confused gay, bi-sexual, queer –or– questioning (GBQQ) Black male screaming for support, acceptance, and tolerance for his multiple identities.

Families and college administrators and professors must acknowledge and act on the research illustrating the factors faced by GBQQ Black males who might be struggling

to accept their identities. Their existence, your existence, in this in-between place, cannot last much longer. You yearn for the day when an act of tolerance or a gesture of acceptance will powerfully shatter your Black Diamond, filling your lungs with a rush of air, the same unashamed air your oppressors comfortably inhale on a daily basis.

-From With-In the Black Diamond

Problem Statement

Autoethnographic personal narrative research regarding the lived experiences of Black gay male college student's viewpoints concerning success and same-gender friendships, while attending a predominantly white institution in the South in American higher education academic literature, is essentially nonexistent (Dancy, 2012; Franklin, 1992; Nardi, 1992; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Research on how Black gay male college students (BGMCS) view friendship with other Black college aged men is an emerging area of discussion (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). There is a breadth of academic literature discussing Black men in higher education that draws on their experiences of success while attending a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the South; ideas surrounding how interactions among Black males are implicated when considering sexual identity are limited or narrow at best (Dancy, 2012; Cuyjet, 2006; Franklin, 1992; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). The lack of research regarding this population of students is akin to the uncomfortable trends on a campus of higher education when discussing gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (GLBTQ) related topics. Until dialogue related to GLBTQ issues includes intersections of ethnicity and gender, and is addressed across college campuses without hesitation, welcoming environments for Black male students in this community will not exist in ways that help shape how individuals positively construct themselves (Chase, 2001).

Research Question

The following research question guided the development of this study:

1. How has a Black Gay male graduate student studying Higher Education negotiated his way to and through predominately white higher education institutions?

Purpose of the Study

To answer this question I argue that the most influential reasons higher education literature rarely addresses controversial topics related to GLBTQ college students are: (a) gender norms and masculine ideals; (b) ethnicity and cultural phenomena; (c) and the politics of identity and sexual orientation, as they are expressed at a PWI in the South. Higher education literature avoids studies that marvel the lived experiences of BGMCS/BGMGS in the South. These student truths, my own momentary truths, are rare if not nonexistent as they relate to achieving what success means to me while exploring my interactions with other straight Black males. This avoidance was largely a result of homophobia in the Black community, which seeped into the campus culture at a PWI in the South.

McCune (2014) explained that Black culture has traditionally avoided discussing issues related to GLBTQ identity stating, "Homophobia–the irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals–has deep roots throughout the world. But in America, the fear of ostracism may be greatest in the Black community, where masculinity is especially prized" (p. 31-32). In a culture where being left out stems from Black Americans' cultural past, inclusion is a prized commodity for marginalized group of students who attend a PWI in the South. Students like me…

Dear Reader,

As long as I can remember, I have been infatuated with belonging, not feeling like an outcast, rather feeling the same; I wanted to feel like everyone else. It was only until recently that I could articulate these feeling in one word, and that's "friendship." Since I can remember I have always wanted to have friends and to know who would be my friend. When I got to Auburn University I sought out a friendship, a male friendship that would potentially blossom into a term I had never been able to use with much confidence, the term "best friend".

Growing up in a house with two older brothers, a plethora of cousins, and neighborhood friends to play with, I never really considered the need for a friend. I assumed I had friends already. But that wasn't the case. In college at Auburn I quickly found out that it wasn't as easy as it looked to find a best friend.

I'm not sure if it was my high pitched voice…
I'm not sure if it was because I did not dress like every other guy on campus…
I wasn't sure if it was because most of my friends my freshman year were girls…
But I did not find a friend until I joined my fraternity…

And then, even after moments of extreme vulnerability, with my line brothers and chapter brothers, I still questioned their friendship towards me. I assumed wholeheartedly that our bond, our brotherhood, was a result of a fraternal bond and not a friendship. Nevertheless, the lack of or longing for a friend, a form of friendship, has always been a part of me.

After all these years, I know that my identity as a Black Gay man has led me to think that I have missed out on some lifelong friendships because of my sexual identity. It is with this knowledge or confusion that I approach one aspect of a study about myself and to address lived experiences surrounding Black male friendships at a PWI in the South. Why is it harder for someone like me to find friends in college…? What is the significance of friendship when you are a Black gay male college student…? Because of my identity, because of not knowing who I am or what I –want/– should be, did I indirectly create these moments of isolation for myself…? What then becomes of a friendless college student…? Who identifies with me and for what reasons…?

I continue this search….

-From Somewhere in My Past

Harper and Nichols' (2008) research suggested higher education literature avoids

highlighting the experiences of BGMCS/BGMGS due to a universal heterogeneity

worldview that all Black male undergraduates are the same. Much literature employs a

racially and sexual identity homogenous vantage point in its portrayals of Black male

undergraduates. Research assumes all Black male undergraduates, "share one common

experience and can (or should) be able to comfortably interact with each other because of

it [their race and sexual identity]" (Harper & Nichols, 2008, p. 2-3). This

homogenization among Black male undergraduates makes it increasingly problematic

when attempting to gather individual lived experiences of an ethnicity (Harper &

Nichols, 2008). The potential to exacerbate interactions between gay and straight Black

male college students and the extent to which Black male college students are

homogeneously viewed continues to: (a) ignore and marginalize conversations

surrounding healthy interactions among BGMCS; (b) maintain exclusion from influential

spaces such as higher education journals, campus conversations and polices; and (c)

institutionalize gendered oppressive practices used throughout PWIs in the South.

Dear Vincent,

You enter a space where you are both a part of the in crowd, and out-side at the same time, a middle space inhabited by others, others like yourself. This middle space is the space you want to discover, to reveal, to share with anyone who will listen… but mostly you urge college administrators, professors, deans and campus officials who will inevitably come in contact with men like you to read this and LISTEN to your story. The strangest thing happened; you discovered the best person to share this type of story was no one else but YOU.

Your story is from your lived experiences….

…To the blank pages of this once white word document

…To individual eyes and hopefully to their actions.

The middle is neither neat nor clean; it is an intricate place where others like yourself do exist, and in this case–you the author–sharing with yourself and others the meanings behind Black male success and friendship at PWI in the South when that Black man happens to be gay.

-From With-In the Black Diamond

My research compliments the limited qualitative (Harper & Harris, 2010; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013; Washington & Wall, 2006; Young, 2007) and miniscule narrative research (Johnson, 2005, 2008; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013; Waymer, 2008; Williamson, 2011; Young, 2007) dedicated to creating a space for BGMCS/BGMGS and their lived experiences both in non- and academic literature. The use of personal narrative in autoethnography demonstrates the complexities taking place when gender, identity, and ethnicity intersect within an existing marginalized race-group attending a PWI in the South. My research question led to the selection of personal narrative autoethnography to uncover the continuous sense making behind the lived experiences of a Black male student who struggles to fit into fixed categorizations of gender, identity, and ethnicity influenced by geographical location and institutional choice (Waymer, 2008).

The following section reviews the literature broadly related to concepts of identity construction in boyhood and Black boyhood; gender expression in Gay boyhood and boyhood in Gay boys of color; manhood among males, Black males, Gay males, and Black Gay males in college. I highlighted aspects of the studies related to friendship and peer groups by broadly discussing friendship, male friendship, Black male friendship, Gay Black male friendship with straight men, and Gay Black male friendship and belonging. The purpose of this section is to provide a vivid backdrop of literature that I used to interpret my lived experiences as a BGMG who navigated successfully through a PWI in the South.

Next, I introduce more specific evaluation of theoretical frames that guided and informed this study: (a) Concepts of success among BGMCS framed by Cross' (1991)

Black Identity Development's (BID) theory of *Nigrescence*; (b) Johnson's (2005) Quare (*sic*) theory of Black male sexuality identity awareness, and Kimmel and Messner's (2013) theoretical concept of gendered beings; (c) Baxter Magolda's Theory of Self-Authorship as framed through the experiences of BGMCS; and (d) Crenshaw et al., (1989; 1995) use of intersectionality within Critical Race Theory. Finally, inserted between non-linear, and at times deliberate, places throughout this section and previous sections are *italicized excerpts* from my own journals, thoughts, reflections, poems, experiences, memories, fears, hopes, dreams, and moments of awakening. I explain in detail the purpose of these excerpts in chapter three through my methods section, as written forms of autoethnographic academic work do not resemble traditional forms of academic dissertations or articles.

CHAPTER TWO: THE BODY (REVIEW OF LITERATURE)

Dear Vincent,

On a late weekday night in May of 2013, after you cried your eyes out over a excruciating break up, you picked up a book, <u>Freedom in this Village: Twenty –five Years of Black Gay Men's Writing</u>, and one of the first stories that stood out to you was Shepherd's (1986) essay, "On Not Being White". Although as long as you could remember, accepting your ethnicity had never been an issue for you… your problem had always been your identity. Shepherd (1986) wrote:

> Myself being in this context a twenty-two year old black gay man (how odd to think of myself as a 'man': isn't it always the others who are men?) with nearly exclusive attraction to white men. A black man who fears and sometimes loathes most other black men. A black man, afraid of white men and deeply resentful of their power over me, both sexual and social. A gay man afraid of men. Naturally concomitant is that I'm afraid of myself. Every fear is a desire. Every desire is a fear...The burden of my identity has always been the burden of not being white (p.49-50).

In his personal essay entitled "On Not Being White", Shepherd, (1986) carefully explained the affects the actions of discrimination can have on Black gay men like you.

A main theme of this destructive imagery revolved around the ideas you learned in class by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) termed the "pursuit of hegemony". The pursuit of hegemony is racialized as the pursuit of White hegemony explains the patterns of aggression connected to males, particularly males of color, who attempt to reach white hegemonic masculinity (Dancy, 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is understood as the repetition of behaviors (e.g. performances of actions, not just a standard set of gender expectations or individuality). Although perceived as the normal performance of all men, realistically only a minority of men are able to actually preform hegemonic masculinity, however history continues to illustrate it as normative (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argued that masculinity is not fixed in the physical bodies or character traits of men like most people think. Rather masculinity is contextual based on an arrangement of, "practice[s] that are accomplished in social action and, …can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 836). Understanding how most Black men establish their own masculinity in relation to hegemonic masculinity is a complex and difficult concept to digest in a few sentences. However, understanding how Black gay male college students like you construct y'all's concepts of what it means to be a gay man who happens to be Black, is an even more intricate idea you hope to shed light on in your study.

-From With-In the Black Diamond

Studies of Identity Construction through a Gendered Educational Lens

Men construct their identities at various ages, in various contexts, and they are comprehensively influenced by various lived experiences. As in most areas in American Higher Education, however, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation complicate traditional forms of identity construction regarding Black Gay men. This section discusses how the performance of masculinity for Black boys is racialized and gendered. I explain why Black boys growing up intentionally seek out ethnic-based bonds between other Black *boyz* for support and comfort. I use existing literature to demonstrate how a boy's ethnicity intersects with his boyhood, exacerbating tensions between gender roles and masculinity. I then apply these same epistemologies as they relate to Black men entering manhood and their pursuit of masculinity, hegemonic norms, and acceptable social constructs associated with being a man, a Black man, a Gay man, and a Black Gay man while in college. Lastly, I conclude with a discussion of friendship through ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation lenses and its importance to the lived experiences of BGMCS/BGMGS successfully attending a PWI in the South.

Boyhood

Young boys learn to practice ways of masculinity years before they set foot on a university campus (Davis & Laker, 2004; Ludeman, 2004). Although today boys perform gender in many ways, most boys are still inundated with messages that are often classed and contradicting depending on a boy's ethnicity. Although this message is dated, it remains the standard within a "larger historical and cultural framework" that has maintained the brand for "*real boys*" of today (Brown, 1965; McCune, 2014, p. 5).

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Brown (1965) wrote:

> In the United States a real boy climbs trees, disdains girls, dirties his knees, plays with soldiers, and takes blue for his favorite color. [ ] When they go to school, real boys prefer manual training, gym, and arithmetic. [ ] In college the boys smoke pipes, drink beer, and major in engineering or physics. [ ] The real boy matures into a 'man's man' who plays poker, goes hunting, drinks brandy, and dies in war (p. 161).

Brown's (1965) example of masculinity claimed *real boys* are "rigid, sexist, or restricted [in] gender role[s]" that are cultivated during elementary school (Davis & Laker, 2004, p. 50). In this rudimentary educational space, boys who fight, verbally "hold their own," and "don't cry", are just "boys being boys" (Davis & Laker, 2004, p. 50; Edwards & Jones, 2009). However, for Black boys in elementary school the performance of masculinity is maintained through multiple influencing factors called "cultural conventions" (Ferguson, 2000, p. 85). The racializing of hegemonic masculinity starts in childhood for Black boys.

Black Boyhood

As children Black boys are seen as deviant, confrontational, troublemakers, verbally abusive, and fighters (Ferguson, 2000). Ferguson (2000) explained that Black boys are expected to fight and cause trouble; as a result, a larger number of Black males are sent to in-school suspension as a consequence, which creates a pipeline to the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2010). The concepts of fighting and troublemaking represent a brand, an identity label attached to Black boys throughout adulthood; this identity is maintain by the authoritative influence of *others*, who are often the controllers of these deviant cultural conventions (Kivel, 1999).

These cultural conventions regulate a Black boy's speech and body performances in ways that widely denote black- and brown- skinned male youth as pathological

menaces, rather than being seen as just *boys being boys* (Ferguson, 2000). By elementary

school, expectations for *real boys* include participating in sports, vying for access to

girls' bodies regulated through competitive bets, and demonstrating their strength by

fighting or being disruptive (Edwards & Jones, 2009; Pascoe, 2005). In middle school,

Black boys realize that branding themselves as an aggressive verbal performer (i.e., using

extreme profanity in the presence of teachers, being verbally sexist toward women, etc.)

is a salient way for Black boys to establish a strong reputation, create a name for

themselves, and achieve a high level of cultural capital (Ferguson, 2000).

Establishing a strong reputation is often essential to most Black boyz (*sic*) who

grow up in urban areas. Black "boys" see value in becoming one of the "boyz" (*sic*) and

at a young age Black boys look up to the older more mature, athletic, charismatic,

hypersexualized (*sic*) boyz in their hood (Dancy, 2005; Franklin, 1992; Payne, Starks, &

Gibson, 2009; Smitherman, 2001). Young Black *boyz* are nurtured by their families,

community, and lessons learned from centuries of oppression and marginalization that

they are stronger as a unified front (Collins, 2000; Cuyjet, 2006). This unified front is

highlighted excessively in athletics where Black *boyz* are trained to rely on their

teammates to defeat the opposition (Cuyjet, 2006; Kimmel, 2008). Ultimately, young

Black boys just want to be *one of the guys* who to them seem more mature, athletic, and

charismatic (Payne et al., 2009; Smitherman, 2001). Unfortunately, ethnicity and cultural

backgrounds complicate the meaning of being *one of the guys*, as young Black "boys"

soon recognize that in the larger community and society, *one of the guys* translates into

being *one of the niggas* who have been found to be associated with stigmatized, angry,

and negatively stereotyped *boyz* in their hood (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Gibbs, 1994; Madhubuti, 1990; Payne et al., 2009).

It is a rite of passage to enter into a "cool" clique or friendship group where you have your *boyz* to watch you back, to hang with, to mischievously enter into a space where they know that they are accepted, where the rules of the space are simple and represent, "someone who won't let you down…[someone who] will stick by you through thick and thin" (Franklin, 1992; Majors, Tyler, Peden & Hall, 1994, p. 246; Harper & Nichols, 2008). In "Contextualizing Black Boys' Use of a Street Identity in High School," researchers Payne, Starks, and Gibson (2009) tackled the use of *street identity* from the perspective of Black boys in high school and how this identity proved useful and informative for educators. The *streets* offer a psychological and physical space that work in tandem to create a foundation of strength, community, and ultimately resiliency for street-life-oriented Black *boyz* (Payne et al., 2009).

Payne et al., (2009) suggested that educators' lack of understanding of how Black boys' street life mentality impacts their classroom behaviors and results in systematic academic and behavioral tracking into remedial or special education pipelines. After surveying 156 participants in two northeast cities, portions of the results demonstrated that, although Black boys generally held negative attitudes towards current educational experiences, they still had positive thoughts about learning (Payne et al., 2009).

Additionally, Smitherman's (2001) research shed light on how the use of the Black dialect, voice, and the language of Ebonics shape a space where Black boys maintain support and familiarity. For example, the term *boy* was historically used by white America to emasculate Black men, cornering them into this claustrophobic

youthful space well into their adulthood (Smitherman, 2001). As a result, Black boys have endeared the word *boy* into welcoming terms such as bro, *boyz*, bruh, or home, unconsciously representing "political statements connoting survival, togetherness, and commonalty" shared among one another (Franklin, 1992, p. 206; Majors et al., 1994). Black boys growing up intentionally seek out ethnic-based bonds with other Black *boyz* for support and comfort against a litany of stigmas and biases regarding their ethnicity; similarly, parents of boys who are assumed to be GBQQ at an early age attempt to protect their sons from their perceived deviant sexual identity.

Gender Expression and Gay Boyhood

Literature with data of young boys who actually identify has GBQQ is scarce; as a result, I use researched data surrounding parental response to children's gender nonconformity (Kane, 2006). In the womb parents actively gender their children; research shows that its not until age two that children become participants in shaping their own concepts of gender (Kane, 2006). For young boys, there is a strong push to produce appropriate forms of masculinity that demonstrate hegemonic norms and masculine gender expression (Kane, 2006; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Gender expression is defined as "how a person outwardly manifests, or expresses, gender" (Morrow & Messinger, 2006, p. 472). Since children are viewed as impressionable, parents or guardians play a significant role in a children's social construction of their own gender; particularly boys are taught to embrace the "Act–Like–a–Man" box [Figure 1:1], denying all feelings, emotions, or activities that deem them more feminine, thereby less masculine (Kane, 2006; Kivel, 1999).

"Act Like a Man" Box

VERBAL ABUSE:					PHYSICAL ABUSE:
	tough			have money	
	aggressive			never ask for help	
		anger			
wimp ➤	competitive			angry	◄ hit/beat up
		sadness			
girl ➤	in control	love		yell	◄ teased
		connection			
sissy ➤	no feelings			intimidate	◄ isolated
		confusion			
Mama's boy ➤		low self-worth		responsible	
	don't cry				
nerd ➤		resentment			◄ rejected
				take it	
fag ➤	take charge	curiosity			◄ forced to play sports
		excitement		don't back down	
punk ➤	don't make mistakes	isolation			
mark ➤				have sex with women	◄ sexual assault
bitch ➤	succeed				

(Oakland Men's Project in Kivel, 1999, p. 12)

Figure 1:1 ("Act–Like–a–Man", Kivel, 1999)

Being *just another curious kid* has different meanings for young boys, as playing with toys like Barbie dolls or playing dress–up evokes a strong sense of objection from some parents, noting that, "girls play with [Barbie dolls], boys play with trucks" (Kane, 2006, p. 63). Research has shown that parents believe that playing with gender based toys is an indication of a child's future sexual orientation, resulting in most parents taking immediate action to discourage a GLBTQ identity in their kids by overemphasizing heterosexual hegemonic tendencies (Kane, 2006). Overall, parents report an intrusive responsibility to ensure that their sons maintain a clear connection between male heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity by rejecting feminine expressions of gender in children (Kane, 2006; Kivel, 1999; Morrow & Messinger; Kimmel & Messner, 2013).

Research in this section demonstrates that gender expression among most boys is not full of nurturing, playful, teachable moments about what is considered appropriate for boys' behavior; comparatively, when a boy's ethnicity intersects in this boyhood, tensions between gender roles and masculinity are exacerbated on many levels.

Gender Expression and Boyhood in Gay Boys of Color

Similar to the scare literature using data from young boys who actually identify has GBQQ, academic literature on young Black gay boys is essentially nonexistent. Popular cultures, however, including blogs, YouTube, and other social media outlets, have much to say about this under researched group of children. The profile page ItsOk2Write posted a YouTube video entitled "Little Black Gay Boys" and in his clip he mentioned popular social awareness platforms of leaders and celebrities within the Black community (2014, June 27). ItsOk2Write (2014, June 27) explained that Oprah Winfrey's platform is to enrich the lives of women and young girls across the world; Bill Cosby's platform is to raise awareness of higher education, particularly Historically Black Colleges and University's (HBCU) among young Black kids. ItsOk2Write posed the question, however, of "Who speaks up and speaks out for the little Black gay boy…not just in this country but around the globe…who cry's for the little Black gay boy? " (2014, June 27).

As a researcher I asked the same question, but through the academic lens of, "How we can create a classroom environment at an early age that cultivates conversations surrounding the intersection of ethnicity and sexual identity among students in grades K-8?" When is it appropriate to communicate Lorde's (2012) explanation of differences, "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to

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recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences" (p. 45). Without healthy conversation

about those differences, homophobia is manifested to inform misunderstandings, hate,

and suicide among young boys, and especially young gay boys of color. It is reported

that 93% of youth experience a homophobic slur occasionally at school and 51% hear

these slurs on a daily basis (Pascoe, 2011). These harsh numbers are reasons why some

mothers of Black gay sons worry about their sons' lives. In the blog post, "An Open

Letter to my Black Gay Son: I'll Always Worry," Williamson (2011, September 3)

poignantly shared her feelings about her Black Gay son: "Being a black man in American

is hard enough…A black man, standing tall, proud of his heritage, intellectual, and

unafraid is more perilous than an atomic bomb" (para. 5).

In a similar blog "My Black Son's Pink Shoes", a mother recognized that her little

boys' sexuality was not a choice, however she acknowledged that his remaining life–

choices must be filtered through a mindfulness of his sexual identity, unlike his other

peers. Rose-Cohen (2011, August 8) explained her son will eventually grow into a Black

man who will occupy spaces where as a mother she cannot rescue him; she shared, "You

have to teach him what people are going to say, and how to respond, and let him chose

when he feels like taking that risk." For a boy regardless of his ethnicity or sexual

orientation, entering manhood is another step closer to his pursuit of masculinity,

hegemonic norms, and acceptable social constructs associated with being a man.

Manhood Among Males in Higher Education

Real boys transition into manhood throughout high school. As young men they

are expected to experience a surge of testosterone, anti–academics, and sexually activity,

be open to experimentation with drugs and alcohol, and most importantly not be gay

(Edwards & Jones, 2009). College–aged men constantly practice *man-upping behaviors*, becoming fatigued in their pursuit of these masculine expectations (Edwards & Jones, 2009). During the journey to "man up!" college-aged men make countless unhealthy choices (Davis & Laker, 2004). Men typically outnumber women in multiple negative behavioral categories such as alcohol consumption, alcohol abuse, and alcohol dependence (Capraro, 2000). These problematic behaviors are generated mostly by the theory of, as Pollack (1999) wrote, a *gender straitjacket*, stitched together by a plethora of mixed nonverbal messages nestled in between "narrow, rigid, and limited [models] of being a man" (Edwards & Jones, 2009, p. 214). Simultaneously these *man-upping behaviors* are exacerbated at a collegiate level, by serving as a direct motivator for these males in their pursuit of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

This gender straitjacket is also highly racialized (Pollack, 1999). My study highlights how intersections of gender, race, and sexuality are woven together creating a racialized gender straightjacket worn by Black male college students. These intersecting identities create stereotypical expectations of Black males in college, shaping how men unconsciously embody, negatively combat, or tirelessly work to demystify their own senses of masculinity (Collins 2000; Cuyjet, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010).

Black Manhood Among Males in Higher Education

Young Black men enter into a realm of *coolness* as they approach high school. Acting cool, or "cool pose", functions as a coping mechanism for Black males to manage their "self–presentation to others" in spaces where stereotypes of the "Dangerous Negro" are strategically avoided with the use of a "cool pose" (Majors et al., 1994, p. 246). Majors et al., (1994) wrote:

To many Black males, demeanor, mannerisms, speech, gestures, clothing, stance, hairstyles, and walking styles are ways to act cool and show the dominant culture that they are strong, proud, and capable of survival despite their low status in society (p. 247).

Similar to Black boyhood, in Black manhood, Black men have placed a "cool cloak" over the use of the word "nigguh", that to some might denote a derogatory racial epithet (nigger), however for most Black American men the term "nigguh" is a term of endearment (Smithernman, 2001). As Black men transition from high school to college, particularly those who enroll in a PWI in the South, there is oftentimes a conflict between white administrators, professors, and campus police in regards to Black males; this conflict stems from a misunderstanding of the intent of their culturally-specific behaviors (Collins 2000; Cuyjet, 2006; Majors et al., 1994; Strayhorn, 2010). As a result, Black males enter spaces like a PWI in the South, using this "cool pose" as *armor* against a socially constructed educational space that prematurely makes them feel unwelcomed, judged, demoralized, hyper-sexualized, and academically deficient as compared to their white counterparts (Dancy, 2014; Harris, 2012; Harper, 2009; Majors et al., 1994; Strayhorn, 2010)

Black males who attend a PWI in the South exist within an institution tainted with a racist history that disrupts the college experiences of Black male students (Strayhorn, 2010). Black men describe the climate and environment of PWIs as both "chilly," and "restrictive" (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). These unwelcoming feelings are related to Black males experiencing intersecting forms of oppression that combine and clash with one another (Collins 2000; Cuyjet, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010).

Scholars have studied Black male college students with respect to fraternal brotherhood and hazing (Harper & Harris, 2006); affect of collegiate athletics (Messer,

2006); spiritual and religious beliefs (Dancy, 2010;Watson, 2006); mentoring

relationships (Sutton, 2006; Harris, 2012); community ties (Cuyjet, 2006); family or

"*fictive kin*"(Strayhorn, 2010); lack of knowledge in prevention of HIV/AIDS (Lemelle &

Battle, 2004); objectification of women (Dancy, 2005); representations at Historically

Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006); struggles with

retention and attrition (Cuyjet, 2006); and how existing pre–college factors inhibit their

academic and social transition into college (Cuyjet, 2006; Harris, 2012).

Research shows that Black males find it hard to walk around campuses of PWIs

without being judged or criticized (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). As a result, Black male

college students are stereotyped and experience moments of seclusion (Dancy, 2005).

Black male college students, particularly athletes who are largely assumed to be

heterosexual, are "widely perceived as campus heroes for their athletics prowess, virile

appearances, and attractiveness to women" (Dancy, 2005, p. 2). Straight Black college

males are perceived as hyper-sexualized, misogynistic, sexually promiscuous, anti–

intellectual, belligerent, and disrespectful (Dancy, 2005). These burly representations of

Black masculinity cultivate a middle space in which Black male college students have to

enter an uncomfortable stage of myths or realities, between the authentic and the

performance, abrasively accepting the role of Atlas and his cumbersome responsibility to

navigate through four years of systemic oppression (Dancy, 2014).

Gay Manhood Among Males in Higher Education

Like Atlas, the Greek mythological Titan whose punishment was to hold the

celestial spheres on his shoulders, gay men in America often feel they are doing the same

with the weight of hegemonic expectations. Gendered norms and values such as well to

do and non-threatening reflect the "true" gay experience, significantly represented in media as "upper-middle class – if not simply rich – and white" (Han, 2007). The media has attempted to illustrate the "true" gay experience with trendy T.V. shows like Bravo's 2007 breakout reality show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and more recently NBCs 2012 short lived sitcom *The New Normal.* Neither of these shows had males of color as main characters; in *The New Normal* the person of color was an ancillary character used mostly as a comical relief. Both T.V. shows include a starring cast of white men who represent the "all American boy," one who was Caucasian with a lean, hard, trophy-like body, alongside ancillary male characters of color, such as *Queer Eye's* Jai Rodriguez who was of Puerto Rican and Italian descent (Han, 2007; *"Queer Eye Guys Will Reunite,"* 2013, September 18).

The media continues to establish whiteness as an institutional norm in America's gayborhoods (*sic*), sustaining these stigmas through vigilant forms of racism and discrimination against gay men of color. Since the transformational 1969 Stonewall Riots in the Greenwich Village neighborhood in New York City, non-white gay, bisexual, queer, or questioning (GBQQ) men of color have endured various forms of racial discrimination in gay spaces throughout the country (Han, 2007). The overrepresentation of the unattainable "white" images and discrimination and racism has impacted how Black gay men classify themselves in public and, I argue, at PWIs in the South.

Black Gay Manhood Among Males in Higher Education

BGMCS/BGMGS are victimized and experience extreme isolation because of their confirmed or assumed sexual identity (Washington & Wall, 2006; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010; Dancy, 2010). On a college campus BGMCS/BGMGS, are called *faggots,*

viewed as weak, seen as less than a man, God's-mistakes, or blokers [*sic*] (Edwards &

Jones, 2009; Johnson, 2005; Pascoe, 2005; Strayhorn, 2010; Washington & Wall, 2006).

At the core of this victimization are questions surrounding masculinity. Hegemonic

gender scripts and expectations at PWIs play a significant role informing how

BGMCS/BGMGS construct and perform their racialized and gendered sexual identities

(Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013).

 Scholars have documented the "coming out" process as racialized, mostly fitting

into a neatly packaged *white* process where an individual publicly identifies his sexual

identity to himself and others (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013).   The research on

BGMGS's, however limited, describes this process as much more, "complicated, and

complex … where men make different decisions to disclose or conceal their gay identity

to different people, in different ways, at different times" (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly,

2013, p. 86). Research reported that Black gay men away from college often are rejected

from their home and disowned by their family and members of their church when they

"come out" and reveal their sexual identity (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013).

Unfortunately, this mirrors the experiences of BGMCS/BGMGS on a college campus.

Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013) wrote that Black men who identify as gay while

attending college struggle in the "coming out" stage for, "fear of losing friends" and face

negative incidents of harassment and "reverse–racism" experienced in the settings of

"classrooms, Black cultural centers, and campus residence halls" (Collins, 2000, p.87).

 As a result, BGMCS/BGMGS willingly preform traditional heteronormative [*sic*]

male roles structured around their sexuality as coping techniques to fit into the Black

college social scene. For example, Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013) explained that

self–identifying BGMCS/BGMGS falsely engage in certain hypersexual conversations, "bragging about having sex with multiple women on campus," as a way of proclaiming their masculinity to other Black male peers (p. 97). However, not all participants of their study felt the same way; one participant who openly self–identified as gay shared that was it not natural for him to participate in sexualized conversations, Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013) recounted:

> I don't have that many Black male friends because I don't like to do what they do, you know? Sitting around talking about girls, their breasts, and how many I laid over the weekend is not something I can talk about. (p. 99)

This statement demonstrates how BGMCS/BGMGS's sexual orientation impacts their gender performance, thereby impacting their peer interactions with their Black males (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Unfortunately, this behavior of staying true to one's self-identity excludes some BGMGS further along the margins of the Black community, and even further from creating and maintaining positive peer interactions with straight Black male college students.

More Black males interacting with each other will help to demystify the internalization of negative perceptions and message they have encountered in pre–college experiences, that result in some Black males viewing themselves as academically deficient and having low self–esteem (Cuyjet, 2006). For example, Cuyjet (2006) explained that Black males at a PWI are rarely provided with an environment in which they can learn from one another and develop, "habits of emulating good behaviors that result in increase academic success" (p. 239). If gay and straight Black male college students have positive peer interactions they have the potential to eliminate existing barriers they experience by attending a PWI in the South.

Friendship and Belonging in Higher Education

As defined by Lewis (1960), friendship in its most classical form is a single representation of the four forms of love shared among humans (as cited in Allan, 1989, p. 15). The history of friendship centers largely on the concept of combat in what was once a male dominated society (Gurdin, 1996). Friendship research stems from the Ancient Greek period and the Latin word *philia* where social life was seen as a standard in Greek culture; the Greeks believed in the study of *man* [all human beings] to discover the truth and what justifies social life (Gurdin, 1996). Although research defines friendship as a "voluntary, informal and personal" relationship, Gurdin (1996) explained that, "the evolution of the idea of *philia* [related to] the whole process which ties man to his fellowman…therefore, nature is good as is the tendency which carries a person towards those like himself" (as cited in Allan, 1989, p. 17, p. 21).

Allan (1989) explained that friendship is not institutionalized; rather it is "free-floating, with its content and 'shape' being a matter for determination by the friends, rather [than] by any external influence" (p. 17). Young children, however, are an exception to this voluntary rule, especially considering that a child's gender creates significantly different socialization for boys and girls.

Male Friendship in Higher Education

At an early age boys know their gender and are socialized to develop in appropriate acceptable ways, which are role-modeled in school, their homes, by other men and women, cartoons, sports, and various forms of media (Allan, 1989; Kimmel & Messner, 2013; Kane, 2006; Kimmel, 2008; Kivel, 1999). Young boys inadvertently construct their concept of relationships from the "unexceptional and taken-for-granted"

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gendered values and beliefs they acquire from others (Allan, 1989, p. 67). Research

illustrates that boys have more friends than girls, due to the social expectation that boys

must participate in team-based shared activities like sports, boy scouts, or neighborhood

childhood games (Allan, 1989; Kane, 2006). As these young boys transition into men,

they continue to develop friendship based around activities or, in this case, their career or

professional life (Allan, 1989). Friendship then is largely contextual, especially among

men in college; their social ties are oftentimes not involuntary but instead they are

"context-bound and dependent on circumstances" (Allan, 1989, p. 6). For example,

Kimmel, (2008) wrote that sports provide a safe-space of profound emotion shared

between college-aged men, and these team-based activities are often the heartbeat that

supports strong male friendships.

Although sports nurture male friendships, acknowledging these emotions is

reserved for the locker-room and the competitive stage, and as a result, male-to-male

friendships outside of team-based activity are often void of intimacy or sentiment (Allan,

1996; Kimmel, 2008). Allan (1996) wrote,

> Men are supposed to be strong and self-sufficient…men are expected and, indeed,
> encouraged to display a strength of character which is premised upon a relative
> absence of sensitivity and the ability to disguise and ignore more tender and
> compassionate feelings…male identity serves to limit the extent to which other
> more caring emotions can be displayed (p. 72).

As a result, the idea of what it means to be a man is reflected in the ways men construct

their friendship, yet those relationship reify social constructs of masculinity while

sustaining traditional forms of maleness (Allan, 1989; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005;

Kimmel, 2008). Allan (1989) noted that male friendships are largely contextual, and

arguably vary across geographic location, socio economic classes, and marginalized ethnic groups such as Black Americans (Harper & Nichols, 2008).

Black Male Friendship in Higher Education

There is little literature on friendships and interactions among gay and straight men and even less addresses the interactions between gay and straight Black males (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Literature documenting the friendship between Black males often focuses on Black fraternal bonds and the athletic teammate interactions, both of which function to re-enfranchise stereotypes associated with Black male college students (Dancy, 2010; Harper & Harris, 2006; Messer, 2006).

Research shows that Black male undergraduates seek out brotherly type bonds, friendships, and mentoring relationships via fraternities and collegiate athletics (Harper & Harris, 2006; Messer, 2006). Joining a fraternity allows Black male college students to experience brotherly bonds and maintain significant friendships with other undergraduate men (Harper & Harris, 2006). Being a member of a fraternity sometimes reinforces the performance of hegemonic masculinity by requiring members to participate in aggressive rituals surrounding competition, using insulting jokes or mockery of their transgressions, and through the objectification of women as merely erotic notches on the fraternity chapter's sexual reputation belt (Edwards & Jones, 2009; Harper & Harris, 2006).

Black male college students who participate in collegiate athletics seek out team membership for fatherly approval from coaches and to belong to a group that helps them to present a tough guy exterior (Edwards & Jones, 2009). Messer (2006) explained that Black male student athletes usually have close relationships with other athletes and with their coaches. These close relationships due to travel, multiple practices, and holiday

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breaks away from family reinforce the ideology that college athletes experience isolation,

academic dissonance, and limited social interactions with the larger campus (Messer,

2006). Black male student athletes rarely have the time to form substantial mentorships

or relationships with individuals from similar backgrounds because of their athletic

schedule (Messer 2006). Not providing potential opportunities for similar types of bonds

or relationships to be created between gay and [assumed] straight Black male college

students unconsciously reinforces existing fears, stereotypes, and phobias associated with

the stereotypical predator and prey type of interactions that rarely occur between straight

and gay Black men (Washington & Wall, 2006).

Gay Male Friendship (with straight men) in Higher Education

Literature supports the idea that straight individuals can maintain healthy

relationships void of fear, bias, or assumed–intimacy (Johnson, 2008; Muraco, 2006;

Strayhorn, 2010) with friends who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or

questioning, Muraco (2006) found that selected family connections such as fictive kin

and chosen family ties that are extremely important to gay men and lesbian women also

exist among straight people. The major difference between forming these relationships

for straight and gay individuals is that gay or lesbian people seek fictive kin because of

denial from their biological family or from geographical distance, both caused by

rejection of their sexual identity (Muraco, 2006).

Research has shown that straight male peer interactions with a gay male might

enact the one-drop rule (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Ward 2008), which indicates if a

straight peer interacts with a gay peer, then that straight peer is also deemed gay by

association. There is also the age-old idea that most males have extreme levels of

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homophobia, which serves as a barrier that blocks straight men from forming supportive

and close same sex friendships with those males who identify as gay (Bank & Hansford,

2000). Although existing literature does discuss homophobia as a barrier that limits the

peer interaction among gay and straight men, research by McCune (2014) explained how

race and the perception of an individual's sexuality might impact potential interactions

among men.

One factor that accentuates this guilty-by-association perception is the idea of

sexual discretion. McCune (2014) explained sexual discretion as a way of life in which

Black men negotiate their GBQQ sexualities and masculinities, actively using self–

surveillance in their pursuit of premium brands of masculinity; they improvise daily to

manage various identities, "which stand in tension with not only their own masculine

imagining of self, but also the larger public imagination" (p. xii).

Gay Black Male Friendship and Belonging in Higher Education

Similar to hegemonic masculinity impacting the performance of gender

depending on the settings, cultural location also plays an important role in acceptance

within the Black community (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Strayhorn and Tillman-

Kelly (2013) explained that some gay Black male college students are treated differently

within their own culture; one of their participant shared:

> The color line exists and there are going to be certain experiences that I'll go
> through because of my color and someone else in the gay community won't go
> through it because of their color. I'll go through something in the Black
> community because I'm gay, but some other [straight] Black guy won't go
> through it. This creates barriers and for the most part 'as said college' the barriers
> really exist for me. Even in the academic world, people have no problem putting
> barriers on you. (p. 100)

This statement illustrates how culture and location influences the peer interactions between gay and straight Black males in college, and how a college environment reinforces the existing biased social behaviors taught through interactions within certain Black communities (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013).

Theoretical Frameworks

Ethnicity/race alongside gender/masculinity mattered in America's past, and it is even more salient to discuss both in America's present (Harris, 2012; Kimmel, 2008; McCune, 2014; West, 1993). Qualitative research is the appropriate avenue to represent the rich and complex stories that symbolize the BGMCS/BGMGS. Higher Education needs to explicitly understand the contradictions of being Black gay and male as well as the patterns of success and friendship that exist among this group of college students. As Dancy (2012) and Strayhorn (2010) suggested, the study of being a Black male on a college campus is complex, and it is in this complexity that gender and identity intersect with success and same gender friendships to emerge as a transparent purpose to deepen research of the lived personal narratives of BGMGS attending a PWI in the South.

I address the accompanying theoretical frameworks filtered through non-heteronormative concepts of success in self-authorship among BGMCS/BGMGS, while addressing pre-college and internalized environmental indications of success among BGMCS exclusively using theories on identity construction regarding: (a) Concepts of success among BGMCS framed by Cross' (1991) Black Identity Development's (BID) theory of *Nigrescence*; (b) Johnson's 2005 Quare (*sic*) theory of Black male sexuality identity awareness and Kimmel and Messner's (2013) theoretical concept of gendered beings; (c) Baxter Magolda's Theory of Self-Authorship (2008) as framed through the

experiences of BGMCS; and (d) Crenshaw's (1989; 1995) use of intersectionality within Critical Race Theory. These theoretical frameworks were used as structures of reference and served as preliminary ways of knowing as my research senses were organically awakened by the result of my own personal narratives.

Identity Construction among Students in Higher Education

College student Identity Development Theory suggested that "identity development" is a central aspect for college students in nurturing their personal development (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Reen 2010). Chickering (1969) suggested that college students establish their identity through seven non-linear vectors, which are experienced at various rates, simultaneously, interactionally (*sic*), and repetitiously (as cited in Evans et al., 2010, p. 66). These seven vectors are: (1) developing competence, (2) managing emotions, (3) moving through autonomy toward interdependence, (4) developing mature interpersonal relationships, (5) establishing identity, (6) developing purpose, and (7) developing integrity. All vectors are crucial to most student development, however, for the purposes of this study and to guide my conceptual framework of college student development I utilized (a) Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships as it relates to peer-to-peer friendship groups and (b) establishing identity as it relates to Black Identity Development.

Chickering's (1969) seven vectors explained that when a college student develops (a) mature interpersonal relationships that it is indicative of student's development of a clear "sense of self" (as cited in Evans et al., 2010, p. 68). The hallmarks of developing mature interpersonal relationships include the "development of intercultural and interpersonal tolerance and appreciation of differences… [which is] the ability to accept

individuals for who they are, to respect differences, and to appreciate commonalities"
(Evans et al., 2010, p. 68). Our relationships are oftentimes a reflection of the individuals
we are, and influence how we establish our identity. In college establishing identity is
related to being comfortable with the complexities that make you who you are. As Evans
et al., (2010) wrote, trademarks of establishing identity include a college student's
contentment with her or his:

> Body and appearance, comfort with gender and sexual orientation, a sense of
> one's social and cultural heritage, a clear self-concept and comfort with one's
> roles and lifestyles, a secure sense of self in light of feedback from significant
> others, self-acceptance and self-esteem, and personal stability and integration (p.
> 68).

Establishing identity for most college students is a complicated process especially when
environmental influencers impact aspects of a student's ethnicity as it relates to
institutional type and location.

Historically, students of color have faced various pre-college and existing
environmental factors that posed influential challenges during their years attending a PWI
in the South (Astin, 1982, p. 89; Cuyjet, 2006). Students of color often find it difficult to
"cultivate a sense of belonging" on a PWI campus due to its oftentimes unwelcoming
coldness and hostile environments (Strayhorn, 2008, p.302). As a result, besides
experiencing Chickering's (1969) seven vectors, students of color, particularly Black
American students, also encounter Cross's theory of *nigrescence* as it relates to Black
Identity Development (BID).

Pre–College & Internalized Indications of Success among BGMCS

Since the early 1960s, Black college students traditionally attended historically
Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Allen, 1985, p. 134). The trenchant Civil

Rights movements of the mid–1960s, the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* (1951), and the 1890 Morrill Act of desegregation of America's higher education institutions led to increased enrollment of Black students at PWIs (Samuels, 2004; Thelin, 2004). Historically, Black students often faced many challenging factors before and during their tenure at college that impeded what American educational systems defined as success (Allen, 1985; Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2012; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). Throughout the remainder of this section the definition of the term "success" will not reflect the typical higher education definition, representative of most college students and as complied from researchers (Astin, 1982; Bonner, 2010; Evans et al., 2010; Tinto, 1975; Baxter Magolda, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Harper (2012) complied a succinct definition of college student success in his groundbreaking study *Black Male Student Success in Higher Education: A Report from the National Black Male College Achievement Study*. His explanation of the characteristics of successful college students included:

> Active engagement produces educational benefits and gains in the following domains: cognitive and intellectual development, moral and ethical development, practical competence and skills transferability, racial and gender identity development, and college adjustment. [He continued to share that] students who devote more time to academic-related activities outside of class earn higher grade point averages. One of the most widely acknowledged profits of engagement is its nexus with college student persistence. 'We know one thing for certain: Students who are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities and experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, are more likely than are their disengaged peers to persist through graduation' (p. 12).

I constructed my own meaning of "success" in higher education spaces through various cultural lenses, accounting for implications of how ethnicity, gender, and identity complicate the meaning of success among BGMGS who attend a PWI in the South.

The various factors indicating Black male student success over several decades can be represented in the two categories of (a) pre–college factors and (b) internalized environmental factors. For some Black male student's pre-college factors such as "high school grades, aptitude test scores, study habits, and secondary school curriculum," affect their overall academic preparation and concepts of success (Astin, 1982, p. 92).

For a majority of young Black males, earning good grades, achieving high scores on standardized test, developing a true sense of study habits, and being invested in secondary classroom structures are not typical representations of success. Harper (2006) explained that at a young age Black males internalize culturally normal minimal expectations of achievement, often fortified by Black communities and friend groups. Young Black males are therefore "groomed to devalue educational achievement" in their pursuit to simultaneously reach and reject ideal high expectations of young Black males (Harper, 2010, p. 434).

> According to the cool pose hypothesis, young Black males adopt and display certain behaviors, attitudes, demeanors, and dress that they perceive and intend to convey their coolness, individual self-esteem, pride, and adherence to their culture. However, there is often conflict between white teachers and Black males because teachers misunderstand the intent of culture-specific behaviors" (Majors, Tyler, Peden, & Hall, 1994, p. 255).

I also argue that young Black males misunderstand the intent of their own culture-specific behaviors, allowing these behaviors to curb feelings of academic achievement with feelings of cultural belongings and acceptance. Unfortunately, in a masculinized Black community success is often feminized, and being called a sissy or a faggot is an expectation if one makes good grades or follows directions in class. As a result, many young Black males in traditional K-12 systems of education constantly reify negative culture-specific behaviors into achievable forms of cultural capital because they are

tangible ethnic traits of progression, whereas, positive behaviors or academic

achievement associated with white privilege and femininity are thereby more difficult or

undesirable to achieve (Cuyjet, 2006; Dancy, 2012; Harper, 2010; Majors, et al., 1994;

Young, 2007). These misplaced traits that some young Black males deem as achievable

vs. undesirable demonstrate the powerful influence that pre-college factors have over

BGMGS at PWIs in the South.

The second category indicative of Black male student success is internalized

environmental factors that often lead to feelings of isolation and defeat (Strayhorn and

Terrell; 2010). Researchers (Allen, 1985; Rodriguez et al., 2000; Strayhorn & Terrell;

2010) attribute the lack of Black male student success at PWIs to 1) high schools that are

underprepared in supporting and aiding their student's academic achievement; 2)

depressing socioeconomic status (SES); 3) internalization of negative stereotypes

portrayed by the popular media; and 4) lack of parental or familial support. More salient

to the understanding of young Black males is the adoption of internalized oppression as

explained by Baker (1983) in which marginalized groups (i.e. young Black males) begin

to believe in his own popularized inadequacy as an individual and as a peer-group. Hall

(1993) illustrated this popularization clearly when he wrote,

> To put it crudely, certain ways in which black men continue to live out their
> counter-identities as black masculinities and replay those fantasies of black
> masculinities in the theaters of popular culture are, when viewed from along other
> axes of difference, the very masculine identities that are oppressive to women,
> that claim visibility for their hardness only at the expense of the vulnerability of
> black women and the feminization of gay black men (p. 112).

Hall (1993) explained the essence of Black-on-Black oppression is maintained through

Black males recreating popular representations of masculinity often resulting in

oppressive practices towards members of their own ethnic group. The title of Kujufu's

(1988) book *To Be Popular or Smart: The Black Peer Group* seamlessly grasps the crux

of how environmental factors can create a dual space for high academic performers or

those who *fit-in* to the "normal"/popular representation of Black youth. The various

factors indicating Black male student success over several decades are represented in two

categories consisting of (a) pre–college factors and (b) internalized environmental

factors.

Non-Heteronormative Concepts of Success among BGMCS/BGMGS

These factors, although representative of most Black males attending a PWI in the

South, are significantly more critical when success is contextualized within spaces

occupied by BGMCS/BGMGS. Among the various ways in which we view success in

higher educational settings, rarely do we consider an individual student's gender,

ethnicity, and identity. I attempt to complicate the dialogue surrounding existing

definitions of success to include the often-overlooked aspects, starting with Baxter

Magolda's Theory of Self-Authorship.

Dear Vincent,

You can remember it like it was yesterday. It was the first semester of your freshmen year. As you answered the phone, tucking it between you shoulder and you ear so you could keep packing you book-bag to head out to the library, Momma said… "Hey, Baby, are you sitting down?" You knew something wasn't right from those few short words. As she continued, all you could do was stop packing you bag, and sit on the bed as you eyes begin to fill with tears. "Yes, Mama, I will… I love you too…" As you hung up the phone with Mama, a few more phone calls from high school classmates followed, calling to confirm, calling to console, calling to make sense of what just happened. After the last call, you left your cell phone in the dorm room and went on a walk. As you strolled along the darkly lit campus garden adjacent to your residence hall and across from the President's Mansion, you tried to make sense of the phone calls you received about one of your classmates. Only just a few months ago, you saw him at Red Lobster at a classmate's birthday dinner. No one would really know why, there were many ideas and speculations. But at the age of 19 that was the first time you actually knew someone to commit suicide. Brian Fields was also 19 when he took his own life, with a self-inflicted wound to his head in his parent's garage.

Unconsciously, you started to redefine your concept of self; you quickly picked up the decision pen and started to author your own next steps, instead of following a laid out set of expectations and rules. Self-authorship is what it's actually called. But for you it was called, "Although your family loves and supports your, they couldn't write your papers, take your test, or go to your classes", therefore YOU, Vincent Tarrell Harris, had to start making hard choices that allowed for your best work. Your method included tailoring conversations with your family back home.

You were bold, clear, and had this amazingly normal sense of confidence when you said it–at first it felt hella strange to be so direct with your family–growing up you had always thought how others could adjust their actions to make situations better

… but you never revealed your thoughts

       … growing up you were taught "A child should be SEEN not HEARD"

            …you never revealed your true feelings.

Although you love your family, and friends, they motivate you, send well wishes, and sometimes suggest things that you don't even want to do or need to know at that moment. This is an example of one of the first moments you can remember while at Auburn, that led you to tell your family NOT to deliver any bad news while you were at school. The news, no matter how insignificant they thought it may or may not be, was too distracting for you. At that moment you weren't posed to deal with this level of academic rigor–like you are now–so you had to develop a method of coping.

It was indeed your first step towards claiming yourself, standing up for your own internal voice. You told them point blank, "Do not disclose distracting, bad, or shocking news to me anymore, even if you think it is absolutely necessary." This was your earliest collegiate memory of Vincent trusting your internal voice as mentioned by Baxter Magolda (2008). This trust would be the first brick in establishing your own internal voice, laying the foundation for how you successfully navigated your way towards graduating from college.

-From your Reluctant Internal Voice

Traditionally, Self-Authorship is defined as "the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269). There are three elements of self-authorship discussed among higher education professionals: a) trusting the internal voice, b) building an internal foundation, and c) securing internal commitments (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Without trusting my own internal voice and

building my internal foundation early in my collegiate career, I would have never been able to address my family so boldly, or successfully navigate through the rigors and pressures of dealing with unexpected difficult situations in college. I realize that by telling my family not to disclose distracting information to me, I was unknowingly reserving precious mental space to cope with my internal conflicts that festered inside my mind. Who was I? Was I gay? Was I straight? Did I want to be straight?

In 2002, as a closeted BGMC, *success* to me was maintaining a sense of normalcy, portraying the façade of the tailored budding young, straight, Black male student leader. The truth was, as a freshman in college at age 19, I was not ready to commit to my own internal voice, and I simultaneously rejected and accepted, as Dilley (2010) said, living my life "on the fringes" (p. 116). Although that was not where I ultimately ended-up, I was miles away from where Baxter Magolda (2008) explained securing internal commitments as "living [your] convictions was as natural and necessary as breathing" (p. 281).

What was natural for me to maintain a level of *success* was to disregard my internal convictions, my natural feelings, by raising the first wall of my own Black diamond. This wall soon became a door to a closet in which I remained for four and a half years of my life to follow a successful path towards graduation. College students who live in the closet create levels of dissonance between both the straight and LGBTQ social circles (Dilley, 2010). To maintain a personal level of success in college I learned to mute my non-heteronormative gender traits and highlight those attributes that limited confusion or potentially ignited debate over my sexual identity (Dilley, 2010; McCune, 2014). I intentionally continued the same heteronormative behaviors I mastered in high

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school; I dated girls to prove my straightness to others and myself, and I joined a

fraternity, which Dilley (2010) explained could indicate my attempt to confirm to myself

and others that I was not gay. Ultimately, staying successful hinged on my attempt to

maintain a sense of what it meant to be a *normal* Black male college student in 2002.

Racialized Concepts of Success among BGMCS/BGMGS

Dear Reader,

Being Black is not good enough for me, Being male is not good enough for me:
Being gay complicates the concepts of Being Black and Being me.

Deep down I just want to be Vincent… But in all honesty, in college I wanted to
be the Black male who had it all figured out. One of my top priorities among other
aspects of college-life, was to successfully maintain a consistent reception as a "normal"
[straight] Black male college student.

At the age of 18 being male wasn't good enough for me; Being Black wasn't
good enough for me; I wanted to be a Black man.

But with thoughts of being gay consuming my mind, being a Black man at age 18
was something I knew absolutely nothing about.

-From my Reluctant Internal Voice

While many LGBTQ college students use their collegiate years to experiment or

indulge their thoughts regarding their sexual identities, for men, and particularly for

Black men, the phrase "finding yourself" is often re-interpreted as "hiding yourself".

Dilley (2010) explained in college that GBQQ males admittedly avoid, "The process of

'finding' or 'establishing' an identity"; they do not experience the " 'unbecoming' that

many of their non-heterosexual peers experienced," an act that many of their straight or

white peers oftentimes will never experience (p. 117). For those GBQQ Black male

college students, the one aspect of their identity that is not questionable is their ethnicity,

which in college is an aspect of self that neither they nor others can question or deny. Hence, some GBQQ Black male college students over compensate for their own internal identity denial by investing and dedicating considerable amounts of time to nurturing their ethnicity over their gender or sexual orientation.

Cross' (1991) theory of BID indicated that for Black students an individual's race is an important aspect of her or his identity. BID is used most often because of its psychological theory of *nigrescence* (*sic*), which is defined as the "process of becoming black" (as cited in Evans et al., 2010, p. 256). Cross' theory was formatted into six sectors: (1) infancy and childhood in early BID, (2) preadolescence, (3) adolescence, (4) early adulthood, (5) adult nigrescence, and (6) nigrescence recycling. All sectors are viewed as crucial to most Black students' development. For this study and to guide my conceptual framework I referred to (a) early adulthood and (b) adult nigrescence. Some Black college students in sector (a) early adulthood are faced with a dilemma of fitting into a PWI's view of them as an *African American* student. These Black students soon enter sector (b) adult nigrescence and often go through a process of internal self–reflection as they attempt to balance becoming a Black man or woman who happens to be a student attending a PWI.) Cross (1991) labeled this conflict as the "encounter stage" which he explained happens "when black people experience [a series of] event[s] that causes a conflict in their understanding of their racial identity" (as cited in Evans et al., 2010, p. 259).

While most Black students attempt to develop or enhance their own ethnic identity and sense of self, some of their peers, particularly males, simultaneously process an abrasive aspect of identity surrounding their gender and sexual orientation.

Gender and Sexuality among BGMCS/BGMGS

Various identities intersect when one is a Black gay male attending a PWI in the South. In higher education a substantial amount of literature adopts the following models as staples of sexual identity development for most college students: Cass' (1979) model of sexual orientation identity formation; Fassinger and Miller's (1996) model of gay and lesbian identity development; D'Augelli's (1994) model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development (as cited in Evans et al., 2010, p.315); the Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948) studies between the late 1940s and early 1950s; and the Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994) model of bisexuality (as cited in Morrow & Messinger, 2006, p. 51). Regarding gender identity development, higher education relies on the following concepts to describe college students: Lev's (2004) conceptualization of binary systems of sex, gender identity, gender role, and sexual orientation, and Bem's (1981) gender schema as cognitive-development (as cited in Evans et al., 2010, p. 335). For this study, however, I used two theoretical frameworks rarely used in higher education: I used Johnson's (2005) Quare (*sic*) theory to describe the sexual identity development of Black male college students, and Kimmel and Messner's (2013) theoretical concept of gendered beings to discuss the development of masculinity among college aged men.

Quare (*sic*) theory appropriately acknowledges ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and gender identities in understanding the development of gay, bisexual, queer, or questioning (GBQQ) Black males. Johnson (2005) explained that the word "quare" has simple Southern roots as his grandmother used to pronounce the word queer as "quare". Johnson's (2005) quare theory intentionally includes ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and gender identities in the discussion of GLBTQ people of color, while other queer

theories assume a more generalist point of view. In particular quare theory acknowledges the existence of white privilege, racism, and cultural homophobia, which continue to disrupt the lived experiences of the GLBTQ community (Johnson, 2005; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013).

Kimmel and Messner's (2013) theoretical concept of gendered beings asserted that men, too, encounter a gendering process beginning as biological males who transform into socially constructed men as a result of their interactions and lived experiences. The phrase by "Men are not born; they are made," conceptualizes the three themes of gendered beings, which are: (1) social constructionist model, (2) variations among men, and (3) the life course perspective (Kimmel & Messner, 2013, p. xvi). For the purpose of this study I focused on the (a) social constructionist model and (b) variations among men, as frameworks to interpret the lived experiences of BGMCS. A social constructionist model of masculinity suggests that – *what it means to be a man* – differs from culture to culture and actively changes over time within any culture (Kimmel & Messner, 2013). A Variation among men framework denotes that within any one culture, for example Black Americans, there is a spectrum of masculinities, creating a matrix of differences based off of age, class, and ethnicity (Kimmel & Messner, 2013). Recognizing a variety of differences among masculinities also endorses a space to discuss the unique relationships men have with each other, particularly addressing peer-to-peer relationship or friendship groups of Black males who attend a PWI in the South.

Critical Race Theory among BGMCS/BGMGS

I used Critical Race Theory's (CRT) view of intersectionality to consider how the experiences of BGMCS in the South are regularly a device of intersecting arrangements

of heterosexism (*sic*) and gender politics. Intersectionality is defined as the acknowledgment of identity politics as it relates to "Race, gender, and other identity categories [that] are often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as …intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different" (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995, p. 357). Although Crenshaw et al., (1995) use of intersectionality directly addresses the identity of " 'woman' *or* 'person of color' as an either/or proposition", I suggest that the identity of "Black men" *or* "gay men" are also seen as either/or propositions and not as homogenous beings (p. 357). Men, too, are complex individuals, however, being a Black GBQQ man one must consider the intersection of ethnicity as a crucial role that has led to identify denial, internal discrimination, and a pursuit of white masculinity (Harris, 2012; Kimmel, 2008; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013).

Crenshaw (1989) also shared ideologies of intersectionality as a universal tendency to theoretically erase Black women from the experiences of racial and gendered beings by grouping them as one unified entity of "Black Women". Similarly Black males are often grouped into one unified entity of "Black Men", when in fact the differentiation of Black males attending a PWI in the South are not acknowledged (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Celious & Oyserman, 2001). Crenshaw (1989) argued that "Black Women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender" (p. 58). Since the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into

account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 58).

The intersections of ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation are often ignored as representations of Black males at a PWI in the South, causing any analysis of intersectionality regarding Black males to inaccurately reflect the lived experiences of BGMCS (Dancy, 2010: McCune, 2014; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013; Washington & Wall, 2006). Crenshaw's (1989) suggestion of an intentional inclusion of the Black community's needs in the analysis of sexism and patriarchy is a valiant effort to alleviate any continued oppression. Similar institutions of higher education must distance their original foundational beliefs that structure diversity on a PWI campus based on the suggestions of past movements [Civil Right Movement of the 1960s and the Women's Movement of the 1970s] that are often representative of singularly oppressive entities identifiable only when importance is given to Black college students because of their ethnicity, or Women because of their gender, but not both simultaneously. Crenshaw (1989) was an advocate of disrupting the traditional notions that address issues related to Black Women; she urged us to embrace the complexities of compoundedness (*sic*) as an influencer of changing discriminatory policies and practices that categorize issues of Black Women as singular. I, too, argue that aspects of higher education must acknowledge BGMGS's compoundedness as a "*Black Gay Male*" rather than grouping their issues as singular or in some cases segmented, currently leaving BGMCS/BGMGS to select within which identity to assimilate their collegiate experience. "Black." "Gay." or "Man". Crenshaw et al., (1989; 1995) explained that the intersections of ethnicity and gender and, I argue, sexual orientation, are only a prelude to creating a focus on multiple

aspects of identities when considering how *we* construct the social spaces, legal system, and educational institutions in which we function.

The beginning of this section broadly discussed Chickering's (1969) seven vectors of student identity development, which most college students traditionally are assumed to experience (as cited in Evans et al., 2010, p. 67). I explained the four theoretical frameworks that guided my research: (a) Concepts of success among BGMCS framed by Cross' 1991 Black Identity Development's (BID) theory of *Nigrescence*; (b) Johnson's 2005 Quare (*sic*) theory of Black male sexuality identity awareness and Kimmel and Messner's (2013) theoretical concept of gendered beings; (c) Baxter Magolda's Theory of Self-Authorship as framed through the experiences of BGMCS; and (d) Crenshaw et al., (1989, 1995) use of intersectionality within Critical Race Theory. I recognize that identifying these four theoretical frameworks excludes other frameworks or concepts that might be more appropriate, and as a researcher I anticipate adjusting these frameworks, depending upon the responses from my participants and the input from my dissertation committee. If other frameworks are considered, I implore that they address the significance and purpose of this study.

> Some black gay men continually feel compelled to conceal their sexual identity, and perhaps try to compensate for it, [in order] to be accepted by their campus peers as *sufficiently* masculine, [these] black gay male undergraduates must persist through additional barriers to affirm a healthy, positive self-conception [which]…impact[s] their sense of belonging within particular social contexts across their collegiate experience (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013, p. 101-102). The life histories of black gay men of the South provide not only different perspectives on the relationships between race and region, gender and geography, and sexuality and southernness (*sic*); they also serve as an intervention in the prevailing histories of homosexuality in the South and in the nation (Johnson, 2008, p. 6-7).

Researcher's Strayhorn & Tillman (2013), and Johnson (2008) provided clear explanations about the importance of more studies about the lived experiences of BGMCS/BGMGS in the South. Additionally, what often goes unnoticed is the risk that straight Black male college students unconsciously cultivate pervasive misconceptions and biases about their same-race male counterparts (Celious & Oyserman, 2001; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). The danger of not completing this study lies in *not* addressing these distinct misconceptions and stigmas as the numbers of Black males in college have steadily increased since the beginning of the 20th century.

According to the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, the enrollment of Black American college students was on the decline, "in 2013, there were 176,208 fewer African American students enrolled in higher education than was the case in 2011" (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2014). Toldson (2013) also reported that nearly 1.4 million Black men are in college now as compared to 840,000 in prison. Even with a large number of Black males attending college, factors facing all males in higher education are often overlooked or assumed included in the general discussion of student development (Davis & Laker, 2004; Ludeman, 2004). The inclusion of a homogenous set of experiences that reflects all Black male college students is dangerous and irresponsible for administrators at PWIs in the South to consider as practice.

The use of personal narrative autoethnography is essential to contextualize the lived experiences of BGMCS within a broad framework in higher education (Kiesinger, 2002). By sharing my lived experiences within this Black Diamond I am less likely to reflect that my experiences are all about "me", but rather that my story is a representation of traces of lived experiences that exist on PWI campuses in the South (Kiesinger, 2002).

Instead of "converting" or reinventing who I am within the space of a PWI, the significance of sharing my story signifies a potential shift or interruption in the ideas and expectations of the gender, identity, and ethnic norms to which BGMCS/BGMGS subscribe indirectly.

Ultimately, regardless of the increased enrollment of Black men in college, it is critical for institutions of higher education to approach serving BGMCS/BGMGS with intentionality. Persistent intolerance still occurs at PWIs in the South, where BGMCS/BGMGS are judged by the color of their skin and sexual orientation and not by their character.

CHAPTER THREE: THE BODY PART II (METHODOLOGY)

Dear Vincent,

On April 6th, 2014, you read a powerful quote that introduced one of the articles you read for class. It read, "The truth about stories is that…that's all we are"; what the researchers meant was that the most crucial skill to learn in qualitative research is listening to your participants in order to identify which stories are the most salient and why (King, 2003, p. 2; Lemley & Mitchell, 2012).

Throughout the course of these two and a half years at LSU you have realized the one story that is the most important is your own. Your goal is to figure out exactly why your story is important within the field of Higher Education. Recently, you have found yourself existing in this in-between space, not to cultivate a comfortable space or a "unitary core self" for other Black males like you to exist, but rather as a space of counteractions …

You are waiting in the middle of somewhere… between the beginning and the future of your personal life, your professional career, and moments that could be love…. What you do know is that your past has disappeared… and your future… well, whatever it is… doesn't exist until you get there.

-From With-In the Black Diamond

Rationality

Berger (1972) explained that *seeing* is the most important skill to acquire as a

researcher. Sight is often taken for granted by those who can see and is, in fact, the

leading sense that destroys dreams, sustains stereotypes, and often increases our ability to

desire more than what we need. I selected a methodological approach to direct my *sight*

by providing a unique method of epistolary autoethnography through which to share my

lived experiences as they related to being a BGMGS attending a PWI in the South. The

chosen method lent itself to examining my research question:

1. How has a Black Gay male graduate student studying Higher Education

negotiated his way to and through predominately white higher education

institutions?

Qualitative research answered this research question. My question was relative to my own free-will as a human in two ways: (1) Acknowledgment: I recognized that I am a currently a gay Black man who self-identifies openly to his friends and immediate family members, while in college I was simultaneously confused as to whether I was bisexual, queer, or questioning. I did not always acknowledge my identity. I was one of those questioning Black males who chose to keep his identity a secret, or "stay in the closet"; and (2) Sexual Discretion: I accepted the choices I made as BGMCS/BGMGS indeed influenced my desire to survey my actions. At times I was accepted into, or pushed out of, certain friend groups as I practiced my own sexual discretion (McCune, 2014). In short, my question dug deeply into the lived experiences of BGMGS attending a PWI in the South. My personal journals and letters exceeded the oft-achieved tertiary view of the BGMCS/BGMGS by not interviewing or surveying any participants. I intentionally avoided a quantitative approach to my research question because of the expected impersonal or detached reflections of the lived experiences of BGMCSs who attend a PWI in the South (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Autoethnography

This study included a combination of autoethnographic data and content analysis of my personal journals and letters. Autoethnography is the deliberate linkage association between "the personal and the cultural" experiences we live – through… – in… – and those we still await (Daly, 2007, p. 92). The guiding framework for autoethnography sustains a focus by utilizing these "three components: the research process (i.e., *graphy*), culture (i.e., *ethno*), and self" (i.e., *auto*; Ellis & Bochner, 2003)" (as cited in Daly, 2007, p. 92). I realize that my story alone is not enough to represent the

lived experiences of BGMCS/BGMGS and their lived experiences. Autoethnography

does not partition ridged spaces between the participant and researcher (Gergen &

Gergen, 2002). When the curtains of discretion are raised, there is indeed a relationship

between the researcher and the participants, "connected by embodied, lived experiences"

within those unseen shared moments of contemplation, vulnerability, self-hatred, and

shame (Daly, 2007, p. 92; Downs, 2005; McCune, 2014).

An autoethnographic and narrative inquiry approach provided curial insight into

the relationships held among BGMGS in the South (Johnson, 2008).   Lemley and

Mitchell (2012) wrote that autoethnography narrative builds on direct observation and

schema from the researchers' point of view. Being a BGMCS/BGMGS who attended

two PWIs in the South, I naturally built a non-intrusive yet welcoming space for my

readers to recognize the values motivations, actions, and beliefs I express within my

culture and those BGMGS who share my same identity (Waymer, 2008).

In addition, Jagose (1996) wrote, "Those who see identity as fluid, [and] the

effect[s] of social conditioning" and independent of culture, hold a constructionist

worldview (p 8), as opposed to those who hold an essentialist worldview, believing that

identity is biological and permanent, relationally dependent on one's culture.

Researchers (Franklin, 1992; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Johnson, 2008; Kimmel &

Messner, 2013; McCune, 2014; Nardi, 1992; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013) reported

that BGMCS hold distinct worldviews from their peers which is arguably an Achilles

heel, preventing long–lasting, healthy, mutually beneficial friendships with other straight

Black male peers. Existing within a space like a PWI in the South, where values

regarding identity rarely relate to BGMCS, is indicative of this group of students, existing in this *in-between place* (Edwards, 2010).

Similarly the epistemological positioning of this research is *somewhere in between* the spectrum of objectivism and subjectivism (Waskul & Vannini, 2006). Openly sharing and being vulnerable about a topic that lends itself to my shame and scrutiny of others, requires me to awaken and revisit my own reflective space. Subjectivity and objectivity successfully separate the lines for researchers, however, the *in-between place* "seek(s) to keep in play the principle of objectivity while placing the self more evidently in the research procedures" (Daly, 2007, p. 193). The term *dynamic objectivity* "aims at a form of knowledge that grants to the world around us its independent integrity but does so in a way that remains cognizant of, indeed, relies on, our connectivity with that world" (Keller, 1985, p. 117). *Dynamic objectivity* represents a reflective space that allowed me as a researcher to position myself in the middle of the research process, while projecting my own experiences as a BGMCS/BGMGS (Johnson, 2008; Keller, 1985; McCune, 2014; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013).

Autoethnography as a Personal Narrative Method

Dear Straight People,

It's not just one reason why I'm lending my college, and personal experiences to research in the form of this epistolary autoethnography…

It's a layering of why(s)...

The collegiate and graduate experiences of a Gay Black male are not representative among the overall collegiate experiences of a straight Black male in college or graduate school.

They [You, them–Straight People–You Them –White people– You them– Women] don't have to live as me (Mock, 2014, p. 117)

I was always Black, Born that way.

I was always male, Born that way.

I was always Gay, Born that way.

But…

I had more time to cultivate a connection to my Black identity and my masculinity…

Growing up I performed Black manhood to the best of my ability...

I was the quintessential Black male college student, or so I thought. I never brought up my insecurities about my identity with any of my friends or frat brothers at Auburn. I was silent when brothers in my fraternity made offensive remarks about perceived Black Gay aspirants [those male students interested in joining the fraternity]. Like Johnson (2008), "My silence about my queerness implicated me in my [fraternity brothers] sometimes homophobic, sometimes ambivalent, attitude towards… homosexuality in general" (p. 112). My silence with my frat brothers allowed me to stand in solidarity alongside my chapter brothers figuratively holding our nuts and beating our chests like gorillas.

I know now that my silence was caused by my own F E A R, S H A M E, and G U I L T of being seen as deficiently masculine, not a real man.

I feared my chapter brothers discovering the truth behind my silence wasn't that I acquiesced their comments as my own; rather I was protecting my own identity…

I worried of the shame I would bring to my chapter brothers if someone really found out, the truth behind my silence…

And I carried the guilt of being pledged as a straight Black man – knowing all along that just like the other supposedly Black gay men I didn't defend–that I too was battling with accepting my own gay identity…

So as a Black man in college I always said I was Black 1st…

Because that is what I was groomed to say…

I was reared to be a Black man, a straight Black man.

In undergrad being a man was an invisible characteristic or identity; it was something I never thought about, or challenged. I wasn't raised to be Gay. I wasn't nurtured in my Gayness like I was with my Blackness. My racial performance cultivated a sense of protection while my gender performance maintained a cloak of validation among my fraternity brothers and friends, however it wasn't until after graduating

Auburn that I slowly began to remove this uncomfortable cloak, starting one button at a time.

                                                                -From Outside the Black Diamond

My research compliments the limited qualitative (Harper & Harris, 2010;

Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013; Washington & Wall, 2006; Young, 2007) and

miniscule narrative research (Johnson, 2005, 2008; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013;

Waymer, 2008; Williamson, 2011; Young, 2007) dedicated to creating a space for

BGMCS/BGMGS and their lived experiences both in academic and no-academic

literature. The autoethnography compliments my research question; through the use of

personal narrative autoethnography, I demonstrate the complexities that occur when

gender, identity, and ethnicity intersect within an existing marginalized race-group

attending a PWI in the South. My research question led to the selection of personal

narrative autoethnography to uncover the continuous sense-making behind the lived

experiences of a Black male student who struggled to fit into fixed categorizations of

gender, identity, and ethnicity influenced by geographical location and institutional

choice (Waymer, 2008). Although I shared my personal story, sharing is not that simple.

My story is not my own. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) wrote,

> Personal narratives propose to understand a self or some aspect of life as it
> intersects with a cultural context, connects to other participants as co-researchers,
> and invites readers to enter the author's world [using] what they learn there to
> reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives (p. 279-280).

As explained by Ellis et. al., (2011), I sought to understand "my" self as it intersected

with the cultural phenomenon of an institution of higher education represented as a PWI

in the South. I intended to connect the audience of higher education professionals,

student affairs administrators, and similar units on a college campus who interact with

BGMGS in "my" world, "my" flaws, "my" hopes, and "my" successes (Ellis et. al.,

2011). Sharing "my" personal narratives only gives a glimpse into the lived experiences

of the lives of a BGMGS attending a PWI in the South.

Dear Vincent,

Are your lived experiences as a BGMGS only relevant to your life?

-From a Researchers Mind

The obvious is, yes, I am writing an epistolary autoethnography of my

experiences as a Black man who successfully navigated his way through a PWI in the

South, while existing within marginalized spaces related to my gender, ethnicity, and

identity.

The fact is, no, my experiences were not only relevant to me.

> Any story we write is in a cultural climate, so it may mean something different
> now than when it comes out …it may mean something very different to the
> audience than ourselves. And then the meaning may change again in five years
> (Flemons & Green, 2002, p. 90-91).

Selecting of autoethnography as a method is my attempt not only to make my personal

experiences meaningful and culturally relevant; I hope to produce accessible text to reach

a more extensive and diverse broad audience that conventional research usually

disregards.

Autoethnographic writing is a space of intimacy where secrets dwell, dangling on

the edges of our tongues, only to be shared with the pages; this type of writing makes us

feel like we are a part of those secrets (Ellis, et al., 2011). Personal narrative writing

effortlessly evokes a since of intrigue, it nurtures curiosities, and fuels the growth of

imagination.

Dear Reader,

I see my mind as a room full of dusty nooks waiting ideas to form, anticipating theories to develop, and longing for innovation to stir-up a jambalaya of solutions to situations affecting those like me. I have learned that…

Intimate, personal writing achieves innovation, theories, and solutions instead of traditional forms of literature.

-From Somewhere in the Middle

While autoethnography is an interesting zone in which to dwell, one contradiction to consider is how we truly can say that what we read is implied as intimate. Gergen and Gergen (2002) explained that autoethnographic researchers are better at creating an intimate space by reducing the distance among the reader, "we are thus, enabled, as readers, to lose our defenses against our own multiplicities. And yet, at the same time the sense of artifice within the text remains. Are these 'authentic' voices, we wish to know?" (p. 16). The question raised by Gergen and Gergen (2002) is complicated since, although one can claim an authentic self, the truth about selves is that we are fluid and every changing, however, we do experience moments of truths and it is in those moments that we awaken our inner most self (Waskul & Vannini, 2006). Young (2007) recognized how *authentic* self as related to ethnicity among Black people creates a space for a double consciousness, giving the example–not every Black person is comfortable in their own skin–yet are expected to be Black, act Black, talk Black, and dress Black.

Indeed some Black Americans, like Young (2007), struggle to disidentity (*sic*) with their born ethnicity to escape multiple forms of institutional oppression and, similarly, identity construction about sexual orientation among Black people receives parallel levels of surveillance. BGMGS experience this double consciousness, and I argue triple consciousness of being–Black, male, and gay–resulting in a diligent search

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for their most *authentic* identity (McCune, 2014; Waskul & Vannini, 2006; Young, 2007). Yet not all Black males who identify as GBQQ want to be straight, however, the difference is that all Black men are expected to be straight, act straight, talk straight, and dress straight (McCune, 2014).   The requirement to operate under the straight guise is inescapable for Black gay men in the South, and especially those who attend a PWI (Johnson, 2008; Young, 2007; Washington & Wall, 2006).

Dear Reader,

> The psychoemotional (sic) pain that this [centaur like] existence creates, the pain of negotiating multiple cultural and racial worlds, is far too great for many. [Like Young] I've been dealing with existing in these dual-worlds of yearning to be the Black straight guy or reluctantly being the Black down-low guy for a long time and [Over the past few years I am recently able to] cope only by transforming my personal problem into an intellectual one. (Young, 2007, p. XVI)

> Sometimes for me it feels like "I'm chipping away at the burden. But far too many BGMCS/BGMGS are not able to intellectually digest the magnitude of existing in these dual-worlds [what I am doing now is slowly lifting my burden]. And why should they [BGMCS/BGMGS] have to?" (Young, 2007, XVI).

I never wanted to be another race…

I never wanted to be another gender…

<div align="center">

I wanted to be accepted

I wanted to be accepted as a Black man who happens to be Gay

I wanted to be accepted by other Black men who happen to be straight.

</div>

I recognize now that I have always thought of these feeling as I searched for a friend, a straight guy who is down for me no matter what, a homeboy, a roll dawg, a straight guy who is there for me through thick–and–thin.

But you see, [just] happening to be born [gay] or any other identity than what the traditional–Black–community believes I was born as, is saturated in bias, judgment, and the unfortunate case of isolation.

<div align="right">

-From Somewhere in the Middle

</div>

Although Young (2007) struggled to grasp his double consciousness regarding his racial identity, my attempt to understand my triple consciousness regarding my own sexual orientation is similar in many ways. I identify both with the *normal* boyz (straight Black male college students), difficulties with being a Black man attending a PWI in the South, while simultaneously disidentifing (*sic*) with their experiences because *I am* –and– *am not* exactly one of the *normal* boyz, and concurrently do –and– do not want to be…because of this as a Black male I am hyper-cognizant of how masculine I am –and– am (not) (Young, 2007). Young (2007) helped me to access my own meaning of what it means to *not* be one of the *normal* boyz by revealing, "meaningful, accessible, and evocative [research] grounded in personal experiences" (Ellis, et al., 2011, p.274).

These types of narratives seek to expose audiences to occurrences of identity and the politics of passing, to seeing the invisible and hearing the silent experiences, and to illustrating various customs which heighten a sense of empathy regarding those individuals who live different lives (Ellis, et al., 2011). This empathy, awareness of sight and voice, and the understanding of identity politics represent dirt roads, small streams, and manmade traces that lead to the discovery of what we know as–*self*–what represents the clearest picture of who an individual is in any given moment (Waskul & Vannini, 2006). Although we, I, you, are constantly changing, autoethnography as a personal narrative is the method I chose to capture the most current snapshot of *Who I Am*, moments that help to illustrate who others like me used to be, who we/they currently are, and who we/they want to become.

Weakness of Personal Narrative Autoethnography

One recurring weakness in autoethnography is the skepticism of false-validity. Qualitative research such as autoethnography has been judged for not being credible enough or grounded in traditional methodological frameworks, particularly if there is no inclusion of traditional analysis [i.e. observations, data collection, surveys] and/or connections to scholarly literature [i.e. renowned theorist, elite academic journals etc.] (Ellis, et al., 2011). To combat this lack of academic integrity, ethnographic researchers must be explicitly aware of the variations of ethnography, the role the researcher has in relation to the audience, and the available types of autoethnography. As a result, as an autoethnographic researcher, I must carefully select only one method that answers my research question (Gergen & Gergen, 2002). Autoethnographic personal narrative research achieves validity by establishing a clear level of verisimilitude, research structured to maintain a sense of credibility described by the realistic, convincing, and probable feelings that any personal narrative or stories are indeed the researcher's own and are true (Ellis, et al., 2011).

To ensure trustworthiness, once an approach is selected the researcher must follow and respect the standard research guidelines set by that particular method, adhering to all preexisting guidelines as outlined by the chosen approach (Ellis, 2004). Examples of autoethnographic methods are: 1) narrative ethnographies aimed to disrupt power dynamics; 2) narrative ethnographies to study others; 3) reflexive dyadic review on actual interviews; 4) reflexive ethnographies of the actual changes of researchers; 5) layered accounts of author's own research experiences; 6) interactive "in-depth and intimate" interviews regarding sensitive topics; 7) community autoethnographies

illustration of social issues; 8) co-constructed collaborative narratives; 9) performance or

dramaturgical characters of cultural life; and 10) personal narratives of researchers' or

authors' relation to a phenomenon (Gergen & Gergen, 2002).

The guidelines of my selected method, "personal narratives of a researcher's or

author's relation to a phenomenon, were clear and constructed to result in viable and

trustworthy academic research. One significant aspect of following the personal narrative

structures involved, "…shamelessly advocat[ing] forms of representation that reduce

alienating, distance, hierarchy, and single-mindedness" (Gergen & Gergen, 2002, p. 31).

Personal narrative authors write in search of themselves, immensely drawn to interactions

that represent an infinite merging and recombining of meanings (Gergen & Gergen,

2002). As an active participating autoethnographer, I recognized how frequently

traditional forms of scholarly writing stay on the sidelines of research which reminded

me of a sayings that I heard my mother speak sporadically when I was a child; "Did

anyone ask you to say anything?...You are a child, you should be seen, not heard."

Comparably traditional forms of research should be seen [in the, discussion and reference

list], and not heard [in the body of the work] (Sparkes, 2002). However, as noted by

Gergen and Gergen (2002),

> …in the same way that flexibility and continuous innovation are requirements
> for living in the complexities and rapid transformations of modern life, so too
> should we savor variety in our forms of [research]….As we enrich the range of
> representation so do we soften the rules of tradition and enrich the possibilities of
> relationships (p. 31).

Using autoethnography as a personal narrative method of research was the best way to

answer my research question, and in turn, enhances the landscape of the future

experiences of BGMCS/BGMGS.

Epistemological Underpinnings

Symbolic Interactionism and the Narrative Body

Dear Vincent,

   Imagine a house on the corner of an inner city neighborhood where the loud police sirens and flashing bright lights of police cars zooming by with their brilliant colors outside a window take the place of birds chirping harmoniously. Imagine three little Black boys playing in a back yard, only feet away from a drug–infested alley frequently visited by local crack heads. Imagine growing up in a neighborhood where doors commonly lead to prison, death, or drug use. You don't have to imagine. You know; this was your reality. You grew up in inner city Birmingham, Alabama, where the dreams for most kids were to 1-get to school safely on a daily bases [and/or] 2-at some point graduate high school.

<div align="right">-From the Corners of Your Childhood</div>

   This personal narrative is directly related to my childhood, to my neighborhood, however, it is only a small indication of who I Am, or who I used to be. I chose theories related to Symbolic Interactionism and the Narrative Body (Waskul & Vannini, 2006; Gubrium & Holstein, 2001) as approaches to analyzing my writings, my voice, and ultimately the development of me. Gubrium and Holstein (2001) wrote, "…when everything appears to be in flux, we are sustained by the conviction that, deep down, a singular authentic self resides within us" (p. 1). Although I grew up in a household in the Deep South that shaped me into the man "I am" today, I was forced to participate in more masculine activities such as football to toughen me up. Those two words "I am" are two of the most powerful words, for what individuals put after them shapes our reality, makes us who we are and informs others what they can expect from us (Jeff_iam24fit, 2014). Gubrium and Holstein (2001) explained our, " '*true self*' resides somewhere inside, in some privileged space… We take for granted that in our most private recesses, we don't need to divide ourselves between countless identities…Deep inside, it is possible to get in touch, and be at one, with our real selves" (p. 1). This type of research begs the

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question… "What does it mean to be *true* to oneself?" Since kindergarten teachers, friends, and parents recited that one of the most important challenges we will face in life is how to be *true* to oneself (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). But what does it mean to truly to be *true*, when so much of who we are is structured from experiences, moments, conversations, and life's challenges?

I chose the sociological theories of Symbolic Interactionism and the Narrative Body to answer these questions related to my own truth and to serve as guiding forms of analysis for my dissertation. The theory of Symbolic Interactionism views the body as a cornucopia of interchanges among many different interest and perspectives (Waskul & Vannini, 2006). Symbolic Interactionism emphasizes the extent to which our own *sense making and consciousness* does not exist *prior* to any of our lived experiences, rather our own *sense making and consciousness* appears through our *daily-actions and interactions* with others (Reynolds, 2003). We know who we are from the memories of our past and from what others tell us about ourselves, stories as a form of information, inform our sense of self, and lead us to develop our own *true* narratives. Waskul and Vannini (2006) explained true narrative is a, "form of working subjectivity and a site of discursive struggle between narrative of the self and institutional discourses which frame our (embodied) [or true] subjectivity" (p. 12).

The Narrative Body explained as a representation of institutionally driven concepts of "personhood [as a] narrative accomplishment…[it] 'is more than the sum of its parts, and narrative is what allows it to be more'" (Waskul & Vannini, 2006, p. 12). The various institutions in which we live actively shape our Narrative Body as "…we continually confront the practical contingencies of occupying an institutional terrain that

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places more and more identity shaping demands on all of us" (Gubrium & Holstein,

2001, p. 2).

Dear Vincent,

From the bully in 6th grade who teased you and called you ~~sissy~~ and ~~faggot~~
because you dressed nice, talked with a high pitched voice, and had mannerisms that
were a little feminine from time to time, from elementary thru middle school; to your
father's skepticism of the youngest of his three sons working at the GAP Inc. clothing
store in your junior year of high school; to your historically Black fraternity brothers in
college vowing never to pledge a "Gay dude" into their chapter and realizing nearly 10
years later–they did with YOU…

…"Who and what [you are] in practice has been dislodged from [your] inner
spaces, to be relocated in [those] self-defining activities of varied institutions" institutions
you now know to be your classrooms, your college campuses, and your biological and
fraternal families (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001. p. 2).

-From the Edge of Adulthood

Gubrium and Holstein (2001) suggested that institutions such as my peers in

Birmingham, Alabama, my role in my family lead by a deeply religious father, and my

fraternity brothers' influences all were representations of my *I Am*. In other words, these

are examples of the various institutions that played an active role in policing and

positioning my Narrative Body. Who *I Am* today, a Black man who nearly 22 years after

birth came into *my*self, and not the *self* others wanted me to become, is a testament to

how my life's narrative shaped me.

The remaining section details my techniques for data collection and explains how

I analyzed the data.

Research Design (Method)

This epistolary autoethnographic personal narrative of my lived experiences as a

BGMGS did not require that I submit an application to the Louisiana State University's

Institutional Review Board (IRB). As a result I limited my data collection to my personal

handwritten and typed journals and letters. According to the literature related to writing as inquiry, writings like personal journals are a social process, writing to figure something out, writing to discovery something new, and in my case, my attempt to figure out my own lived experiences as a BGMGS who attended a PWI in the South (Ellis, 2004).

As a researcher I must explain who I am as a subject of my autoethnography. I, Vincent Tarrell Harris at age thirty; (a) was or am currently enrolled in at least one PWI [as detailed by that institution's policies and guidelines], (b) self-identify as African American but I prefer to call myself Black, or Black American, (c) self-identify as gay or homosexual, however for 21 years of my life I actively practiced sexual discretion (McCune, 2014) and presented myself as a straight or heterosexual male, (d) self-identify as a cisgender (Shaprio, 2010) male, which describes an "individual whose gender identity matches the expected norms for their genitals…e.g. a masculine gender identity and male genitalia" (p. 58). I was born to a deeply religious father and mother both of whom were raised in Southern Baptist Christian households in Alabama and Georgia, respectively. I consider myself a spiritual being at heart rather than religious, and I do believe in God, Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and I recognize that my faith continues to grow as I form a closer relationship with God. I am the youngest of three sons; both of my older brothers are married to women and have families, totaling three beautiful nieces and four handsome nephews. I was born and raised and lived my entire life in Birmingham, Alabama, until I attended Auburn University, in Auburn, Alabama, for undergrad. It was not until I graduated from college and moved to Houston, Texas, that I

began to live openly as a Black gay male. I refer to Houston as the place where I grew into myself, for myself, and with myself.

Data Collection

Given the expected time frame of the project I tailored my writing to those lived experiences that impacted my life as a BGMGS who attended a PWI in the South. I wrote in regards to my a) ethnicity, gender, and identity, b) successes as a Black man at a PWI, and c) lived experiences as a Black gay man attending a PWI in the South.

From December 2014 to March 2015, I drew from past experiences that arose as I read through the literature relating to my research, and wrote organically 4 revealing stories or vignettes and 1 testimony over the course 4 months. The journals were semi-structured as I adopted, as Ellis (2004) suggested, a writing method that gave me permission to experiment and explore new forms of writing, such as poetry, representing various voices, writing to myself in 3rd person, and writing on behalf of myself to a broader, unknown audience. Although I leaned towards an epistolary form of writing – or letters – as demonstrated in the works of Ellison, Gregory, and Walker and researchers such as Edward, Johnson, and McCune, I was open to allowing the moment to transform my writing into a place of organic development, which in all transparency was unknown to me. The use of personal journals or writing letters to oneself indicates, "self-reflexive activities…useful in removing or buggering the effects of stereotypes" which provide a form of residual analysis not achievable from interviewing participants (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 38).

The personal journals were written in my personal locations and varied depending on my daily routine, interactions, and anticipated moments. Simultaneous analysis of my

writings occurred, however, and I was flexible in my approach to avoid limiting the natural flow of the writing process.

This autoethnographic study was written at one 4-year PWI located in the southern region of the United States; the locations of my vignettes and testimony occurred over the course of my life, however, in various locations and involved numerous people and circumstances. The selected institution was considered a large public research–I institution as categorized by the Carnegie Classifications noted in the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching ("The Carnegie Classification," August 2014). Research–I institution types have an enrollment of approximately 20,000–50,000 undergraduates and graduate students ("The Carnegie Classification," August 2014). Given the historical oppression of Black college students in some parts of the southern region this research aided in eliminating existing barriers and tensions within the Black collegiate community regarding misguided beliefs surrounding individuals who share the same gender and have varying sexual orientations (Strayhorn, 2010).

Presentation of Data (Data Analysis)

High School Vignette

[I grabbed the single light blue piece of paper titled "Ramsay Magnetic High School Summer 1999 Reading List". The directions instructed me to pick at least 4 of the 10 book or novels listed and write a 2 to 3 page reflection of each using selected prompts. Already dreading how this would cut out a large recreational section of my summer, knowing that I was a slow reader, I reluctantly place my index finger at the top of the page…as I slowly pressed my finger against the soft paper, I moved number by number saying to myself…]

1. Nope
2. No
3. Not interested,
4. Nah I'm good…

[As my finger guided my eyes title by title –which I now realize was not the best method of selecting a book– I finally said to myself…]

5. Wait… Hold Up… What's This?... <u>The Color Purple</u>?... Hmmmmm

[Picks up book...Flip… Flip… Flip…Page One]

"Dear God,
I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me." (Walker, 1982, p.1)

Epistolary Writing

Two years before I was born in 1984, Alice Walker authored a seminal piece of American literature.   After reading *The Color Purple* on my high school reading list the honesty of each letter captured my sense of wonder, and I was lost in the possibility of self-awakening; the beauty of each letter demonstrated a model of self-expression and self-care I never knew existed. During my graduate studies at LSU I discovered this form of writing is known as epistolary writing. In American literature epistolary writing is more commonly referred to as an epistolary novel. These were composed of only letters dating back to L'Estrange's translation of *Les Lettres portugaises* [sic] in 1678, which lead to Jane Austen's narrative of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1798, to a more modern form in Walker's (1982) *The Color Purple* (Bray, 2003, p. 1). As defined by Tucker (1993), the epistolary novel is distinctively different from writing a traditional letter from a sender (writer) to an addressee (reader), particularly regarding the identities of the author (sender) and reader (addressee).

> The form of the epistolary novel is characterized by an implicit doubleness (*sic*) of both [author and reader], since along with the writer and addressee of any given letter within the novel there exists a second writer and addressee – the author of the novel and the novel's readers (Tucker, 1993, p. 422).

Similarly as the author of my own letters, I was trapped between the dual roles of both researcher and participant. An epistolary autoethnography is self-focused. Epistolary writing required me to explicitly acknowledge the tension of the roles of researcher and participant, since I –Vincent Tarrell Harris– the researcher, served as the focal point of my study as a "subject" [I actively executed my own inquiry] and an "object" [I was the participant who was studied] (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Change, 2010).

> Within the epistolary frame, the letter is limited as an act of self-representation of its author within the text not only because it must be received and read before it can effectively represent, but also because it is literally the representation of another author-the author of the novel (Tucker, 1993, p. 422).

As my own researcher and participant I was placed in a unique positionality [sic] of self–representation. An epistolary autoethnographic study restricts any attempt to partition self from research, "it is an impossible task" explained, Ngunjiri, et al., (2010), noting that "Scholarship is inextricably connected to self-personal interest, experiences, and familiarity" (p. 2). As my own participant, I used the tool of epistolary writing to gain access to my own delicate issues and deepest thoughts, which as Ellis (2004) illustrated, "makes this research method [autoethnography] a powerful and unique tool for individual and social understanding" (p. 3).

Time and place played significant roles in the context in my study. The dates in my letters most resemble the form of the epistolary novel, but they are not chronologically placed due to the organic nature of the letters. Tucker (1993) stated,

> Letters are dated or presumably datable. While the dates of actual letters are intended to identify the time of composition and, in so doing, emphasize and implicitly privilege the act of writing, dates in epistolary novels, when they are present, serve primarily as an ordering device (p. 432).

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My writings were non-temporal. I recognized during the writing process of my personal vignettes and testimony that, although we assume that life occurs chronologically, my natural recollection of my–*self* and my–experiences were non–temporal. For example, Gubrium and Holstein (2001) suggested that even among the daily demands of our life and the variations of time, space, and location "The self might be fragmented by the diverse demands of social life, [however]…At its greatest depth, the self is secure from the vicissitudes of daily living" (p. 4). Tucker (1993) supported this position, explaining that the "temporal disjunctions" formed by using epistolary writing conceptualizes the degree of "human action (and the [autobiographical] representation of that action)" that largely relies on the interruption of an *expected* flow of time (p. 423).

Tucker (1993) explained that in an epistolary novel "dates" entice the reader to the idea that *time* always takes an "organic" route in regards to a novel's narrative progression, when in fact, "the juxtaposition of the two time frames also accen-tuates the differences between the two" (p. 432). Autoethnographic writing has been compared to filmmaking, song writing, and poetry (Neyman, 2011), all of which are non–traditional forms of writing that transition between time and space with the use of flashbacks, emotional memories, and unpredictable outburst. Writing my letters in order of dates and time would have hindered the natural progression of the epistolary autoethnographic research process, similar to the distinction time and date have in an epistolary novel.

Letters written retrospectively not only offer the author another chance to reflect on her or his personal experiences, but they simultaneously invite the readers to create her or his own connection to the letter.

Altman (1982) explained,

> As readers of the [epistolary] novel, we can never be certain whether we are reading the letters as they are written, as they are being read by their recipient within the novel, or at some moment entirely independent of either of the two events (p. 129).

I offer my letters to my readers as they are; some letters have dates, location, and themes to provide necessary context, literary structure, and intentionality and others are without any designation of schema. However, citing Altman's (1982) research in *Writing Home: Evelina, the Epistolary Novel and the Paradox of Property*, Tucker (1993) suggested that I will never know with what intent or emotion my readers interrupt my letters, either as I wrote them or either the individual interpretations of he/she/her/him/they/them/zer/zis [*sic*].

Power of Black Talk, Names, and Poetry

I realize now that the truth about L-E-T-T-E-R-S is that, that's all I am. Reflecting on my life, words have endured with me in every breath, in every exhale. Using words to write letters or to memorize the lyrics to my favorite song or poems gave meaning to my life. The words, L-E-T-T-E-R-S, and actual letters became the soundtrack to my life, and it all began when I was just a child.

Dear Readers,

As a young boy I had a pen pal; it as my Aunt Toot. We write about my week and my day, we write about my summer plans, and trips, and the act of sending and receiving letters energized me. I anticipated her response. I even picked out my own paper, and my special time to write her back.

As a young boy my mother left notes for us on the dining room table each day before she left for work. Although short, the notes detailed a list of things to do, how to structure our day, and what to expect.

As a pre-teen I wrote letters to my oldest brother who at the age of 15 was sent to live with my grandparents in Georgia. He teased me even in the letters about my spelling, which I still have problems with today.

-From the Edges of My Childhood

Unconsciously these words, L-E-T-T-E-R-S, and actual letters have shaped my use of the epistolary form of writing. Words maintain our lives, by the forming of names, the use of naming, the belief in what a name represents, as Charmaz (2006) explained, "Names carry weight, whether light or heavy. Names provide ways of knowing– and being" (p. 396). Names inadvertently dictate the way we live our life, reflect on our past memories, or anticipate our future moments. Throughout my letters particular words or names were used in the following manners:

a). ~~Lines~~ are drawn through words to signify my attempt to deconstruct the meanings or the use of these words.

b). *Italicized* words represent my own voice, the voice of others, or to empathize significance of the words.

c). **Bold** words used within the body of my chapters [outside of headings] demonstrate an urgency of the words.

d). CAPITALIZING or making an expected <u>lowercase</u> letter uppercase or vice versa is my attempt to disrupt traditional values of hierarchy and power given to those words.

e). The use of [brackets] or (parenthesis) highlights contextual schema such as location, time, date, etc…alongside providing the reader with my personal tangents.

Charmaz (2006) reminded me that names, L-E-T-T-E-R-S, and words formulate and reify human interactions –we– attach deep and permanent values to particular names and ignore others. Growing up being called a ~~sissy~~ was the most painful word I remember as a questioning and identity-confused little Black boy in Birmingham. The word ~~sissy~~ was worse than being called a ~~nigger~~.

Dear Readers,

> "Names, then, are rooted in actions and give rise to specific practices"
> (Charmaz, 2006, p. 396)

-From a Student With-In the Black Diamond

As an undergraduate questioning and identity-confused Black male student being called the word or being "named" *straight* was more than a word to me; it was a defining characteristic I eagerly pursed for four and a half collegiate years. Unlike my straight Black peers, because of my ethnicity, these words [*straight, ~~sissy~~*] were painful and gripping. The linguists' traditions of my Black American past held true in my writings, and must be recognized as a valuable skill set on which I relied heavily in writing my autoethnography.

To give context, in elementary school I took three years of speech therapy to correct my pronunciation of words. I recall one key area for me was the pronunciation of words like "peach" and "sausage" which where issues with my /s/ and /ch/ sounds. Similarly, Smitherman (2001) also was placed in speech therapy to deconstruct the Black talk from the natural regional [ethnic American] dialect to a more educated universal [white American] tone. In Geneva, Smitherman's (2001) scholarly book *talking that talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America* explained how Black talk is

"fundamentally different, in so many ways, from the speech of European Americans that it seems to get right up in yo face and *demand* that you address it as 'language'" (p. 14).

> In Black America, [oral traditions] preserves and celebrates African Culture…Because Africans in America play with and on the Word, good talkers become heroes and she-roes…Bloods who can talk and testify, preach and prophesy, lie and signify, get much props (Smitherman, 2001, p. 223).

Unfortunately, those who cannot prophesy, lie, or signify like myself grow up being "cracked on/jones on" or discredited for being opposite, not black enough, not straight enough not, not boy enough to comfortably exist in educational space. The speech classes helped me to read better –still– aspects of my voice or the way in which I pronounced my words didn't classify me as "the average nigga" (Young, 2007), rather they placed me in a category of "~~sissy~~ or ~~faggot~~". Hale-Benson's (1986) research in *Black Children: Their Roots, Culture and Learning Styles* found that black boys often "feel [as if] they are flirting with homosexuality if they give into the pressures of the school to exhibit behaviors they consider feminine" (as cited in Young, 2007, p. 90). The way a young Black male talks –the way I spoke in elementary and middle school– or physically appears, extends or curtails him/me a significant/trivial level of cultural capital (Young, 2007). In my letters you encounter the rawness of my childhood memories. Stories of me being teased or taunted because of how I talked, dressed, or carried myself followed me long after I left the tainted hallways of Washington Elementary & Middle School. Understanding how the use of this language held me captive from my true identity is crucial to the presentation of my letters.

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Vignettes and Testimonies

Dear Readers,

In my mother's house above the mantel of an abandoned fireplace hang three photos on her paint-peeling discolored off white walls, one of my oldest brother Sir Michael, one other of my middle brother Rickey Jr, and three portraits of me, Vincent the youngest. Yes, Three…Lol!

In the first photo I wear a satin white cap and gown with a little red tassel hanging over the left side of my pudgy little brown face. My smile reveals four sliver capped top row front teeth showing just a hint of white teeth on the bottom row. With my right hand over my left I tightly held a miniature rolled up white-paper graduation certificate, adorned with a bright red satin ribbon. I smiled because I knew what made my parents happy and that was behaving well and getting good grades. So that's what I did.

The second portrait is of my high school cap and grown, a glossy royal blue, but the gloss didn't stop there. My head was full of dark thick curly black hair that shone in every angle along with my extra shining face and thick chapped lips slightly parted to reveal a hint of my straight all white teeth.

In the last portrait I have on an all black cap and gown and around my neck rests a bold gold & old–black stole representing my fraternity membership in Alpha. Amiably hanging to the left side of my face is a bright orange & blue tassel with the number '06 at its crown. Above my lips sits a neatly trimmed black mustache setting off my wide bright smile. Of the various photo backdrops I could have chosen at the university photo studio, I selected Samford Hall, one of Auburn University's hallmark buildings. No matter how normal this photo seemed it clearly represented a complex student who did not start off as the confident man in the description above. Similarly Samford Hall, my backdrop, seems flawlessly built inside and out, however few people could tell that it has withstood wars, been the vessel of change for transformative policies, and even survived destructive fires; all of this resulted in a stronger, more reliable foundation upon which Auburn University has stood.

My family, my high school guidance counselors, and administrators of the Birmingham City Public School System expected nothing but greatness from me. They expected to see the Vincent they always knew I would become. Each portrait is a representation of how I sought to make sure I did not let them down while along the way discovering who I truly wanted to become and was.

-From a complex BGMGS

Vignette writing is equivalent to a self-portrait. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis

(1997) explained, "the portraitist's reference to her own life story does not reduce the

reader's trust, it enhances it. It does not distort the responsibility of the researcher and

the authenticity of the work, it give them clarity" (p. 96).   With each vignette I

authentically illustrated or referenced moments in my life that played defining roles in

my development as a BGMGS. From this vignette a reader might assume that education

played a crucial role in my life, or simply that I like to take photos. Honestly, both are

true. Although not chronologic, my vignettes "construct a window through which the

reader can view some of the pleasure and pain" associated with how a BGMGS

negotiated his way to and through PWIs (Humphreys, 2005, p. 842).

Citing Nowak's (2000) and Smith's (1999) research on "diaries," Humphreys

(2005) explained that private journaling represents an author's own *micro-ethnographies*.

Like small portions of vibrantly colored fabric representing distinct moments in my

collegiate and personal life, my vignettes represent a quilted tapestry derived from twenty

years of formal and informal journaling, cell phone note taking, sporadic free writes,

intentional/unintentional self-reflection, and interactive self-examination. Using

vignettes comfortably allowed for a "more erratic, circuitous rhythms and patterns" to

occur in my dissertation writing, granting me the capacity to navigate with a sense of

fluidity rather than concrete traditional academic styles (Cohen & Mallon, 2001, p. 10).

Testimonies, referred to in the Black community commonly as "testifying",

comes from the African American Verbal Tradition and is defined as speaking the truth

to the people (Smitherman, 1999). Similar to Collins' (2000) request for African

American women to reclaim their voice in academic literature, I, too, wanted to reclaim

the often muddled voice of BGMGS who attend a PWI. Smitherman (1999) wrote, "The

truth has to be spoken in a language that the people understand – with both their head and

their hearts" (p. 252). I wanted to use my truth, my testimony, to speak the truth to *my*

people, my people representing: a). gay and questioning Black male college students, b).

higher education administrators and faculty, and c). straight and Black/white people who

interact with BGMGS on a daily basis.

As a once questioning Black male, I did not entertain any knowledge of being gay

from a straight person; in fact I found advice from a straight person, even white men or

women, as borderline insensitive. An old African American saying says if, "They got

religion, they oughtta show some sign"; being Black and proud is a verb, not an adjective

(Smitherman, 1999, p. 257). Existing research about Black males in college barely

scraped the surface of sexual orientation. I specifically include a testimony to provide

my concrete, specific lived experiences openly expressing the "involvement and

intimacy" of my personal and graduate life. I do this not to provide the readers with the

"Tea" or the *real side* of the BGMGS' story; rather it is my hope that my vignettes and

testimony allow me to illustrate that who I am and my story motivate us to deconstruct

boarders, transcend differences, and reaffirm our common humanity (Conquregood,

1991).

CHAPTER FOUR: THE BODY PART III (VIGNETTES AND TESTIMONIAL)

Vignette One: Setting the Stage

Circa. 2002 – 2006

Location: Auburn University, Auburn AL [Undergraduate]

Dear Readers,

Being successful in college looked different for a young African American male or a young Black guy…or was it…? As I reflect on "What success meant for me in college" I never imagined it could mean abandoning my own ethnicity; I never would have anticipated the tremendous awakening I would gain from such a public failure, a test that I know without which I would have resulted in a different person than I am today.

While at Auburn University (Auburn) I was involved in over ten student organizations and groups, all of which were of value to me, however these select few had the most impact on me as a student leader: Student Government Association (SGA); Black Student Union (BSU); Better Relations Day (BRD); Student Alumni Board (SAB); and Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc., (Alpha). These specific groups allowed me to experience areas of growth where I developed a stronger sense of Black identity, which later led to me self–acknowledging my questioning sexual orientation.

I did not want to become just another number when attending Auburn with a population of 23,000 students. As a result, my on-campus involvement resembled that of most professional internships; it was my job. The first student organization I applied for – SGA's Freshman Forum –rejected me. I later found my place within SAB, which was equally as important as Freshman Forum. Next I auditioned and was a member of the Auburn's Modeling Board 3 years in a row. I played trumpet in the campus band and then I discovered the one organization that seemed to be a perfect fit, the BSU. These student organizations fostered my development of purpose, altered my career choice from becoming a veterinarian, and introduced me to the field of higher education and student affairs. As time progressed, I found myself heavily involved in numerous elite campus organizations, including pledging as a fraternity brother of Alpha, and I switched my major to Mass Communication, with a Minor in Marketing. Although all of my new found success at Auburn felt natural, I still wondered why now? Why was I finally good enough? Were my accomplishments real or was I just meeting a quota?

I struggled with the revelation of leaving a footprint on Auburn's campus as one of the most successful – "African American" – student leaders, or as one of the most successful – "Black" – students in Auburn's predominately white campus history. In addition to wrestling with more than just my sexual orientation, I also struggled with race labels early on in college. At Auburn I avoided calling myself Black, and I strictly adopted the African- American-college-student-guise because it was the Auburn culture, and it was the considerate phrase used by members of my PWI. As a Black male this

confusion of ethnic labeling caused me to question my own definitions of success regarding my on-campus student involvement. Was I selected because I was the best candidate for the positions, or was I selected because I was an African American student who applied, looked un-threating (Dancy, 2014), talked in proper white English vernacular (Smitherman, 1999; Young, 2007), and dressed like I could assimilate (McCune, 2014) into Auburn's predominately white student organizations? As I reflect on my student involvement choices, I never considered that my campaign for SGA president was my own personal plea for acceptance- not from my Black peers, but from the predominately white student organizations that rejected me. Part of me knew I didn't belong. Looking back, I can honestly say I was campaigning for a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2008), not votes.

In 2005, I ran for SGA president; if elected I would represent over 23,000 students as their official university ambassador, student leader, and would hold a coveted seat on the Auburn Board of Trustees. I was only the fifth African American student to run, and if elected would have been the fourth African American SGA president in Auburn's 149 year old history. I forced myself to go to the predominately white bars off campus [even though I didn't go out to those bar regularly], and I paraded myself around white sorority female and male chapter meetings to garner their votes. I was concerned with appearing at too many Black student events on and off campus because I didn't want to send the message that I was the "Black candidate"; rather I wanted the campus to know I was the best candidate–who happened to be Black. After weeks of questioning my own Black identity and campaigning under an African–American–college–student–guise, I lost the election by 200 votes.

The temporally traumatic experience of publicly losing this major election prompted a turning point in my self-identity. I reflected on my campaign for SGA president; I regretted questioning my own ethnicity and I compromised my own sense of Black culture to attain an ambitious personal goal. The SGA presidential elections were held in early March, months before the BSU presidential elections. And then it hit me.

I realized that with the SGA presidency I was reaching for the star, but I did not have to look so far, because with BSU I could do both! Later that semester I was elected as BSU president by my Black peers who already knew the "real" me, the Black me, rather than our predominately white counterparts for whom I was actively seeking their approval of my "representative" "Black guy in SGA." At the end of my tenure as BSU president I was proud to leave a lasting footprint on Auburn's campus as one of its most successful Black student leaders.

As the saying goes, we often search high and low for our desires to find out that our truths have been right in front of us all along. Although I reached for the stars by running for the SGA presidency, I am thankful that I bumped into the real reason for my campaign journey, which was for me to begin a new journey of defining my own Black self–conscious.

-From the reflections of Questioning Black college student

Reflection on Vignette One

What the townspeople and probably even my own family don't know is that it was partly my queerness that motivated my overachievement. It was the sense that, if I could only deflect attention away from my… soprano voice…penchant for dolls and mama's wigs…if I could focus attention away from some of the fundamental parts of who I was coming to know as 'me' by working extra hard for A's in school, by joining every possible high school club, by running for and winning senior class president…

By being the 'good' son who sends money home to help when none of my siblings comes through, by agreeing to give speeches and lectures for the community to inspire young kids to stay in school and off drugs, then and only then, perhaps, when the unspoken, potentially devastating news that I am queer finally came, it wouldn't be so damn disappointing or might not matter at all.

(Johnson, 2008, p. 15-16)

Vignette one poignantly set the stage of my debut as the over–involved Black college student. Being involved was my drug of choice in college; it was enticingly addictive and refreshingly available on demand. I did not really know why I was so good at being involved until much later. What I did know was that I loved being around others like me who saw their college experience as more than just rhetorical lectures, essays, and tests.

I realize now that my over-involvement in ten campus student activities was an unconscious desire to achieve a sense of belonging (Astin, 1982; Strayhorn, 2008). I describe this desire as a *pursuit of belonging*; over-involvement was my coping mechanism for not wanting to dealing with my own internal identity conflicts. I describe this as *ambiguous–coping*, although my over-involvement left me stressed out, over worked, and it inadvertently impacted my Grad Point Average (GPA); over-involvement indirectly encouraged me to find my professional purpose in higher education and student affairs, and it kept me from making questionable social choices.

While my *ambiguous–coping* served to distract me from my own personal discoveries, the phrase "*it was my job…*" demonstrates the theory of on campus student *vocation*: "Vocation is used broadly to refer to paid or unpaid work within the context of a specific career or, more generally, as a person's life calling" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 69). Suddenly, I was involved in what I call a "four yearlong internship in the field of higher education", also known as a vocation. This experience fostered my development of purpose, and altered my career choice from the expected career as a veterinarian to the future student affairs professional I am becoming today.

As I successfully navigated through student organizations, I developed a sense of awareness of my ethnicity that was not yet present before.

> I was concerned with appearing at too many Black student events on and off campus because I didn't want to send the message that I was the Black candidate, rather I wanted the campus to know –I was the best candidate– who happened to be Black.

Dancy (2014) labeled this experience as the "White gaze" which described my "negotiating anonymous collectivity…the understanding of Blacks as a stereotypical collective" (p. 50). I wanted to avoid associating myself with the Black students, because I thought it would limit my chances of being voted SGA president. I unconsciously self-imposed my own "Imposter Syndrome" which Dancy (2014) explained as a form of "internalized racism…focus[ing] unrelenting attention on doing perfection in a White gaze, namely outperforming [Black] peers while also vigorously attempting to embody a less stereotypical self" (p. 53).

The public loss of a major SGA election fortunately caused a ripple effect of awareness that disowning my own ethnicity was a deep betrayal I wanted to overcome.

One attempt at managing my own internal racism in tandem with meeting the needs of

my student involvement desires was to find a position that accomplished both.

> Luckily the SGA presidential elections were held in early March, months before the BSU presidential elections. And then it hit me. I realized that with the SGA presidency I was reaching for the star, but I didn't have to look so for, because with BSU I could do both!

Cross's theory of the internalization stage of BID represented dissonance resolution (as

cited in Evans et al., 2010, p. 259). Cross (1991) stated, "Individuals who have a

bicultural reference group orientation concern themselves with infusing their black

identity and their dominate culture identity into their overall identity" (as cited in Evans

et al., 2010, p. 259). In the process of being elected president of the BSU I developed

into a Black man without having to appease the expectations of my predominately white

campus faculty and peers. Being president of BSU reaffirmed my own self-awareness as

a Black student while simultaneously fueling my desire to become a student leader

(Cuyjet, 2006; Baxter Magolda, 2008).

> In *Chapter 3* of this dissertation, I mentioned the third and most recent photo my

mom has of me.

> In the last portrait I have on an all black cap and gown and around my neck rests a bold gold & old–black stole representing my fraternity membership in Alpha. Amiably hanging to the left side of my face is a bright orange & blue tassel with the number '06 at its crown. Above my lips sits a neatly trimmed black mustache setting off my wide bright smile.

Cross (1991) labeled the middle stage of BID as "immersion-emersion" which he

explained as individuals enter having, "a clear sense of identity they wish to shed, but

have little information about the identity they wish to assume" (as cited in Evans et al.,

2010, p. 259). I was a proud young man of this photo who was starting the process of

shedding an identity of the African–American–college–student–guise to assume my

identity as a Black man. Cross (1991) indicated that during this stage it is ok to enter

without much information or clear expectations of who you want to be (as cited in Evans

et al., 2010, p. 258). As I held tightly my empty Auburn degree portfolio I did not

assume what other people expected of me, rather I optimistically set out to create my own

outlook of who Vincent T. Harris would one day become.

Vignette Two: The Great Pretender…

Circa. 2002 – 2006

Location: Auburn University, Auburn AL [Undergraduate]

Dear Straight People,

I couldn't ignore my questioning disposition that secretly haunted me and only me. To understand the level of self-policing I inflicted on myself here is a glimpse of when I first knew something was up.

There were a selection of pseudonyms for my name: I was known as "Vincent the involved guy", "Vincent the Black guy in SGA", "Vincent who went to Ramsay", or the one that held the most weight …you know "Vincent the Alpha". To outsiders, even my close friends and family, they thought I was "Mr. Auburn… Mr. Popular", but to me I was "Mr. Cellophane". As Ellison (1952) mentioned in Invisible Man, although you could visibly see me, you didn't truly SEE me.

At Auburn my professors only saw me as a Black body, a student who in the classroom sat in the same spot, didn't cause any issues, and was a fairly average student. My peers saw me as the "Big Man on Campus", regularly in the library, having a good time at parties, supporting a variety of on-campus programs and events. Unfortunately, they never really saw me…well, not the whole me, not the –me– that also included my identity as a Gay man. I always knew something was different, I knew something was missing. I finally realized that for other people to see me I must first SEE myself. It is my hope that these pages, these letters, will allow you to finally SEE me.

I opened my eyes inside a lonely, quiet two-bedroom apartment in Auburn, AL. With the inhale of one breath and the reluctant push of one button, I focused on a fuzzy reflection of myself in my mind. Over the years this image became sharper… over the years I finally SAW, myself.

–Day One 7:36 a.m.–

I took one deep breath and pressed call!
Ring… Ring… Ring... "Hello?" I said,

"Hey, man, how are you?" said Lewis.
"I'm good, just chilling…what about you? What are you doing?" I asked.

I nervously paced the worn forest green colored carpet in my bedroom, triple the size of any residential hall I stayed in while on campus at Auburn. To my surprise I was up early that morning and here I was talking on the phone to Lewis (He made me smile sooo hard I didn't know I could blush like that… wait, men, can blush too?). As I sat on the edge of my pseudo queen bed (I took two twin beds and pushed them together) I propped my feet up and started to stare at the wood-colored wall fixtures and glanced out the window. I didn't know why I wanted to talk to Lewis, but what I did know was that talking to him was simultaneously terrifying and thrilling with every conversation.

–2 Months Prior–

I met Lewis at my chapter brothers' party and I traveled to in Georgia (as neos in Alpha we were always traveling or as we called it in the Black Greek world "showing love" to other chapters, plus… hell, we just really wanted to show off ourselves …LOL and be seen, now that we could finally tell the world we crossed Alpha). Lewis was not the type of person I thought I would be attracted to, but at the age of 21, I'm not too sure to whom I was attracted to anymore, guys or girls.

Lewis was light skinned, tall, of slender build, broad shouldered, killer smile, and had the most thoughtful way of making me feel good about myself. Lewis had a small cut above his right eyebrow, and, although it didn't look recent, it intrigued me. We kept in contact off and on over the next year, only on the phone, never in person. Around my chapter brothers I was creative to conceal who Lewis truly was to me, how **she** made me feel, how I longed for **his** phone call and text messages, how **we** hoped to see each other again, **she** was the essence of anticipation, **he** … I mean **she** was a friend I had meet out of town.

In my phone I saved **his** name as "**Lisa**".

–Day 2–

Dear Vincent,

"We're the Light of the world" Xs 2

"We're A-Phi-A" Xs 2

"That's Who we are" Xs 2

"We're A-Phhhhhhhiiii… A-Phiiiiiiiiii... A-Phiiiiiiiiii… A-Phiiiiiiiii… A... Shiiiiiiiiit"

"Badder Than a Motherfucker… Ooooooo K! Ooooooo K! Ooooooo God Damn K"

"And I love it, I love it, I love it!"

Boy, did you love it! You finally made it through one of the hardest, most challenging, most time consuming, extremely draining, and occasionally dangerous moments in your life; you, Sir, were an Alpha Man! –Being a member of a Historically Black Greek letter organization was a marker of success for young Black males in college. And at Auburn, the Omicron Kappa Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. was one of the strongest, most influential, and most respected Greek letter organizations, even among the predominantly white Greek Letter orgs of the Inter Fraternity Council (IFC).

Ha! Look at you now, you alongside both your older blood–brothers were Alpha's now; you completed the triangle, the last brother to pledge. It felt damn good man, it felt damn good. Even though from time to time you could still hear your dean saying, "#5?.... #5?"

"Yes, Sir, Big Brother Dean, Sir," I yelled avoiding eye contact with him,
Big Brother Dean said, "Say it Loud, and Say it Proud… on the count of 3…1…2…3"
"I'm A Virgin, Big Brother Dean Sir, can you help me find the pussy?" I yelled 3 times in a row. Although I wanted to reluctantly yell, or not even acknowledge it, I had no choice in the matter, so I proclaimed it among eerie laughs, pointing fingers, and suspicious questions about my sexuality that I later found out was a frequent topic of conversation among my chapter brothers.

You see, concealing your identity was something you got good at; you had to hide from your family for nearly 12 years of your life, but hiding from a group of hormonal, judgmental, and often times offensive young Black men was gonna be a lil difficult.

–Day Three–

"Vince!" Roger yelled out… "Man, you didn't see how thick that girl was? I know you saw that. Damn, she thick man!"

As I looked to see which girl he was talking about, among the 3 that walked in front of us, I replied "Yeah, Quad-Spot, she is bad, man… lol".

Roger was my line brother and was the #4 on the line, so I called him Quad-Spot. Of all my line brothers, Roger and I had the closest relationship. I am not sure if it was the fact that we stood side-by-side for nearly an entire semester, but there was a connection that we mutually shared. Like many conversations on campus I never really knew what the guys or my chapter brothers were talking about when they said a girl was "thick"…
I wasn't sure if it was referring to the thickness of her hips, of thickness of her vagina, or the thickness of her camel toe…. Idk…But all I knew was that all my chapter brothers wanted a thick girl.

–Day Four–

       I blended in well, very well actually. I was meticulous about how I walked, the swing of my hands, the inflection of my voice, and the style of clothes I wore [not too flashy, but not too dull]. I always got complements on the way I dressed, the way I carried myself was important to me; my mom instilled that in my brothers and me. I remember vividly many mornings before we left for elementary school my mom would dip the tip of her finger into a yellowish gold plastic Vaseline jar, and with a tiny bit of clear, creamy Vaseline would rub her hands together, grab our faces as our heads slightly jerked back and forth between her hands as she lathered me and my brothers' face until we were a shiny-brown resembling a chocolate covered candied Whopper… LOL. My Momma dressed us in the best clothes a JC Penny's department store credit card could buy! At that time I didn't know it, but that's where my fashion sense came from. If there was a color or style to be matched Momma knew how to match it. From birth to around age 17 when I started to buy most of my own clothes, my mother taught her three sons that appearance was important as a Black man. She always said, "Boy, don't leave this house looking no any kinda way!...go in there and put on some real clothes…you ain't gonna have folks thinking I didn't teach you no home training!"

Although, I am grateful for the lessons I learned from Momma, I often wished she would have spent less time worried about how I looked on the outside, and spent more time trying to figure out who I was growing into on the inside.

–Day Five [Today]–

       Now that I look back, appearance played a significant role in my life at Auburn, as a questioning Black male college student. My closet represented the multiple identities I adopted, hanger by hanger: I could wear popular Vincent – the Alpha– and toss on a black and old–gold jersey; I could wear respectable Vincent –the SGA cabinet member– and toss on a some slacks, a nice blazer, and a button down dress shirt, with a shiny Auburn lapel pin. Or I could wear cool Vincent –the fresh dressing Black guy on campus– and grab my trusty pair of GAP jeans, a yellow polo shirt, and a light blue polo hat with a matching yellow horse in the center and be the friendly, relatable, the all-around "Big Man on campus." At times I was at peach with being invisible. Even though I was masked by deceit, I felt like an outsider… a pretender.

–Day One 11:16 p.m.–

Text Message from Lewis: Smile you're too handsome not too ☺
My reply: Awww that just made my day…

Lewis always knew how to make me smile; from the latter half of my sophomore year till graduation he was a constant source of possibility for me. In college, I thought life was much harder than it really was. I thought the major problems like tests and papers were the end of the world. My GPA became this Deity that I worshiped and praised with hopes that it would change for the better. I craved belonging, gaining friends, and

approval was the coveted prize, the laughs, the good times, the parties, the programs, the events became places of growth. I was content and happy beyond all measures. But! The one person I should have been making happy was myself.

Not enough self-reflection happened for me at Auburn.

I was too busying trying to construct this double-life I alone sewed together thread by thread, weaving together my over involvement on campus, my friends who liked the popular guy, and my family who knew I was making them proud by wearing the perfect disguise of a successful straight Black male college student.

-From the Great Pretender

Reflection on Vignette Two

Oh-oh, yes I'm the great pretender
Pretending that I'm doing well
My need is such I pretend too much…

Oh-oh, yes I'm the great pretender
Adrift in a world of my own…

Too real is this feeling of make-believe
too real when I feel what my heart can't conceal…

Yes I'm the great pretender
Just laughin' and gay like a clown
I seem to be what I'm not, you see
I'm wearing my heart like a crown

-Ram, B. (1955). The Great Pretender, The Platters

Vignette two illustrates a series of moments in which I knew *something was up*, "pretending that I'm doing well… I seem[ed] to be what I'm not, you see…[I wore a straight identity] like a crown" (Ram, B., 1955). From 2002 to 2004, I embodied *successful–pretending* as a coping mechanism (Dancy, 2014); it was a comfort zone I relentlessly occupied, until I crossed Alpha in the fall of 2003 and met Lewis in the spring of 2004. I was 20 years old before I even considered that this *successful– pretending* was actually doing more harm than good. I acknowledged to myself that this

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"something [questioning of my sexual identity]" had to be addressed. For far too long I

pretended to construct my life around the tropes of what other people [my family, my

Birmingham school district teachers/admins, my friends and fraternity brothers] set for

me.

Vignette two highlights how intersections of gender, race, sexuality, age, and

campus affiliation are woven together creating a *gendered blazer of success* worn by gay

or questioning Black male college students who actively pretended to be someone they

were not.

> I blended in well, very well actually. I was meticulous about how I walked, the
> swing of my hands, the inflection of my voice, and the style of clothes I wore [not
> too flashy, but not too dull].

My self–monitoring behaviors were a result of what I refer to as a gendered blazer of

success or, as Pollack (1999) referred, as a "gender straitjacket," stitched together by a

plethora of mixed nonverbal messages nestled in between "narrow, rigid, and limited

[models] of being a man" (Edwards & Jones, 2009, p.214). I actively wore this gendered

blazer of success daily, and I now acknowledge how highly racialized it was (Pollack,

1999). I use the metaphor of a *blazer* instead of *straitjacket* because of their cultural

representations. When Black men wear a blazer or a suit it typically refers to: a.) He is

successful and has a nice job, b.) He is going to church, or c.) He is going to a court date

(Young, 2007). However, like a straitjacket, wearing this gendered blazer of success on

Auburn's campus as an involved Black male restricted me from acknowledging my own

intersecting identities representative of the stereotypical Black male college student.

Black male college students, particularly athletes or student leaders, who are

largely assumed to be heterosexual, are "widely perceived as campus heroes for their

athletics prowess, virile appearances, and attractiveness to women" (Dancy, 2005, p. 2).

Black male college students are perceived as hyper–sexualized, misogynistic, sexually

promiscuous, anti–intellectual, belligerent, and disrespectful (Dancy, 2005). I was

regularly groomed by my chapter brothers, family, and friends to adhere to these Black

male masculine norms. Unconsciously, however, I wasn't sure if I wanted to embody,

negatively combat, or tirelessly work to demystify others' sense of Black masculinity,

including my own (Collins 2000; Cuyjet, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010).

I tried desperately to fit in; for approval I actively participated in perplexing

conversations about the female anatomy with which I had limited experience until the age

of 21, when I lost my virginity to a young lady.

> Like many conversations on campus I never really knew what the guys or my
> chapter brothers were talking about when they said a girl was "thick"… I wasn't
> sure if it was referring to the thickness of her hips, of thickness of her vagina, or
> the thickness of her camel toe…

Gay or questioning Black male college students willingly perform traditional

heteronormative [*sic*] male roles structured around their sexuality as coping techniques to

fit into the Black college social scene. For example, Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013)

explained self-identifying gay Black men falsely engaging in certain hypersexual

conversations of "bragging about having sex with multiple women on campus" as a way

of proclaiming their masculinity to other Black male peers (p. 97). Adapting to my

environment was an example of a *cool pose* or "coping stance/pose that black men

utilize, in order to make do with what they do or do not have" (Majors & Billson, 1992,

p. 4-5).

Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013) reported this as a common occurrence among

gay or questioning Black male college students, as one of their participants explained,

"Sitting around talking about girls, their breasts, and how many I laid over the weekend is not something I can talk about" (p. 99). This statement demonstrated how Black male college students' sexual orientation impacted their gender performance, thereby impacting their peer interactions with their Black male peers (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Unfortunately this behavior of *cool posing* excludes some gay or questioning Black males along the margins of the Black community, and even further from creating and maintaining positive peer interactions with straight Black college aged men.

Appearance and gender performance were salient aspects in vignette two, representative of a form of sexual discretion exhibited daily by the clothes I wore, with whom I interacted, and how I carried myself.

> Now that I look back on it, appearance played a significant role in my life at Auburn, as a questioning Black male college student. My closet represented the many personalities I adopted, hanger by hanger…

Gay or questioning Black male college students are acutely aware of the meaning of clothes in regulating and policing proper masculinity (McCune, 2014). Without endorsing a sense of *sexual discretion*, gay or questioning Black male college students become victimized and experience extreme isolation because of their confirmed or assumed sexual identity by the Black community, their family members, and by the general student body at PWIs in the South (Washington & Wall, 2006; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010; Dancy, 2010). As a result, gay or questioning Black male college students actively practice *sexual discretion*, which is the act of men moving and engaging "in desire in spaces that are outside of dominant culture [as they] create lifeworlds [*sic*] that allow them to often celebrate the ideals of Black masculinity while acting on queer desire" (McCune, 2014, p. 8).

Within my fraternity, I was known as the "fresh dresser" or the "pretty-boy". I rarely wore over–sized clothing or paired pieces together that didn't match. Many brothers within my chapter let the trends of current hip–hop music influence their attire; they admired the baggie clothes, fitted caps, Jordan's, and over–sized "white–T". Hip–hop music also influenced their misogynistic, sexually promiscuous, and degrading approach toward women (Collins, 2000).

> "I'm A Virgin, Big Brother Dean, Sir, can you help me find the pussy?" I yelled 3 times in a row. Although I wanted to reluctantly yell, or not even acknowledge it, I had no choice in the matter, so I proclaimed it among eerie laughs, pointing fingers, and suspicious questions about my sexuality that I later found out were a frequent topic of conversation among my chapter brothers.

Research shows that Black male undergraduates seek out brotherly type bonds, friendships, and mentoring relationships via fraternities and collegiate athletics (Harper & Harris, 2006; Messer, 2006). Joining a fraternity allows Black male college students to experience brotherly bonds and maintain significant friendships with other undergraduate men (Harper & Harris, 2006). Harper & Harris (2006) wrote that success is indicated by induction into honor societies, qualifying for financial assistants programs, or being accepted into nationally competitive graduate school or postgraduate options like Teach For America. Being a member of a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) at Auburn, and in particular an Alpha man, was a marker of success. Joining Alpha improved my cognitive development, practical competence, and leadership development, which were indicators of a successful/straight Black male college student. Revealing my questioning identity would have had serious repercussions due to existing levels of homophobia and patriarchy prevalent among fraternal BGLOs.

Being a member of a fraternity reinforced the insidious performance of Black hegemonic masculinity. When joining BGLOs some aspirants are required to participate in aggressive rituals regarding competition, using insulting jokes or mockery of their transgressions [i.e. *my being a virgin*], and through the objectification of women as merely erotic notches on the fraternity chapter's sexual reputation belt (Edwards & Jones, 2009; Harper & Harris, 2006). These routine practices of homophobia instilled a fraternal sense of heteronormativity in my chapter that was transferred orally from lineage to lineage.

My fraternal experience supported the research that straight male peer interactions with a gay male might enact the one–drop rule (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Ward 2008), which indicated if a straight peer interacts with a gay peer, then that straight peer is also deemed gay by association. Hence, if my chapter knew I was gay, or even questioned my sexual orientation, my presence would have indicated that the entire chapter was also gay by association (McCune, 2014). Heterosexual males have extreme levels of *homophobia*, which serve as a barrier to block straight men from developing supportive and close same sex friendships with other males, regardless of their sexual orientation (Bank & Hansford, 2000; Franklin, 1992; Kimmel, 2008; Pascoe, 2011). Homophobia is defined as, "The fear of homosexuals and/or the fear of being perceived as a homosexual" (Bank & Hansford, 2000, p. 65). Existing literature discusses homophobia as a barrier that limits or corrupts the peer interactions among men albeit sexuality; vignette two explained how race and the mere perception of an individual's sexuality impacts potential friendships among Black male college aged students.

Vignette Three: Questioning/ Reflections from my Childhood

Circa. 1990 – 2002

Location: Birmingham, AL

Dear Dad,

In what ways did you and Momma raise me differently than my brothers Michael and Rick…they turned out straight, but I turned out gay? "When I was a child, I spake (sic) as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (1 Corinthians, 13:11, Holy Bible, The: KJV, 2004).

You raised me in the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement, Birmingham, Alabama, a city with neighborhoods still tainted with racial disparities. It is from your hometown that I absorbed the values that guide me to this day. Birmingham taught me to be persistent, to show integrity, to work with passion, and to have courage in my decisions. Unfortunately, it was the pain of this city that seemed to bleed into our family.

This hemorrhage caused me to be a witness to domestic abuse and to child abuse to my older brother from you, Dad. These circumstances later resulted in my oldest brother going to live with relatives in another state. I remember the day he walked out of our living room door, to embrace a new life of security and love. But where was I? I was at the house where it all started. Trapped among four walls of heartache, regret, eagerness, and shame. My childhood was not stable yet the courage of this city screamed to me a line from a poem, Author Unknown,

"…When things go wrong as they sometimes will…don't quit…"

…So I listened.

Dad, you don't have to live as me! It's not just **one** reason why I, as a Black Gay man can't be open about my identity in college or in your house; it is actually a layering of whys...

Throughout elementary and middle school did you know that I was teased? You would have thought "Sissy" my first name. When it came to high school selections, I wanted to be in a place where I wouldn't be teased or pushed to the limit. Did you know that I wanted a place where I could be me, and so I prayed one of my hardest prayers at that time and was accepted into Ramsay Alternative High School (Ramsay) [The only Magnetic High in Birmingham Public City Schools].

You know I was the spitting image of you. I was a tall, slim [I hated the word skinny], curly haired, innocent, wide-eyed young Black boy in high school. However, unlike you, I played the trumpet in the band, I won trivia contests for Black History Month & Women's History Month [unknowingly a budding researcher], I enjoyed

writing, I was a member of a friendship group called the "Strong Five + 1", five girls-Rena, Alex, Yonce, Laura, and Jill plus one boy, Me…lol.

Dad, you never really complemented me on my attire, but others did. In high school I was the typical preppy/urban/GAP Inc. guy. You were proud I had a girlfriend. Remember her name was name Jolene, and we were elected as Senior Superlatives as favorite couple?   I represented Ramsay as a member of the Superintendent's Student Advisory Board, and my senior year I was Harvest King, our version of Homecoming King [i.e. we didn't have a football team…long story…]. That same year I also earned the Head Drum Major Position, and I was a lead runner on the Track & Field and Cross Country teams (both Band and Track were the two activities you were most supportive of for me). All while enrolled in AP classes, all honors, and graduating with a GPA or a 3.78 and that still wasn't high enough for the National Honor Society.

Dad, I was your quintessential popular guy. By my junior year, all the teachers [well most] loved me, most of the freshmen girls thought I was cute. I was the guy my classmates wanted to host and to perform and to lead the crown. I was the all-around good guy. So what was missing? Why was I still wondering who I was? Like you, so many other people told me who I was and what they expected of me. I'm sure you could tell I was a people pleaser in high school… but Dad… no one really knew "me," not even you. At school they knew "Mr. Popular" Vincent, and at home you knew me as "your son" Vincent. Being "your son" meant being a straight southern gentleman who dated girls, had a job at a fast food restaurant, not a retail store, a tough Black young man who played sports, mostly football or baseball like my older brother– being "your son" meant not being myself.

Dad, because of you I never kissed a boy in high school, but I always wondered what it might feel like; I even thought about who it might be. You called me out on this or threatened me frequently. I was a slightly feminine young boy, not graceful, but not macho… you knew I hung around girls mostly and I picked up their movements, their sayings, and they facial expressions. My voice was naturally high, not sure why, for the most part I held the rumor mill down but my eyes and my private parts were stimulated daily with the attractive boys I saw at school.

 Dad, do you remember saying…

"I don't see why you have to work there [at the GAP Inc.]. You should get a real job like a man" –AND – "Who are all these boys calling you late at night? Why do they have to call you?"

-My Father

I worked at the Gap, just down the street from my high school! It was the perfect job because I loved fashion, I loved to dress well, and I needed to make money plus the distance from my school to work to home was ideal. Although it was ideal for me you hated it, Dad, because at the time the Gap Inc. was associated with "Gay and Proud".

You say my co-workers questioned me about their intentions and my own. But you never asked me, Dad, you only assumed. Just as you assumed those guys on the phone were calling for an intimate reason; actually those boys were my track teammates, who also didn't know about my questioning identity. They were calling because they were my friends.

-From the Corners of My Childhood

Reflection on Vignette Three

I started vignette three with a question for my father "*In what ways did you and Momma raise me differently than my brothers Michael and Rick…they turned out straight, but I turned out gay?*" In college I did not have much personal interaction with my father on a regular basis. Don't get me wrong; he was present, and was there when I needed to call, but he did not show a keen interest in my college experience like he did with my brother. My brother played college baseball and traveling to his games, city to city and state to state, was a common weekend for my family and me. However, when it got to my college days, my father seemed less interested in traveling down to Auburn to help me campaign for SGA president or watch me perform in my step shows with my fraternity brothers. His lack of parental involvement in my collegiate life was not fueled by his lack of caring, rather it was his lack of understanding of the surrounding PWIs and how his son should navigate through this place while simultaneously developing into the man I am today.

My father's awareness of my level of involvement in high school was a foreshadowing of my over–involvement at Auburn.

> I represented Ramsay as a member of the Superintendent's Student Advisory Board, and my senior year I was Harvest King, our version of Homecoming King [i.e. we didn't have a football team…long story…]. During that same year I also earned the Head Drum Major Position, and I was a lead runner on the Track & Field and Cross Country teams…

Harper (2006) suggested that parents of Black male college students should be advised that student involvement is a form of retention and intentionally aids in their son's persistence through college. My father failed to investigate whether my over-involvement in high school was a result of me not feeling welcomed at home.

Morrow (2006) explained that GLBTQ youth rarely see themselves emulated in their families, and particularly for families of color, internalization of homophobia and heterocentric [*sic*] messages are exacerbated.

> Being "your son" meant being a straight southern gentleman who dated girls, had a job at a fast food restaurant and not a retail store, a tough Black young man who played sports mostly football or baseball like my older brother. Being "your son" meant not being myself.

Cultural location in tandem with racialized hegemonic norms impacted my father's expectations of my gender performance within the Black household in which I was raised (Collins, 2000; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013) explained that some gay Black male college students are treated differently within their own culture:

> The color line exists and there are going to be certain experiences that I'll go through because of my color and someone else in the gay community won't go through it because of their color. I'll go through something in the Black community because I'm gay, but some other [straight] Black guy won't go through it. This creates barriers and for the most part 'as said college' the barriers really exist for me. Even in the academic world, people have no problem putting barriers on you. (p. 100)

This statement illustrates how culture and location can influence the dynamics of a father's parental relationship with his college-aged son. Lack of familial support from a central masculine figure in a BGMCS can lead to seeking out bonds with replacement relationships in the form of fictive–kin.

Muraco (2006) found that selected family connections such as fictive–kin and chosen family ties are extremely important to GLBTQ young adults. Fictive–kin or "gay families… are *replacements* for, rather than chronological successors to," the biological families of GLBTQ individuals (Weston, 1991, p. 116).

> Dad, because of you I never kissed a boy in high school, but I always wondered what it might feel like I even thought about who it might be. You called me out on this or threatened me frequently. I was a slightly feminine young boy, not graceful, but not macho… you knew I hung around girls mostly and I picked up their movements, their sayings, and they facial expressions.

Hanging with groups of young women became a space of solace for me; I was comfortable just "being" around them. As I spent my adolescence in a house that muted my gender performance to match my father's expectations, hanging around young women the "Strong Five +1" was the only representation of personalities similar to my own. As I transitioned into my identity as a BGMGS in my Master's and PhD program, I found comfort in hanging around Black Gay males similar to me. I often wonder how my life might have been different had I connected with young Black Gay males at an earlier age instead of waiting until I left my mother and father's house.

Reflecting on my childhood makes me question what family means to me. In Birmingham, Alabama, family was the both of my older brothers being protective of me growing up, regardless of the fact that my oldest brother did not have the same father. Without a doubt he was our brother. Family appeared in the smell of my mother's chicken dressing on holidays; in the line of grandkids playfully waiting alongside Granddad's Bar-B-Q pit to get a fresh chicken wing off the grill; in the "tag" games played with my cousins; in the way my uncles' and aunties' spades games morphed into mini–civil wars. I took my reflections of family as I embarked on a fresh start, moving to

Houston, and later pursing my masters in Ohio. No one knew me to judge me, there was a sense of liberty in a tabula rasa, in forgetting what before looked like (Mock, 2014).

Vignette Four: On the Margins of Acceptance

Circa. 2005 – 2012 Location(s): University of St. Thomas, Houston, TX [Teach For America], Ohio University, Athens, OH [Master's]

Houston, TX, 2005

Dear Readers,

Fuck it! I maintained this exhausting self-surveillance for 22 years of my life. I couldn't take this shit anymore, these personal pressures; these feelings were so persistent that even the Hoover Dam couldn't withstand their force. In the spring of 2004 these pressures passionately rushed through my thoughts and with intentional power caused me to act on my own inhibitions when I meet someone,

<div align="center">a man,</div>

<div align="center">who I kissed for the first time</div>

<div align="center">[Although, I had kissed a couple girls in high school, a few more beautiful women in college and a couple women in Houston]</div>

<div align="center">This kiss, this kiss right here,</div>

<div align="center">with this man felt like my first time.</div>

It was my first kiss, this kiss was more than a kiss; it was indeed a confirmation to "my"self –that– the Dam built brick by brick, mortared together by the judgmental and painful words and actions of institutions [neighborhoods, schools, universities, family, and fraternity] could indeed be torn down. That one kiss released a rush of possibilities in my body, mind, and soul that this is who "I Am", this is as natural a feeling for me as is my belief in God. It has always and will always be who "I Am".

<div align="center">*Houston, TX, 2008*</div>

All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naive. I was looking for myself and asking everyone expect myself questions, which I, only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am…[a Black gay man] (Ellison, 1995, p. 15).

Houston, TX, was my release, my awakening, and it was a place where the cut of my father's words no longer bruised my soul. Houston, TX, was a city of comfort, unlike Auburn, AL, where the scrutiny of how I dressed, whom I hung out with or where I partied had a direct impact on who I was expected to be. In Houston, TX, I found friends who were FINALLY just like me, confused, confident, scared, and excited; they weren't worried about "my" reputation, their reputation, or an organizations reputation.

In Houston, TX, I saw myself…

I stopped asking everyone else, except myself crucial questions, which I…

Only I, Vincent Tarrell Harris, could answer (Ellison, 1995).

Then came love, in a cold place…Ohio!

Ohio University, Athens, Ohio

After Teach For America in Houston, TX, I pursued my professional goals of becoming a senior level higher education administrator by enrolling in the College Student Personnel (CSP) Master's program at Ohio University (OHIO). I was not surprised that I was the only Black male in my CSP Cohort, but I was surprised that OHIO lacked strong support systems for graduate students of color. OHIO's lack of graduate student support for students of color left me searching for a collegial relationship from those who looked like me.

The lack of anything resembling a Black Graduate & Professional Student Association (BGPSA) at OHIO reminded me of how significant student organizations are in graduate student's collegiate experiences. Eventually I found these essential bonds in three other graduate students seeking similar levels of support. These three graduate students, two Black women and one Black male, all of whom shared with me that they were straight, were the first group of individuals with whom I shared my sexual orientation. The sense of relief, the pressures of trying to fit in, the expectations of being the straight Vincent, slowly faded away.

As the only Black male in my Master's program in OHIO, I sometimes felt as if I constantly walked along a river of wondering why or through a forest of finding out. As I continued this journey in a cold, rainy, mountainous place, eventually being the ONLY created a void in my heart that my three friends could not fill. I wanted to FEEL, so I thought only another person, a partner, a relationship with man, would help. I found out that it's not always about what he has done to me but it's about how he makes me feel that matters.

*Somewhere In-between Houston and Ohio *

(August 21, 2007)

In my "hood" being a successful Black male, regardless of sexual orientation, meant that when you left home, you left for an education. Moving out of town away from the past, you thought you would become a different person, when actually you did not have maintain your invisibility. It took me moving away from the places I loved so dearly to realize that this is who I am.

I cannot change me. No!... I will not change who I am just so people will think I'm not gay. The way I dress, the way I talk, the way I move my body, the things I do, well, that's just who I am. One day I want to reach a place where I am accepted for who I am.

-From an INVISIBLE Black Gay Man Standing at the Edge of Adulthood

Louisiana
(Present Day)

Dear Vincent,

I wanted you to know that you reached your "One Day" as soon as you removed yourself from unhealthy places of isolation, shame, and fear, placing yourself in a healthy space of reflexivity, acceptance, and support.

-From a VISIBLE Black Gay Man

Reflection on Vignette Four

Vignette five is representative of key moments in my life where being Black and Gay was finally not a burden; I felt free to just "be." Vega (1989) poignantly captured the essence of what being in these spaces taught me; it was really about the control of these spaces, these institutional selves that control our actions, our every steps. The surveillance of being Black and Gay is maintained these spaces, and these spaces are dangerous, restrictive, and consistently reshaped through cultural practices.

> It was my first kiss, this kiss was more than a kiss, it was indeed a confirmation to "my"self –that– the Dam built brick by brick, mortared together by the judgmental and painful words and actions of institutions [neighborhoods, schools, universities, family, and fraternity] could indeed be torn down.

As an undergraduate, feelings of isolation prevailed in my on campus memories. I grew

up in household where memories of homophobia were reproduced as normalized,

hegemonic gender scripts. The institutions of a). A PWI in the south and b) The concept

of family, directly affected my outlook on self. Space and institutions matter. Waskul

and Vannini (2006) explained that these institutions do not passively or objectively affect

an individual's physical body; these spaces–swiftly and at times gently–flow, evolve, and

negotiate or subjectively produced my unconscious subject-body.

Leaving ties to my biological family behind and removing myself from the

Auburn bubble allowed me break down barriers that kept me from finding my *true self*.

> Houston, TX, was my release, it was my awakening, and it was a place where the cut of my father's words no longer bruised my soul. Houston, TX, was a city of comfort, unlike Auburn, AL, where the scrutiny of how I dressed, whom I hung out with or where I partied had a direct impact on who I was expected to be…
> In Houston, TX, I saw myself…
> I stopped asking everyone else, except myself crucial questions, which I…
> Only I, Vincent Tarrell Harris, could answer (Ellison, 1995).

Gubrium and Holstein (2001) explained that social institutions played a crucial role in

shaping me into the person *I am*, continually bruising my identity, and at times causing

me to wander, "the popular belief is that a 'true self' resides somewhere inside, in some

privileged space" (p. 1). It took physically moving away from these influential

institutions of "my family" and Auburn to finally listen to myself.

> Eventually being the ONLY created a void in my heart that my three friends could not fill. I wanted to FEEL, so I thought only another person, a partner, a relationship with man would help.

Living in Houston, TX, and OHIO allowed me to fill this void and enhanced my clarity

of sight. Over time the dense fog of internalized homophobia and hegemonic norms

cleared day by day, revealing to me a world of possibilities and a spectrum of what it

meant to have a relationship with another Black Gay man.

> Respect yourself, my brother, for we are so many wondrous things.
> Like a black rose, you are a rarity to be found.
> Our leaves intertwine as I reach out to you after the release of a gentle rain.
>
> You precious gem, black pearl that warms the heart, symbol of ageless wisdom, I derive strength from the touch of your hand.
>
> Our lives blend together like rays of light; we are men of color, adorned in shades of tan, red, beige, black, and brown.
>
> Brothers born from the same earth womb.
> Brothers reaching for the same star.
>
> Love me as your equal.
> Love me, brother to brother.
>
> (Vega, 1989, p. 107)

Vega (1989) poignantly captured the essence of interactions between Black men in

describing a bond, a friendship, or a love for a fellow brother, particularly a bond devoid

of sexual intimacy, lust, appetite, or fear. A friendship standing on respect, wisdom,

strength, family, equality, and brotherhood. I did not know as an undergraduate that not

all gay males desire a sexual relationship with another male. Gubrium and Holstein

(2001) acknowledged that "Institutional identities are locally salient images, models, or

templates for self–construction: they serve as resources for structuring selves" (p. 11). In

vignette four I was removed from the restrictive local images and templates for the life I

embodied while at Auburn and in my household in Birmingham, AL; finally, in graduate

school at LSU I am able to re–construct my own sense–of–self.

Testimonial: Dear God, I'm Here!

Circa. 2012 – Present

Location: Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA [PhD]

Dear Vincent,

Whenever you run a tiny inner voice calls out…

"Breath in your nose out your mouth... In your nose out your mouth… Innnnnn [DEEEP breath] Ouuuuuut [Exhale]

Since middle school running has always been something you did well... Not sure why but it seems like that's one part of your life you have control over.

"Don't wipe the sweat, don't wipe your nose... Just keep running...push... Puuushhhh... You're almost home".

Enduring is something you have always been good at! Enduring, lasting, making it till the end. Endurance has held you. It has led you to reach deep inside yourself, kindling and replenishing an ember of ENDURance. The definition of endurance is 1: the ability to withstand hardship or adversity, especially the ability to sustain a prolonged stressful/painful effort; 2: the ability to do something difficult for a long time; 3: the ability to deal with suffering that continues for a prolonged time.

Oppression is much like endurance. The definition of oppression is the active discrimination, mistreatment, and exclusion of a group of individuals over a prolonged period. Much like endurance and oppression students like you Vincent –Black Gay males– have had to evoke a remarkable sense of endurance to withstand the daily oppression they experience on a college campus.

June 2012

Dear Black Gay Male Graduate Student,

After OHIO, I just knew I was not ready for a similar graduate experience. I initially thought getting a job right after my Master's program was the plan; however along my journey I discovered that pursuing a PhD was in my future. As my research interests and proficiency grew, I started the search for PhD programs; LSU's response pushed this program to the top of my list. Dr. Martel Richards, a Black male faculty member, asked me to call his cell phone to discuss the Higher Education Leadership program; his personal touch made me highly consider attending LSU. Ultimately the second email from James Roundtree, a Black male graduate student, added a level of support that I lacked at OHIO. James was the President of the LSU Black Graduate & Professional Student Association (BGPSA) at the time and shared with me how the organization was active on campus. Without reservation, I knew that if I selected LSU, that I would flourish academically and blossom socially.

February 2015

As a third year PhD candidate, I did not take for granted the higher education programs, various external and on–campus opportunities, or social and academic support systems that LSU has in place for graduate students of color, and especially Black males like me, who just two years before enrolling at LSU was the only male of color in my Master's graduate program. Today I am one of 10+ Black males in the higher education Master's and PhD program, and I also serve as the current President of LSU BGPSA. Although I have academic and social support for my identity as a Black male PhD student, there was a lack of support at PWIs for my identity as a Black Gay male graduate student.

Unlike my experiences at Auburn and OHIO, where being the only Black student in an organization or Master's program took its toll on me, I came to grips with being the only Gay Black male in my program, organizations, and office. Being the only Black male was not new to me, but being the only Gay Black male caused me to experience undiscovered moments of isolation and shame, joy and relief, alongside depression and a sense of–self–worth. What do I call these feelings? How should I categorize these emotions? As a Black Gay Man at a PWI in the South, I often feel empty, like everyone who knows me sees me, hears me, acknowledges me, but in reality, they have NO IDEA. No recollection of who I am or what I deal with on a daily basis. I walk into a classroom, and one of two things happens: I'm either stared at or dismissed. But when I hope my mouth, they listen; they are in tune with me.

November 2014

After the most exhilarating feeling of passing my LSU general exams I did not want to go home to an empty house. I did not want to admit that I was alone. So I wondered what I could do to celebrate this milestone in my life. I could not spend another important significant moment entering into a lonely space! So I drove to "Whole Food" with every intention of buying me a nice bottle of red wine, a tasty dinner, and a slice of Chantilly cake to top it all off!

As I walked to the cashier to checkout I was taken by the subtle yet magnetic aroma of the floral section. I passed and said, "Nah, I'm good. What would I look like buying some flowers for myself" But then I ask myself, "Why wouldn't I?" So I meticulously looked over arrangements until I found one bouquet that was perfect. But it was missing my fav flower, the Star Gazer Lily. After asking the florist to put in one and exchanging the ribbon for an orange and blue combination, I picked up my perfectly selected, thoughtfully chosen, and personally meaningful bouquet from the florist. As she handed me my flowers she said....

"She's gonna really love them…these should definitely make her smile."
…I thought to myself, "Well one thing's for sure; they'll definitely make me smile."

Back at Home

I don't know what before looked like. As I lay here in my bed, yet again all alone, I wondered. After one of the hardest work and academic days this year, I still feel incomplete, and I wonder why? It's like a revolving door: work hard, do your best, and then nothing. Nothing is what you get at the end from the people that matter. I get emptiness; I get "This could have been better"; I get "It's all in your head".

Yes, it's all in my head because that's where I am expected to do good work in these moments of isolation. How can I see growth, development, or guidance? As a Black male graduate student, president of the BGPSA, holding down dual Graduate Assistantships, alongside academic pressures, the expectations of who I should be are extremely high but...

 I TOO need help, I TOO need training, I TOO need the guidance.

I don't know what before looked like.

I feel bamboozled, I feel removed from the joy and introduced to the revolving feeling of SEEKING approval rather than seeking the reason why I am here!

Being Here. Lying in my bed with no one to welcome me home, no one to tell me I did a Good Job, No one to remind me why I do what I do.

I don't know what before looked like…But I do know I want before back.

May 2013

Dear Heart,

Loneliness I'm convinced is a disease. I'm not sure if it chronic or if its curable, but it damn sure is painful

Loneliness will cause you to loose sight of yourself, it will cause you to wear rose colored glasses

Loneliness will remove you from your path, in a simple glance away from the rode it sneaks up and destroys hope

Loneliness SCREAMS to your body, to your mind, and to your soul that you are and will be NOTHING without a companion

Loneliness endures and thrives in the mistreatment of your own body

Loneliness whispers sweet nothings in your ear saying, "It's okay, you can trust him…"

Loneliness empties your tear ducts as dry as a desert

Loneliness welcomes regret and discouragement

Loneliness assures you that he is clean and healthy

Loneliness makes you smile at the simple gesture of treating you right, of doing all the NORMAL things a man should do

Loneliness turns the most simple gesture or approach into the STANDARD, the exception

Loneliness forces you to forget about your past, it rescues hope in exchange for desperation

Loneliness turns a simple kiss into a rush of warmth from your head to your toes…. What happens when the warm F E E L I N G S … STOP?

In one phone call all the hope I felt was gone, like magnets attracted to the same ends we couldn't even be forced to touch… with the whisper of the words…

"Now this changes things"

I lost the sparkle in my eye…

The one aspect of myself that made me who I am…

How can this be? Where did this come from?

Only God Knows why…

Only God Knows for what reasons,

Only God knows the purpose for this in my life.

I've never had suicidal thoughts. I've never wanted to end my life. I've never considered how it might happen, who would find me, I have never because I was never pushed to the brink of questioning my mere existence.

And although I could never go through with it, life is simply too precious to destroy because of something I had… something I have… no control over.

I continue to come back to the emotions and the same questions keep coming up!
"Why Me?" "Why this?"
There are infinite "whys"…but to be honest…I will NEVER know why…

November 2014

[The Day I Realized the "Why" Behind my Actions…
[The night of the indictment verdict in the case of Michael Brown, unarmed Black male]

BURDEN…..

BURDEN is what I FEEL…..

BURDEN is the responsibility of being a Black male today.

There is a price to pay for being in college, for being Black and in college, for being Black, male, and in college,

There is a Burden to pay, a price to pay, a position to obtain,

There is a reason I am HEAVY My brother, it is this Burden.

I represent the lives of those Black males who could not be here today, who did not have the chance to be where I am today…

This Burden is a privilege, the privilege to be in this space, in this so called "Safe" space to think to develop ideas, to help create a more comfortable environment for Black students to exist.

This Burden is a responsibility, but what, I ask, is good enough?

How can I be Black enough, but not too Black to scare, or intimidate, or frighten the white man? How can I be Man enough but not too overbearing?

I must not demonstrate aggression, I must not allow others to see me weak or vulnerable; when is the time or the place to have the audacity to be BOLD?

This Burden is persistent, as persistent as a mirror that regularly reflects back to me my skin, my Black Skin, my Gender, my penis, my identity, my Gayness, this Burden weighs too much at times, it's frightening to think that I have done so much in my time in this white space at the PWI, when in mere seconds at the age of 31 I could become a statistic among Black Men…Gay Black Men… at least it's treatable…right?

Reflection on Testimonial: Writing Through the Pain

More than one in five Gay men reported having made a suicide plan, of those the highest prevalence of suicide attempts was found among males of color.
<div align="right">(Herman, Haas, & Rodgers, 2014)</div>

Higher education, sociology, and contemporary scholars (Alexander, 2010;

Cuyjet, 2006; Dancy, 2014; Madhubuti, 1990; Marjors et. al, 1994; Strayhorn & Tillman-

Kelly, 2013) would call the pursuit of my PhD a "success story", not because I am a

male, but because I am a Black male. When considering the all too unfortunate odds of

homicide being the leading cause of death among Black males ages 15 to 34 (Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention, 2011), the knighting of me as a "Black Male Success

Story" is an accomplishment, however, as a Black male PhD student, I assume a different

yet equally destructive profile. The profile I coin as the "Black Male's Burden"

[Burden]:

> This Burden is persistent, as persistent as a mirror that regularly reflects back to
> me my skin, my Black Skin, my Gender, my penis, my identity, my Gayness, this
> Burden weighs too much at times, it's frightening to think that I have done so
> much in my time in this white space at the PWI, when in mere seconds at the age
> of 31 I could become a statistic among Black Men…Gay Black Men

Being a Black male graduate student, there is a significant misconception that our path to

college (success) was achieved and maintained without intentional support outside of the

academic, professional, or leadership guidance provided by the PWIs we attend. The

needs of male students are often considered included in an institution's litany of support

services for "all" students (Davis & Laker, 2004; Ludeman, 2004), however, a significant

amount of literature (Cuyjet, 2006; Dancy, 2014; Harper & Nicholas, 2008; Kimmel,

2008; Madhubuti, 1990; Marjors et. al, 1994; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013;

Washington & Wall, 2006) advocated for exclusively Black male support services,

especially at PWIs. For all institutions of higher learning, especially PWIs, to expand

their reach and support of Black males, I encourage a more intentional approach in

diversifying systems of provision for males of color. In addition to student affairs

professionals asking the question of "what it means to be a man," they must broaden their questions to ask "What does it mean to be…a Black man… a Black Gay man… a Black questioning man… a Black bisexual man… a Black Male–to–Female transgender student?" The inclusion of these questions in the thought processes of higher education practitioners would demonstrate the institution's thoughtful obligation to understanding how Black students' gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity affects their mobility to and through a PWI.

A "Black Male's Burden" is kindled long before he gains acceptance into college; like ethnicity and sexual identity this burden is persistent and requires a significant level of endurance.

> Endurance has held you. It has led you to reach deep inside yourself, kindling and replenishing an ember of ENDURance… Much like endurance and oppression students like you Vincent –Black Gay males– have had to evoke a remarkable sense of endurance to withstand the daily oppression they experience on a college campus.

 When I moved to Baton Rouge, LA, I was tired! This *burden* crafted a yearning for not only a strong academic and professional support system at my next institution, but I needed to be expressive of my "whole" self. I was selective in attending LSU to pursue my PhD, knowing that with the number of Black males in the program and the on–campus support form organizations like BGPSA I would not feel alone. Even the abundance of academic and professional support revealed a glaring void –for the first time I wanted to live my life publically as a Gay man– and there were no existing systems at LSU to support, affirm, or demonstrate what I was about to experience.

> Being the only Black male wasn't new to me, but being the only Gay Black male caused me to experience undiscovered moments of isolation and shame, joy, and relief, alongside depression and a sense of–self–worth. What do I call these feelings? How should I categorize these emotions? As a Black Gay Man at a

PWI in the South, I often feel empty, like everyone who knows me sees me, hears me, acknowledges me, but in reality, they have NO IDEA.

Moving back to the South from OHIO fueled its own set of unique contributions to my stress as a BGMGS. The pressure of maintaining my <u>African- American-graduate-student-guise</u> was still evident. The negative perceptions of Black Gay males as predators, sexual converters of straight men, deceptive carriers of HIV and AIDS to Black women, as hypersexual beings, still existed (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013; Washington & Wall, 2006). I internalized these negative perceptions and unconsciously developed an inferior perception of my abilities to *live* my life as an "out" Black Gay male (Cuyjet, 2006; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). These internalized beliefs constructed by various individuals and maintained by existing systems and institutions within a PWI caused me to struggle with answering the question of "Who am I?"

> I don't know what before looked like. As I lay here in my bed yet again all alone I wondered. After one of the hardest work and academic days this year, I still feel incomplete, I wonder why?... Being Here…with no one to welcome me home, no one to tell me I did a Good Job, No one to remind me why I do what I do… I don't know what before looked like…But I do know I want before back.

Living in the South as a Black man who self identified as Gay created an acute level of awareness. The *burden* was heavier once the pretending ended. Unlike most students attending a PWI, particularly straight Black males, as a BGMGS I constantly analyzed my positionality in various spaces: (i.e. academic, professional, and social). Unfortunately, opening the door to my sexual identity came with its own set of consequences.

> Loneliness I'm convinced is a disease. I'm not sure if it chronic or if its curable, but it damn sure is painful.
> _____
> Loneliness SCREAMS to your body, to your mind, and to your soul that you are and will be NOTHING without a companion

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I've never had suicidal thoughts. I've never wanted to end my life. I've never considered how it might happen, who would find me, I have never because I was never pushed to the brink of questioning my mere existence.

I always thought that living my life *out* would be a happy place filled of relief, joy, freedom, and finally a peace of mind. I never thought I would be in a dark place.

As a result of the self-inflicted isolation I started to experience self-destructive thoughts.

I wondered if I were a white gay male, would things be different for me? I started to think I should have not "chosen" Baton Rouge as a place to live *out*. Fortunately New Orleans became my "*out*"–let; I was able to freely exist without having to question my motives, scrutinize my attire, and tailor my emotions and gender performance. My single self-destructive thought did not reoccur, my internal racialized homophobia grew fatigued, and my sense of worth and PRIDE began to form.

As I redefined my own *realness*, I reflected on how far I had come.

Dear Reader,

I remember that my Lord… does not honor disbelief…he honors those who trust and believe he made the right choice…I prayed a prayer of life. I prayed a prayer to recognize that God made me "Just As I Am".

I AM A MAN. I AM A BLACK MAN. I AM A BLACK GAY MAN.

Right now, I am in IT--IT is a complex place where I cannot distinguish the difference between my emotional–self and my scholarly–self.

This is a particular phenomenon for people like me whose dissertation is more than a dissertation; it is a love song to myself.

During this process I have embraced the wondering and the wandering...
I just am, I just write, I just live, I've accepted IT. I know I will finish.

I had to allow myself as many pages, words, and L E T T E R S
*to untangling my his–tory, as many as it took for **him** to create IT and me to live IT.*

-From a Place of Peace

CHAPTER FIVE: SALUTATION (CONCLUSION)

In this chapter I discuss my findings. The method of epistolary autoethnography was utilized in this study as an instrument for answering the research question while also gleaning themes that appeared throughout the research process. The major research question in this study was:

1. How has a Black Gay male graduate student studying Higher Education negotiated his way to and through predominately white higher education institutions?

Each major theme was presented in the form of a "Letter of Findings" addressed to the particular individual, groups, or entity responsible for considering the implications and future areas of researcher. The major themes or "Letters of Findings" were presented in the following order: Dear Student Affairs/Higher Education Professional; Dear Questioning, Gay, or Bisexual Black Male College Student; Dear Parents of a Questioning or Gay Black Male; Dear…...-Straight Black Men & Women Faculty and Senior Level Administrators/-Straight White Men & Women Faculty and Administrators; Dear Future Researchers; and Dear Vincent 20 years From Now.

Dear Student Affairs/Higher Education Professional,

Here is what you should know….

Some students, especially GBTQ Black males, need time to find themselves, and student organizations can assist in doing just that, but sometimes those moments of finding can be troubling if advisors are not aware of the triggers. Over-involvement, or as I term it ambiguous–coping, does not mean the students have it all together. Ambiguous–coping is in fact a managing tactic practiced and maintained by the student, and nurtured and

encouraged by the organizations that willingly accept students with the characteristics of pursuit of belonging.

I advise administrators and advisors of student organizations to develop selection rubrics that glean a more self-assessment background of the student's own personal disposition.

> Examples of questions for Black undergraduates are: a) "What does it mean to be a man?"; b) What does it mean to be a Black man?"; c) "What does it mean to be an educated Black man in the South?"; d)"How will participation in this [insert student origination name] enhance or change your view of manhood?".

> Examples of questions for Black graduate students in addition to a)–d) are: "As a Black man, what is the last thing you think about before you go to sleep?"; "As a Black man have you ever experienced fear on this campus?"; "What motivates you to pursue you education regardless of your previous or existing obstacles?"; "In regards to your own identity what is the first characteristic you see reflected in a mirror?...And explain Why"; "In what spaces or circumstances have you ever felt alone or isolated? Explain in detail the location, individuals, or situation that maintained this feeling."

Questions that dig deep mines into the lives of BGMCS'/BGMGS' background provide more contexts for Student Affairs/Higher Education Professional (SA/HE professionals) to implement strategies in support of Black males, especially Gay Black males who attend a PWI. SA/HE professionals must be intentional in providing programming that directly addresses issues related to Black male sexuality and GBQQ lived experiences, rather than think their campus wide services already acknowledge comprehensive GLBTQ concerns.

Secondly, SA/HE professionals should not assume that students acknowledge their ethnicity because there is a Black student in their organization. Ethnicity and identity acceptance play crucial roles in the guidance of a student's collegiate experience. I challenge SA/HE professionals to ask the difficult questions of their students. "Are they

wearing an <u>African- American-college-student-guise</u>?" This question could be posed as, "Explain to me how you identify as a Black or African American person?" or "In what ways have your family, friends, or past educational experiences formed your concept of your ethnicity?" Assuming the student's ethnicity is as transparent to him as it is to peers and the larger PWI environment, it is a disservice to the student's development, and a misuse of any SA/HE professional's educational background or skills. Conversations regarding sexuality or identity orientation should be less direct until a system of confidence is built. For example, as a student leader the first person I can remember sharing the slightest bit of information too about my "questioning" identity with was one of my summer Camp War Eagle Parent Councilor advisors.

> During the summer of my junior year, I was selected to be an Orientation Parent Councilor (Camp War Eagle Parent Councilor). The role was simple, to be a sources of information about all things Auburn to incoming freshman parents; we had campus tours, facilitated workshops and informational sessions, and mingled and answered questions about campus life in formal and informal spaces.

> One day during an informal session I stood alongside another Parent Councilor and we were approached by a middle-aged white male, who immediately locked eyes with me. He asked me the typical questions about housing and meal plans, then it got a bit unusual. He asked me, "So what do you do for fun?"… As I replied with my typical pre-practiced response… he stopped me… [Gently grabbed my forearm while looking into my eyes] and said, "No, No... What do YOU do you fun?" Shocked and a little confused, I slowly pulled my arm away and said something to the extent of, "I'm not sure what you're asking me." As I pulled my arm away… in my hand he placed a small folded up piece of paper that read "Call me: ###-####."

At the time I did not know how he recognized my potential GBTQ identity. That was the first time I met him and I had no previous interactions with any other men besides the flirts in passing when I worked at the GAP in Birmingham, Alabama. I did not know what to do, and questions revolved around in my head: "Why me? How could he tell? When did he notice me?" Instead of retreating into my own cocoon of seclusion, my

initial thought was to share my feelings and concerns with Marty who was my Camp War

Eagle Parent Councilor advisor.

Marty was a friendly, welcoming, middle-aged, white male and showed a pure

sense of care since day one in our orientation. I considered Marty's demeanor friendly

simply because he smiled and although he was older than us, he was still relatable. I

considered him welcoming because he met with each parent counselor one–on–one for a

check–in, where he asked the following intentional types of questions:

> Regular questions [i.e. grades, how are classes going, what does the fall look like, etc..], personal questions [i.e. do you have siblings, when was the last time your parents came to visit], social questions [i.e. what are your weekend plans, what are you looking forward to doing with your friends], and lastly leadership questions [i.e. how do you think your role as a parent councilor is going? Anything you think we can do to improve this experience for someone next year?]

Although I did not know it at the time, these types of questions made me feel like I

belonged, these questions connected me to the Camp War Eagle family and made me

realize I had a space. Lastly, Marty demonstrated a pure sense of care when he:

> held me accountable for being late to a session by pulling me aside and letting me know my tardiness mattered, and how he and I could both work together to ensure that it wouldn't happen again.

Although, I did expect for him to reprimand me, I did not expect him to explain why, and

when he did, I realized how my tardiness affected more than just me.

Although Marty was not the prefect advisor, he did create for me –a questioning

Black male student– a welcoming space, which resulted in me revealing to him an

awkward and new moment regarding my questioning sexuality. I share the story of

Marty because his characteristics are examples of what other SA/HE professionals should

emulate when creating a welcoming space and sense of belonging for BGMCS. Too

often I experienced advisors in college leadership roles who projected a false or obligated

sense of care while simultaneously maintaining high levels of expectations for their students. Unfortunately, the combination of the advisors' method continued to nurture unauthentic spaces where SA/HE professionals at most PWIs perform these approaches figuratively rather than authentically. I strongly encourage SA/HE professionals to add personal and departmental reflective strategies of support for Black males, especially BGMCS, who are in the phase of the <u>pursuit of belonging</u>, <u>African–American–college–student–guise</u>, and <u>Ambiguous–coping.</u>

-From a Black Questioning Male Student–Experiences along the Pursuit of Belonging

Dear Questioning, Gay, or Bisexual Black Male College Student/Graduate Student,

I have learned there is a tremendous power in being yourself…

Being a questioning Black male college student is being a hybrid of straight and "other." At the time I did not know what the "other" was or what it meant, but I did know that being straight was not just an option for me. Too often cultural stigmas and institutional practices create spaces where being LGBTQ conflicts with being Black. It is evident that being gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning is incompatible with being a Black man, especially in the South.

Success is not fulfilling the expectations of others, success is not suffocating your internal identity, and success is not avoiding your teachable moments. Success is taking the time to figure out who you truly are, and living your life with honesty, first to yourself. In this dissertation my concept of success as a BGMGS is representative of a <u>gendered blazer of success</u> stitched together through the locational, the temporal, and the gendered threads I experienced in college and while in graduate school. Growing up and living in the South I noticed there is a <u>seduction of acceptance</u>. Southern Black culture

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insists on creating a welcoming and warm space where everyone is greeted with a hug and accepted. The South is a place where everyone is expected to be friendlier. I formed an intense fear of rejection growing up in a region where I was always accepted for who I thought I was. The seduction of southern acceptance increased my own levels of internal fear and shame and caused me, and young Black GBTQ males like me, to pretend for years, sometimes a lifetime. The fear of rejection drives the endurance of pretending.

You were not on the down–low (DL); the DL is over simplified as an all in–composing term that categorizes any man who sleeps with men but still dates women as being on the DL. Pretending is different. *Pretending* is the essence of denial and coping until you are in a place where you can hear your internal voice. Pretending is a passive approach to maintaining, and it nurtures hope of a false reality. Pretending is in some cases healthier than substances or drugs to fill a void; pretending conditions you for the often times false realities outside the gates of your PWI.

On the other hand, wearing this gendered blazer of success or *pretending* does have consequences; it causes pain and disrupts the flow of life. Actively practicing sexual discretion interrupts choices causing the adoption of an unhealthy indecisiveness during critical moments where clarity is needed. Pretending accounts for gray areas and makes them relevant, makes existing in a middle space acceptable. Pretending for too long can exacerbate existing problems with family by dividing the very relationships sexual discretion maintained. Sexual discretion removes obligation and gives permission to live a risky life, and there is no need to use protection when the life lived is not your own.

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The truth is, no one can tell you when to stop pretending [come out], no one but yourself. I stopped pretending before it was too late to salvage ruptured relationships with friends and loved ones. I stopped intentionally practicing <u>sexual discretion</u> when I felt their disappointment –a disappointment not in who I was or who I am– a disappointment in how I treated them or made them feel as a result of my intensity of pretending. Unfortunately wearing this <u>gendered blazer of success</u> or actively practicing <u>sexual discretion</u> validates institutional and cultural claims that categorize Black Gay men as deceitful, cunning, or untrustworthy. These institutions and cultural voices promote our internal dilemmas, of shame, depression, and guilt often associated with young Black Gay men who pretend.

I ask you instead to remove your <u>gendered blazer of success</u> and slowly discontinue your use of <u>sexual discretion</u>. Your college experiences will be tremendously augmented without wearing a mask, without constantly seeking dual approval; I urge you to reconsider appearance as an outward expression of whom you truly "trust" yourself to "be", rather than portraying the "other" person you are expected to "become".

-From the Black Gay Male College Student Who Walked in Your Shoes

Dear Parents of a Questioning or Gay Black Male,

ASK! Don't assume or try and fix the "problem"…

Parents over assume that because they collectively created this being that they have power or control over his life and his decisions. To say parents do not have input would be a lie, but to say they have complete control is a misuse of our self–authority. Black mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers, and legal guardians, ask your sons before the age of 13, "If he feels different"…"If he has ever had thoughts about who he wants

his future partner to be"… "If he thinks he might be gay"… if you have speculations that he might be struggling with his sexual orientation. Your asking is not unwarranted–it is necessary! Like the expectations parents place on their kids, children, too, should have expectations for parents, particularly those kids who question their sexual orientation. In a national survey, homeless agencies reported that 94% of their youth clients identified as GLBTQ youth (Durso & Gates, 2012). Unfortunately, one in five Gay men reported having made a suicide plan (Herman, Haas, & Rodgers, 2014). There is no substitute for showing care and acknowledging that your son might be experiencing extreme moments of isolation, depression, and shame. So Help!

Be an advocate for your son, be his number one cheerleader in his self-development rather than only at his athletic event. Be present in his internal view of himself, rather than only his outward appearance. Take every teachable moment when he cries to hold his hand and ask him what is wrong, ask him how he feels, ask him what you can do to help him through it, and avoid telling him "Boys Don't Cry." If you are not "in the know" about his identity struggles, seek counsel at his college, and be intentional about your approach. Ask the Offices of Student Support Services and the Offices of Diversity what supports are in place for your Black GBTQ son's self-development. Ask if are there any services in place for parents to educate themselves on issues surrounding GLBTQ. Ask to attend a Safe Zone training, and how you can be present in your son's journey to accept who he sees himself to be.

Parents, I urge you to adopt new concepts of what masculinity is and what that means for your Black sons. I ask you to remove the pressures of heteronormativity and replace it with a culture of acceptance and mutual support. Be the parents you have

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always wanted to be, while embracing the son, the young boy, who will grow in his own time and be accepted for whom he always knew he was, inside and out.

-From a Black Gay Son

Dear Straight Administrators,

The way a space makes you feel matters…

Ever think about how continued practices of racial segregation might affect the financial bottom line of your institution? Well, think about if you added sexual orientation to your admissions criteria; would you be bold enough to do so…or would you quiver at the political implications of your actions? How would your institutions look locally and nationally? Which key endowment donors would pull their funding? Which legislative supporters would you lose? Ask yourself these are questions as a senior level SA/HE administrator or a tenure track professor. Consider the possibility of how your institution can take the lead, if thoughtful enough to take a stand, using your platform of intentional support of GLBTQ students as a measure to defeat public prejudice.

I suggest the following practical applications, initiatives, and ways of thinking in expanding your institution's approach to working with GLBTQ students of color, particularly Black males:

> 1.) If gay and straight Black male college students have positive peer interactions they could help to eliminate existing barriers they both experience by attending a PWI. For example, Cuyjet (2006) explained that Black males at a PWI are rarely provided with an environment in which they can learn from one another and develop, "habits of emulating good behaviors that result in increase academic success" (p. 239). More Black males interacting with each other will help to demystify the internalization of negative perceptions and messages they have encountered in pre–college experiences that result in some Black males viewing themselves as academically deficient and having low self-esteem (Cuyjet, 2006). More spaces where Black males can interact to increase their academic success

will also increase their persistence through college, which affects your institutions financial bottom line.

2.) Instead of only acknowledging the compelling research and studies that affect a portion of the student body, PWIs should adopt the idea of "When you know better, you do better." Given the significant factors faced by Black Gay male students, institutions should implement partnerships with community based GLBTQ services, providing on campus space for GBTQ males of color to retreat and seek support along their journey.

3.) SA/HE professional and university faculty should be required to attend diversity training workshops. These workshops should be created by a planning committee that develops a strategic plan with an objective to increase the awareness of males of color transitions from boyhood, guyhood [*sic*], and manhood, with an emphasis on intersections of ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. The inclusion of the theories of sexual discretion, the gendered blazer of success, the pursuit of belonging, African–American–college–student–guise, and ambiguous–coping should intentionally be included during training to challenge their own biases, teaching practices, and behaviors as professionals.

4.) With the success of the exclusively male initiatives and research centers such as the LSU Black Male Leadership Initiative Fellows Program, Todd Anthony Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male at The Ohio State University, and Centennial Scholars Program at North Carolina Central University, PWIs should model similar initiatives directed to support GLBTQ students of color in key areas related to mental health, transition support, and social engagement.

5.) PWIs will benefit financially by exhausting all options to increase the persistence and access of Black gay males. For example, universities would increase their yearly budgets by an increase in tuition money from a boost of enrollment from those GBTQ males of color who find a PWI welcoming to their level of diversity, and that already has structures in place to encourage their success.

<div align="right">-From A Black Gay male SA/HE Professional</div>

Dear Future Researchers,

This study enhances the literature on Black males in college, and serves as a starting point for future literature that documents the lived experiences of Black Gay male undergraduate and graduate students. This study can be used to inform practices of

SA/HE professionals, faculty and staff, college guidance counselors, campus psychologists, and intercollegiate athletic coaches.

Some limitations of the study revolved around the singular perspective from the use of an autoethnographic research method. Limiting data collection to college-aged Black males attending PWIs in the South made the potential data not applicable to wider groups of students. On the other hand, since the study was presented as epistolary autoethnography, the results could lead to implications for the analysis of other individuals, including groups of individuals with similar sexual orientation and gender regardless of ethnicity.

The possibilities of this dissertation include identifying at an early age how young Black boys process their identity; conducting a study in the K–12 age group might render crucial data as to when and how detrimental stigmas can be avoided. This study can be expanded to discover to what extent hegemonic masculinity with gendered and racialized social norms influences the peer relations among gay and straight Black men. There is also significant potential to study the interactions among gay and straight Black men of older age groups. Conducting a study on BGMGS who are not marginalized also would be beneficial. For example, BGMCS/BGMGS who grew up in predominately white neighborhoods do not face the same factors as their fellow gender and racial mates who lived in urban or rural areas. More research should target how socioeconomic status negatively affects BGMCS/BGMGS, and particularly how the concept of poverty relates to inadequate academic achievement among males of color.

Finally, when considering an interdepartmental approach, this study can include documenting the lived experiences of two Black gay fathers raising their families in the

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South, with an aim to trouble traditional definitions of fatherhood/patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity. Acknowledging, as a Black Gay man in the South, who hopes one day to become a father, a significant portion of our lived experiences have been compared to Black Woman or in a father's case, Black mothers. Using Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) as a platform to discuss the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) of oppression as Black Women experience various forms of oppression within their positionality [*sic*] as Women and persons of color, coupled with the use (Johnson, 2005, 2008) (McCune, 2014) of the lived experiences and intersectionality of Black American men, particularly those who identify as gay, this study sought not to amalgamate the experiences of Black American Gay fathers like with Black American Women or mothers, but instead to initiate what questions we can glean from comparing their intersectionality.

-From A Fellow Researcher

Dear Vincent 20 years from now,

> Education must not simply teach work–It must teach life.
> -DuBois (1903)

As you sit at your desk, wondering how to end your dissertation, tears fill your eyes… and the only word you can think of is "hope"…

I hope…

I hope you never compromise your relationships with others to fulfill your own selfish gains

I hope you know when I think of love, I think of you

I hope you recognize that there is a remarkable power in being yourself.

Without a doubt being a BGMCS in the South has been a tremendous burden, there is so much uncertainly, so much that gets lost in translation…I hope you listen in these moments

I hope that your spiritual relationship with God has grown

I hope those life moments waiting in a long winding line to find there place in your life have taught you how to be stronger, how to love harder

I hope you have recognized that life isn't as complicated as you make it out to be, life is amazing, its wonderful, its joyful, its afraid, its curious, its anxious, it's not fair, it hurts, it loves…

I hope by now you realize that life today, the success and development you have experienced in your lifetime, wouldn't have been possible if your past was not relevant "His"–tory is too precious in your existence…

I hope you recognize that the success you have experienced as a Black Gay man is not your own; it is a message for others BGMCS/BGMGS to embrace… I hope you know you had an impact in their lives

I hope you finally understand that in chaos there is opportunity…

I hope you have found in chaotic moments that the truth lies amongst the silence.

I hope by know you have removed this self–imposed marginality, because although difficult situations in life feel like tight knots in a rope, they are hard to untie because the misunderstandings from both ends creates a tension in the rope. I hope you noticed that in time with details those knots are loosened…everything works out and becomes a smooth rope again, over time the wrinkles will fade away

I hope by now that you know life is full of doors when you are a Black Gay man. Did you open them to see what awaits? Have you taken the risk to walk through them blindly towards the darkness?

I hope the doors you have opened have been fair to you, I hope some doors stay closed, I hope you don't re-enter those doors that should have never been opened at all

I always hope for light at the end of the tunnel

I hope you trust your instincts more and forgive yourself often

I hope you realize that you too are a real man…A real Black Gay man... Just as you are.

<div align="right">-From a Black Gay man named Vincent</div>

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VITA

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