ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	DIFFERENCE AMONGST YOUR OWN: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LOW-INCOME AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS AND THEIR ENCOUNTERS WITH CLASS WITHIN ELITE HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGE (HBCU) ENVIRONMENTS
	Steve Derrick Mobley, Jr. Doctor of Philosophy, 2015
Dissertation directed by:	Professor Noah D. Drezner, Department of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education
	Professor Francine H. Hultgren, Department of Teaching and Learning, Policy and Leadership

The subtle and deeply impactful nuances of Black intra-racial social class differences that manifest amongst students who attend historically Black colleges (HBCU) has remained untouched and understudied in higher-education scholarship. In this phenomenological study, I explore how low-income African-American students encounter social class within elite HBCU environments. The men and women in this study graduated between the years of 2001 and 2010. Contemporary HBCU student experiences are underscored and reveal great tension between self, community, and place. The philosophical works of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Edward Casey are joined with the voices of Black scholars including W.E.B. DuBois, Audre Lorde, Frantz Fanon, bell hooks, and Toni Morrison to provide critical context for the phenomenon being studied. Max van Manen's key phenomenological insights also provide a methodological foundation for the study.

My co-researchers encountered significant shifts and evolved within their oppressed identities during their undergraduate years. During their undergraduate years they felt a *difference amongst their own* that they still reconcile today. The participants within this study endured feelings of alienation, wonder, and even confusion within their distinct higher education environments. This study concludes with phenomenological insights for myriad educational stakeholders that include higher educational researchers, higher education practitioners, families, and students. I provide pedagogical insights into how elite HBCU environments can not only intercede and provide a more enriching cultural environment for their low-income students, but their families as well. The pedagogical insights that "end" this study also summon the need for future research to continue to explore Black intra-racial differences that are present within both elite HBCU communities and elite PWI institutions as well. Exposure to the pertinent issues that are outlined in this scholarship provide a new entry into critical discourses that must now be had. This dialogue is needed so that students within elite HBCU environments do not continue to suffer in silence within their oppressed identities.

DIFFERENCE AMONGST YOUR OWN: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LOW-INCOME AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS AND THEIR ENCOUNTERS WITH CLASS WITHIN ELITE HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGE (HBCU) ENVIRONMENTS

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Advisory Committee:

Professor Noah Drezner, Advisor and Co-Chair
Professor Francine Hultgren, Co-Chair
Professor Sharon Fries-Britt
Professor Kimberly Griffin
Professor Joseph B. Richardson, Jr.

Dedication
"An inheritance gained hastily in the beginning will not be blessed in the end..."-
Proverbs 20:21

For my mother, Cheryl Denise Bonner-Mobley (September 9, 1957-March 5, 2015). You are and will always be my muse and my strength.

To "My Perfect Ten:" Alonzo, Blair, Emmanuel, Kodi, Nia, Nicole, Nora, Roman, Summer, and Xavier. You all are so much more than "participants" in a study. Words cannot adequately express how grateful I am for all of you. You helped me to give voice to those like "us" who have been silenced. All I can say is thank you!
You know who you are.

To my many ancestors who have long departed. You perpetually stand watch, cover me, and have bestowed me with the fortitude to courageously live and walk in my own truth.

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Dissertation Committee
I was very deliberate in selecting my village to help me through this fortuitous process. Each individual who comprises my dissertation committee has guided me and they all remind me how blessed I am to have mentors that shall and will transcend my dissertation process. I know and have immense faith that they will be here for me once I graduate to guide me in all of my life and professional endeavors. I know this because they have already shown me.

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I speak your names
I SPEAK YOUR NAMES!
You are ALL a part of me now and always.
Because of you
I am humbled
I am grateful
I am here
Amen
Ashe'

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CHAPTER ONE
A VISITOR IS CHOSEN AND INVITED TO QUESTION

"The Book" and Three Colleges That Count

Bryant Gumbel is, but Bill Cosby isn't.
Lena Horne is, but Whitney Houston isn't.
Andrew Young is, but Jesse Jackson isn't.
And neither is Maya Angelou, Alice
Walker, Clarence Thomas, or Quincy Jones.
And even though both of them try extremely
hard, neither Diana Ross nor Robin Givens
will ever be. (Graham, 1999, p. 1)

Lawrence Otis Graham opens his widely acclaimed[1] work, *Our Kind Of People*,

with the aforementioned quote, and his words immediately draw a metaphorical "line in

the sand" as to who is and who is not deemed "good enough" to gain entrée or be

considered a part of the Black elite in the United States. Graham's epithet strikes a raw

nerve in the reader. I was nineteen when I first read these words, and within me they

stirred many emotions. I was severely struck by these comparisons, forlorn yet

enthralled.

Our Kind of People is an anecdotal work that provided a glimpse and was one of

the first to begin a contemporary discourse about the placement and history of America's

established African-American upper middle class population. Graham's work provides

detailed accounts of the "appropriate" pedigree, professions, school credentials, and

fraternity, sorority, and club affiliations that Blacks[2] *must* have in order to be considered

members of this well-established populace. Who do these values exclude? What occurs

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[1] *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (HarperCollins) was a *New York Times, L.A. Times* and Blackboard bestseller.

[2] African American and Black are used interchangeably throughout this study to refer to persons whose ancestry denotes Black racial groups of Africa, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. Distinction will be made with regard to these terms in chapter two.

in such exclusion? Why does the Black "elite" hold certain institutions, personal

relationships, and networks with such high esteem? One chapter in particular, titled,

Howard, Spelman, and Morehouse: Three Colleges That Count, details the vast history

and influence that historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have had on the

Black upper middle class. Within this chapter it is noted how several generations of the

Black elite have attended these HBCUs to attain not only the baccalaureate degree but

advanced degrees as well. It was *this* chapter that hit too close to home.

I came across *Our Kind Of People* in the campus bookstore my freshmen year at

Howard. I remember flipping through the pages and immediately became fascinated with

the idea of a "Black upper-middle class" in America, especially when I saw that my

school was included in one of the chapters. I knew that I *had* to read this book.

Reading Graham's work as a freshman at Howard was quite the experience.

When my classmates would discover that I was reading *Our Kind Of People* I often

heard, "Oh, my family is featured in that book...My grandmother's Links[3] chapter is in

chapter 6...or My uncle declined to be interviewed by Lawrence." When these comments

were made I noticed that my peers would search my face for acknowledgement, or even

confirmation, that I somehow had a tie to *Our Kind Of People.* I did not. These

interactions were subtle, however; my classmates were making their presence known in

an unmistakable manner. A metaphorical pink elephant named elitism had entered the

room and would never leave during my time at Howard. What occurs when the

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[3] The Links, Incorporated is an exclusive non-profit women's organization established in 1946. This organization consists primarily of professional African-American women. Based upon the ideal of combining friendship and community service, The Links, Incorporated has evolved into one of the most well known elite Black women's organizations in the country. (Graham, 1999; The Links, Incorporated Website)

seemingly invisible lines of class are made visible? Would I acknowledge this formidable presence?

Although I had gained entry and was a freshman at Howard University, one of the colleges *that counted*, I knew where I fell on Graham's "Black spectrum" and was unsettled in my feelings. Why was I conflicted? To whom was I comparing myself? I knew that I did not and would not ever truly embody this existence. I lacked the necessary pedigree, was the recipient of a Pell Grant[4], and the product of a low-income[5] background. In my mind it was made quite apparent that while many of my closest friends and classmates were a part of this world, I would forever just be a visitor in that existence. Was this true? I intentionally choose the word visitor to illustrate my feeling like an outsider. Was I a stranger? An unknown?

The word visitor comes to English from the mid-fourteenth century agent noun of *come* meaning, "one showing promise and one who chooses to come."[6] While dwelling in my existence as visitor what promise had I shown? Although I chose to come to Howard, was I not also chosen? Would my entrée extend beyond admission to the institution and into the campus culture as a whole?   "And I was chosen...I was there...the wells gets deeper more unfolds...but wells are endless...I found more..." (Knowles, Splash, & Riddick, 2008). At the time an invitation into "Howard Society"

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[4] The Pell Grant program is a federal grant intended for students that come from lower-income families who may have considerable difficulty financing undergraduate education. Students who receive this award demonstrate very high financial need (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

[5] Low-income and working class are used interchangeably throughout this study.

[6] All etymological references within this dissertation were retrieved from www.etymonline.com.

had presented itself to me from upperclassmen with whom I was unfamiliar, but *I* had the *choice* to decide how I would engage *them*. What would be revealed to me?

What is ironic is that I was not angry at this book, its reflections, anecdotes, or musings. Should I have been incensed because "The Book[7]" negated me to a peripheral existence within Black society? Instead of a visceral reaction steeped in resentment, anger, and bitterness, I was glad that I got my hands on its contents, and in turn, utilized it as a guide to navigate my higher educational context.

To me, *Our Kind Of People* was a key to unlocking the doors that had been shut to me due to my lacking what was "appropriate." Over time I have come to value this book because it created a space and challenged the discourse about what it is to be Black. *Our Kind Of People* invited me into a world that was unknown to me, but I am now compelled to question its accounts of what is right, acceptable, or even elite. Where do these standards prevail? What is it to be elite? Do these norms have the ability to alter individuals and institutions? "In doing research we question the world's very secrets and intimacies which are constitutive of the world, and which bring the world as world into being for us and in us" (van Manen, 2007, p. 5). It is time to confront these mores and their impact within African-American communities, and the underlying question that compels this study: **What are the lived experiences of class for low-income African-American students at elite HBCUs?**

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[7] "The Book" is a nickname that myself, friends, and classmates have given to Graham's (1999) *Our Kind of People*. It served as a reference tool for me to gain insight into the lives of many of my closest friends and classmates during my undergraduate career.

Taking The Road Not Taken Into A Different World

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
(Robert Frost, 1916/2002, p. 270)

In Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken*, he utilizes the "fork in the road" metaphor to describe the process of making a difficult life choice. As early as I can remember I have always chosen the *road less traveled* that he so eloquently describes in this poem. I often wonder why. Why did other paths intrigue me? What promise did these alternate paths assure? Where would they lead?

During my adolescence I sought refuge in a book rather than a basketball. I chose to stay after school and compete in science fairs and the "Odyssey of the Mind," rather than try out for flag football. I chose *the road less traveled* by other Black males in my age group who sought dreams in sports and entertainment. I reveled in coming home

with honor roll status and being placed in gifted and talented programs throughout grade school. During my childhood my heroes were Levar Burton from *Reading Rainbow* and Big Bird from *Sesame Street*, as opposed to the basketball star Magic Johnson and the rapper Tupac Shakur. I was different.

The ideas of being *different* and *difference* are intricate threads woven into the tapestry of my phenomenological turn. The word difference arrives into the English language from the Latin *differre* meaning "to set apart." Throughout my life I have made conscious efforts to set myself apart from the norm. Many times, these choices were well received; however, I was also chastised during my adolescence for this difference. In the final stanza of Frost's work his tone has an undercurrent of one who is fatigued. His narrative shows the reader that the road less traveled is not easy and may be accompanied with costs. *"I shall be telling this with a sigh...I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."* My difference would come at a cost. I would constantly have to defend my existence in this world, a world that would constantly question me and I it!

A Different World Provides A Way Out

Being raised in the heart of the nation's capital was interesting to say the least. The nationwide crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s gravely plagued the city, and as a result crime and murder riddled my hometown. During my youth Washington, DC was known as the "murder capital" of the United States (Urbina, 2006). Throughout this time it was routine for my friends and me to find discarded drug needles while on the jungle gym, or immediately following recess we were often forced to hide under our

desks because there was a gang related "shoot-out" occurring on the playground. This was my environment, but I always yearned for more.

I grew up working-class. A product of a single-parent household, my mother utilized the parenting style associated with the *accomplishment of natural growth* (Laureau, 2003). "The commitment among working class parents [is to] provide comfort, food, shelter, safety and other basic support given economic challenges and the formidable demands of child rearing" (Laureau, 2003, p. 5). I was what you would call "the quintessential latch key kid." My mother worked evening and midnight shifts throughout my adolescence. When I was dismissed from school my mother was headed to work. As a result I had to "parent" myself while she was earning a living to ensure that I was clothed, fed, and had a suitable roof over my head. Due to her "alternative" work schedule, she put many rules into place to ensure that I would not fall prey to a perilous lifestyle associated with sex, drugs, and incarceration to which many of my friends and peers fell victim. Each day I was required to call my mother at work by 4pm so that she knew I was safe and sound in our apartment, and I was forbidden to play outside after the street lights came on.

One night while I was engaging in my normal after-school activities which included watching television and doing homework, I can distinctly remember a major shift in my reality. Being an only child I often sought refuge in television sitcoms. They were my escape mechanism from the sirens and gunshots often heard outside my fourth floor apartment window. These sounds were so commonplace they eventually became white noise. On one particular night I heard something new. I now know that it was *Whitley Gilbert's* voice, a character from the groundbreaking television series *A Different*

World [8](La Deane, 1992). I was entranced. I could not believe that I was actually watching a television show depicting young African-Americans in a positive light, and the ultimate for me was that they were in college. I thought, "I want to be at Hillman, not here in DC; I want to be in a fraternity like Ron; I want to be smart like Dwayne Wayne..." These fictional depictions provided a tangible portrait to a future that I yearned for: to be at a Black college. A newness was awakened in my identity. I no longer felt ashamed to embrace being young, Black, and smart. Each day after school I would run home to watch re-runs of *A Different World* and secretly plot how I would escape my current condition and gain entrance into a premiere historically Black college or university. To me, this was my only way out of my current condition. For me, excellence *had* to be the standard, *not* an option.

During this time I also had several college students who attended elite HBCUs in my life. They served as mentors and their lives intrigued me. I wondered what life was like for them. Many of them were very involved on their campuses, gave back to their communities, and took a sincere interest in my future. These individuals inspired me. They provided me with hope *and* a glimpse into a world that was foreign to me at the time. My mentors also saw my potential and knew that I yearned for more. From the eighth grade until I graduated high school I was obsessed with college, but not just any college: the Black college. To me these institutions embodied the epitome of the collegiate experience. I wanted out and viewed higher education as the only way. What

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[8] *A Different World* is an American television sitcom which aired for six seasons on NBC (from September 24, 1987 – July 9, 1993). It is a spin-off series from *The Cosby Show* chronicling the lives of students at Hillman College, a fictional historically Black college (HBCU) in Virginia (La Deane, 1992).

drew me to the HBCU environment? Why did I yearn to attend *these* schools? Would

they indeed provide the way out that I so desperately sought?

The *Allure* of the HBCU Mystique

Across the country while other high school seniors looked to Harvard, Yale, and

Princeton as the standard; I viewed Howard, Morehouse, and Spelman, often referred to

as the "Negro Ivy League," with the same reverence (Gasman, 2006; Graham, 1999).

The "Negro Ivy League" is a subjective grouping of the "best" Black colleges due to their

highly credentialed faculty members, prominent alumni in various fields, and the social

statuses of [their] students (Graham, 1999).

> Howard University, Morehouse College, and Spelman College [are] the 'creme de
> la creme' of higher education for the Black elite, as these institutions are highly
> respected in the White professional world and their graduates gain admission into
> competitive graduate schools and boast highly regarded professions. (Taylor,
> 2008, p. 195)

The allure of these campuses, the mystique associated with Black Greek life, and their

eminent legacies are what attracted me to this institution type. *Allure* derives from the

Old French *aleurer*, meaning "to attract, to captivate." I *was* enthralled and the draw was

intense. I had to go to an HBCU, but not just any HBCU, the best HBCU. There are

unspoken standards amongst African-Americans regarding HBCUs that deem some of

these schools as acceptable while the rest are reduced in importance. During my

adolescence I was drawn to a romanticized HBCU image and heavily influenced by their

alumni, rankings, and the legacies of certain institutions, but why? Who decides which

Black institutions are the best?

All HBCUs have a core mission of African-American racial uplift, but they are

not a monolithic group and are diverse in nature (Gasman, 2011). HBCU communities

have reached out to students who have been convinced that they are not college material

due to socio-economic status, family background, and previous academic performance,

and they are not only concerned with who gets admitted but rather what happens to them

afterward (Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2001; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002). Is this

always true? *The Negro Ivy League* consists of institutions that are private and selective

in nature, and while they *do* provide access, they also take SAT scores and GPA into

heavy consideration. I now beg the question, to *who*m are these schools providing

access?

> There are few HBCUs where low-income students are not a majority of all
> students. Among these schools are many of the nation's more selective Black
> colleges and universities. Spelman College and Morehouse College in Atlanta
> have low percentages of their undergraduate students who qualify for Pell Grant
> awards. Hampton University in Virginia has the lowest percentage of Pell Grant
> recipients among the HBCUs. Hampton is the only HBCU where low-income
> students make up less than one third of the undergraduate student body.
> Howard University, the highly regarded historically Black university in the
> nation's capital, has the second-lowest percentage of Pell Grant recipients among
> the HBCUs. (The Journal Of Blacks In Higher Education Website, 2010)

Low-income students are in the minority at these schools. Are they somehow excluded?

Why are there *so* few? Does this distinctive student composition impact the campus

culture at these institutions? I had no idea that I would be placed in the minority within

my HBCU context.

I can still remember the day I received my acceptance letter to Howard

University. Early in the third quarter of my senior year of high school, January 12, 2001

to be exact, I engaged in my normal routine at the time which entailed checking the

mailbox to see if the colleges I applied to had sent any updates. On this day I discovered

an envelope emblazoned with the Howard University seal in my mailbox. My heart was

racing and beating fiercely in my chest. I was full of both anxiety and excitement as I ran

the four flights of my apartment building (skipping three and four steps at a time). I was

scared to open the envelope in a public space. What if it was a denial? I was sure that if

I was not accepted that I would fall out in the middle of the hallway of my walk-up

building. I could hardly contain myself to unlock the door. I finally found my keys and

controlled my hands to unlock my deadbolt. I dropped my book bag and tore open the

envelope and read:

> Congratulations on your acceptance to Howard University. We look forward to
> your joining us beginning Fall 2001 and to your contributing to the University's
> legacy of Leadership for America and the Global community. We know your
> experience at the University will be exciting, rewarding, and memorable and are
> pleased you chose to obtain your college education at the Capstone.

As I read these words I was ecstatic, dazed, and in utter disbelief. This was more than an

acceptance letter, it was a dream realized. I was holding my admissions letter and

scholarship offer to a university that was up the street from my house but had always

seemed so far away. I thought to myself "My hard work has paid off! I will be a

freshman at one of the premiere universities in the country."

Zora Neale Hurston[9], a daughter of the South and product of an impoverished

background felt the power of her entrance into the elite HBCU context too—*her* moment

was awe-inspiring yet humbling.

> The thrill Hannibal got when he finally crossed the Alps, the feeling of Napoleon
> when he finally placed upon his head the iron crown of Constantine, were nothing
> to the ecstasy I felt when I realized I was actually a Howardite. (Hurston, 1925, p.
> 315)

Hurston describes the feelings of the low-income African-American student embarking

upon a new educational journey in a poignant manner. She was awestruck and full of

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[9] Zora Neale Hurston, a Howard alumna, was a prominent author and anthropologist
during the Harlem Renaissance (Hurston, 1942/1984).

passionate promise and wonder. Hurston reveals that the elation she experienced, that I experienced, that others too experience trumps that of being made royalty or even conquering a nation. *This* euphoria is commanding. Entrée into the elite HBCU environment marks a significant turn for the low-income African-American student. How does one unite a modest personal history with the culture of elite individuals who look just like them? Can a low-income student *truly* "be" in the elite HBCU context?

Challenging The Norm

> The stereotypes that shape the American images of Black males are so stark that most find they are forced to contend with the fantasies and fears that others hold toward them. (Noguera, 2008, p. xiii)

> The typical Black boy in a K-12 educational setting is taught [by individuals] who combine an insufficient anticipation for his academic achievement with high expectations for disruptive behavior, intellectual stupidity, and a dispassion for learning that will ultimately culminate with high school dropout. (Harper, 2009, p. 697)

Throughout my high-school career I enjoyed several achievements. I was Editor-In-Chief of the yearbook, President of The National Honor Society, and Vice-President of my class all four years. I was proud of these accomplishments, and the end of my senior year should have been a joyous time. I was preparing to attend college the following Fall and named the first male valedictorian in the history of my high school. While I felt that my achievements were noteworthy, within my high school environment they were treated with disdain, dismissed, and shrouded in controversy.

Immediately following the announcement that I was valedictorian of the M.M. Washington Senior High School class of 2001 my classmates booed me. I still do not understand why I received this response. For the remainder of the school year I was taunted and shamed not only by my peers, but my high school's administration, and

former teachers. Why was I enduring this torment and humiliation? High achieving

minority students are often ostracized by their peers, but others (like myself) often adopt

and negotiate multiple identities in order to ensure their success *and* survival in numerous

contexts (i.e. school and home) (Davis, 2003; Davis & Jordan, 1994; Noguera, 2008;

Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010). Is it possible that I had begun to negotiate several

identities before ever stepping foot onto Howard's campus?

I will never forget what my counselor told me the day I received the news that I

was valedictorian. She peered up at me from her glasses and stated:

> You have to understand boys do not do this sort of thing around here! It was
> already bad enough when you were the only honors student in your class to get
> into Howard when your classmates were denied, now *you* are valedictorian!
> Doesn't that seem to be a bit much?

I turned around and walked out of her office in a daze. Several questions flooded my

mind. Did I do something wrong? Was it out of the norm for a Black male to attain this

accomplishment? Should I feel ashamed of my success? "The normalization of failure

on the part of Black males is pervasive. This is undoubtedly because many educators

have grown accustomed to the idea that the Black male students they serve will fail, get

into trouble, and drop out of school" (Noguera, 2008, p. xix). I was thoroughly confused.

Coming Full Circle

Upon reflection on this period of my life, I was angry. I wanted to lash out and

use my valedictory address[10] to communicate my feelings of scorn and bitterness. I had

done everything "right" but was being penalized for my success, but why? What was I

fighting against? Black males in our public school systems are consistently deemed at

risk and endure negative consequences. School failure, special education assignment,

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[10] See Appendix A for the valedictory address in its entirety.

suspensions, expulsions, and violence often become the norm (Davis, 2003; Ferguson, 2000). I was different. Freeman (1999) expresses this identity confusion:

> High achieving students confront a double dilemma in their academic and social adjustments to higher education institutions. On the one hand, because they have excelled in high school, educators feel these students need no services to adjust. On the other hand, the very fact that they have achieved to a place at the top of their class often creates a sense of responsibility that they perceive separates them from other African American students who might not carry the same feelings (or burden) of constantly performing at the top. (p. 16)

Why do these students feel separate from their peers? Is their *sense of responsibility* indeed ever-present? When does it become *too much*? Are high-achieving low-income students often forced to navigate the educational context alone? Does a perception exist that high achieving students are not in need of help?

While composing my speech I worked closely with my English teacher, Mrs. Bradshaw, who was a close ally of mine. She was a mentor and one of the few people in my high school who defended my reputation and affirmed me in the midst of this tumultuous time. "African American students who are academically successful have been able to use role modeling of adults to their advantage" (Freeman, 1999, p. 17). She showed me that this moment was not only mine and pushed me to go beyond the present and look forward to the future.

A mentor is one who is able to push you to greater heights amidst adversity. Kassie Freeman (1999) captures the feelings of Ruth, a high achieving Black student who often leaned on her mentor to provide much needed guidance. Ruth explains:

> I think that a good mentor challenges you. They are not comfortable leaving you on the level you are. Sometimes [you] need that extra person in [your] life to push, encourage and stimulate thinking—cause [you] to think bigger. (p. 23)

Like Ruth, I too, leaned on my mentor and am thankful for her motivation. Mrs. Bradshaw and I soon met after she reviewed the first draft. During this meeting she told me, "Steve, I know you are angry and you have every right to be, but you cannot use this platform to get back at those who have wronged you. You must take the high road." I will never forget her words. They gave me strength. My speech was revised many times, but what I remember most about this process is that she allowed my essence to remain. The result was an affirmation to my class with just a touch of audacity. Mrs. Bradshaw aided me in looking at the bigger picture. I am forever thankful.

Monday, June 11, 2001 was graduation day and it could not have come soon enough. The time was here. I led my class into the auditorium and took my place on stage with the other platform guests. I glanced at the program and winced. In a final jab to my ego the administrators at my high school put me last on the program. Usually it was tradition for the valedictorian to be placed first on the program, but not that year. My best friend Valana McMickens, who was class president saw my expression and grabbed my hand and whispered, "It is ok, you will be amazing!" She never let go of my hand or maybe I never released my tight and sweaty grip. I was extremely nervous; meanwhile, the ceremony seemed endless. As I listened to my principal introduce me and call me to the podium I could feel my hands shaking. Before I took my place, she whispered in my ear, "You need to hurry this up! The program is over time and we need to be out of here so they can set up for the next graduation!" In a final act of defiance, I whispered back in her ear, "No!" What I remember most about my valedictory address is its ending.

For a final thought, I have often needed words of encouragement to help me along the difficult road of life, but recently I have had to weather a turbulent storm. The following words have helped me a great deal.

I then recited the poem *If* by Rudyard Kipling.

If

If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,

If you can dream -- and not make dreams your master;
If you can think -- and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings -- nor lose the common touch,
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run --
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And -- which is more -- you'll be a Man, my son!
(Kipling, 1910/2007, pp. 170-171)

Kipling's words were powerful. They called to me. "*If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you.*" I had been chastised for being a young man who was both intelligent and Black. I was hurt by the ridicule I was forced to endure from my peers, friends, and teachers. I still carry this with me. "*If you can wait and not be tired by waiting, or being lied about, don't deal in lies, or being hated, don't give way to hating.*" It was my dream when I entered high school to become valedictorian. I *had* waited and worked tirelessly for this day to come. What were the consequences? I was weary and felt hated for simply being myself. "*If you can meet*

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with triumph and disaster and treat those two imposters just the same." I knew that I had to confront this disaster and claim my triumph. This moment was not solely my own. I stood on the shoulders of countless individuals who had sacrificed to get me to that point in my life—my mother, mentors, and extended family. *"Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it."* I knew that I was destined for more and determined to claim greatness.

Before I knew it my speech was complete, and to my surprise, met with a standing ovation. I was flooded with emotions. What was also rewarding was that I achieved this feat on Howard University's main campus in Cramton Auditorium. Irony perhaps? No, it was fate and an eminent foreshadowing. I was ending one chapter of my life and receiving my high school diploma at the very location where two months later I would begin my college career and continue my journey of self-discovery.

Moments after leaving the stage I was interviewed by a Washington D.C. cable news network and asked what was next for me, and how I felt about graduating high school. My response was, "I feel very excited but at the same time apprehensive. I feel scared because I know now that I am going to be facing a new world, a new beginning." This foretelling is compelling. What *would* this new world provide? What does entrée into an elite institution mean for the low-income African-American student?

> The education of 'first generation, low income, and minority' students are the most important educational problems in America today, more important than educational funding, affirmative action, vouchers, merit pay, teacher education, financial aid, curriculum reform and the rest. (Astin, 1998, p. 12)

There are tremendous difficulties for low-income students when attempting to gain access to elite universities. "Most low-income students who have top test scores and grades do not even apply to the nation's best colleges" (Leonhardt, 2013). High-

achieving low-income students are far less likely than their middle and upper-middle class peers with weak high school academic profiles to enroll in college, let alone an elite institution (Baum & Ma, 2010). Only 34 percent of high-achieving high school seniors in the bottom fourth of income distribution attend one of the country's most selective colleges (Leonhardt, 2013). Furthermore, "Students from lower-income backgrounds and those whose parents do not have college degrees are most likely to enroll in less selective colleges than those for which they are qualified" (Baum & Ma, 2010, p. 40). This is problematic.

Obstacles lie with the applicant *and* the institution. Are either ready for what is on the horizon? To whom do these universities cater? Do these schools simply serve as gate-keepers to keep certain individuals *out*? "How difficult it is for the [elite] university to decide which among the many superbly qualified applicants should be accepted. How should this elite be chosen" (Klitgaard, 1985, p. 3)? How *are* the "elites" chosen? Again, what *is* elite? Is it status? An impeccable scholastic record? Family pedigree? Could it be that high-achieving students with immense potential who happen to come from meager backgrounds are in fact elite?

The college choice process for *any* individual is a pursuit that is often experienced inside of a complex paradigm. The low-income student who attains entry into the elite HBCU has defied the risk factors that other students with similar backgrounds have endured. This entry, however, is only the beginning. What occurs when a poorer student achieves the "impossible"?

Dilemmas of "The Chosen": Becoming Acquainted with "Our Kind Of People"

Prior to enrolling at Howard, all I knew was that it was a "good school." I was not aware of the type of students who attended or its prominent stature, not only within the Black community but society as a whole. August 18, 2001 was freshmen move-in. I noticed my environment shift immediately with regard to economic and social status from one extreme to another. Tremendous differences were everywhere. While my mother and I had to scrape to rent a U-Haul to move into the residence hall, my fellow classmates were arriving in Land-Rovers, Escalades, and some of my female classmates had Louis Vuitton luggage in tow. I immediately began to question myself and my surroundings. Where is everyone from? Why do I feel so different? Do I belong here? I was self-conscious. I remember whispering to my mother, "Who are these people?" She whispered back "Don't worry baby, you will find out soon enough." Class has a way of smacking one in the face and I felt the sting; I still do.

Growing Scales

Gills & Tails

I looked at my reflection in the water
Thought what an unlikely pair

Closed my eyes, held my breath, plummeted down, down, down
And anchored myself there

Can't tell how long I've been
In the company of gills and tails
I think I feel my skin
Growing scales

Can I come up for air
Can I come up, can I come up

Can I come up for air
Can I come up, can I come up

How can I come up for air?
Can I come up, can I come up

Can I?
Can I come up, can I come up

I'm gettin' eaten up down here
I'm just not built like them
The big fish have a monopoly
The little fish get buried in the sand

This here world I'm in
Sucks your life out, leaves you comatose
Take back your salt and fins
Send me a lifeboat
(Larrieux, 2006, Track 7)

Amel Larrieux (2006) sings a song entitled *Gills & Tails*. Her piece documents a conflicted conversion. Larrieux enters into a world with which she is unfamiliar. Oblivious to what this new environment will present she is unconscious to its parameters and begins to transform. She realizes her evolution, but Amel is stifled by the "fish," the "others" who inhabit her new home and she yearns to return to familiarity; but can she? This song speaks loudly to me, in more ways than one.

"Closed my eyes, held my breath, plummeted down, down, down and anchored myself there;" I chose Howard. I chose to leave the familiar and embark upon a new journey. A unique aspect to my becoming a Howard student was that I was a native Washingtonian. *"Can I come up for air, Can I come up, Can I come up?"* After deciding to attend Howard, I was apprehensive that being a DC native would thwart my maturation, but I had a plan to combat this anxiety. *"Can I come up for air, Can I come up, Can I come up?"* I made the choice that I was a Howard University student first, and working class Washington, DC resident second. *"Can I come up for air, Can I come up,*

Can I come up?" I observed that many of my working class peers from the Washington, DC metropolitan area were reluctant to transition, and as a result, felt ostracized from campus life. I was determined to become a part of the Howard community. I now know that I was also aspiring to gain admission and acceptance into the Black middle class as well. Why was I choosing to "class-jump"? What was drawing me to *this* ideal? Was I being chosen as well? "*How can I come up for air? Can I come up, Can I come up for air?"* While I was proud of my city and was a product of the environment, I did not want it to serve as a barrier in successfully assimilating into the Howard culture. When recalling this shift I wonder whether or not I was drowning in this new context? Many times I did gasp for air. Every time I was asked where I came from, what my parents did for a living, and where was I going to "summer" when the semester was over, I did indeed gasp for air. While I never lied or dismissed my upbringing, I did feel different and out of place.

My evolution was quite apparent especially in my style of dress. *Can't tell how long I've been in the company of gills and tails. I think I feel my skin growing scales."* Early in my freshmen year, I no longer wore jeans and t-shirts to class. I quickly accepted the social norms of my middle class peers and adopted a more preppy style that consisted of khakis, loafers, oxford shirts, and a sweater draped around the shoulders. "The student peer group is a potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (Astin, 1993, p. 398). Was this outward expression fitting in or a newly embraced authentic self? When I came home freshmen year for Thanksgiving break and my mother noticed my new style of dress she stated, "You are now one of them! You have that Howard stank all over you!" I was stunned and

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offended. Was she not a part of this transformation? Was I now a manifestation of her past standing before her? Was she afraid that I was repeating her mistakes and now consumed with the Howard environment? *"How can I come up for air? Can I come up, can I come up?"* I literally had taken a bus from down the street but quickly realized that I had gone from one world to another. I wondered, "Had I changed in a mere couple of months?" For the rest of my time at home I found myself longing for my friends who were a part of the Black middle class and pondered how my life would have been different had my mother finished her studies at Howard. Would I have been a part of the Black elite? Would I have been given the opportunity to have friends in Jack and Jill[11] too? I felt immense guilt and frustration.

Prior to enrolling at Howard it was extremely important to me that while I did wish to persist towards graduation, I was not going to sacrifice my morals, ethics, or denounce my background in the process. I thought, am I doing just that? My mind was filled with guilt and frustration. *"I'm gettin' eaten up down here. I'm just not built like them."* Had I rejected my upbringing, and more importantly, was I making my mother feel uncomfortable? I quickly realized that I *had* changed and now had to navigate two worlds: my home and that of Howard University. While these two environments were close in proximity they were light years away from each other. *"This here world I'm in sucks your life out, leaves you comatose. Take back your salt and fins...Send me a lifeboat."*

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[11] Jack and Jill of America is an African American organization formed in 1938 by African American mothers with the idea of bringing together children in a social and cultural environment. It is considered a cornerstone of the American Black upper middle class community. (Graham, 1999; Jack and Jill of America Website, 2012)

When Black students enter college, they often reflect, at times, in a deeply existential sense, on themselves and their identities (Stewart, 2008). For students from low income or working class backgrounds, these reflections can be even more intense. Are these thoughts amplified when put into an elite HBCU context? Hope fills their journey. Optimism exists for the construction of a meaningful life. Contemplation about self and identity are ever-present (Astin, 1993; Stewart, 2008). Their very cores are challenged every day. Stewart (2008) contends that "For students from underrepresented populations, identity struggles take on a particular intensity when the 'longing to attain self-conscious [personhood]' means negotiating the multiple dimensions of their identities in an environmental context that may be neither inclusive nor welcoming" (p. 184). While embracing who they are be-coming in their new environments, these students must resolve whether their old selves must be discarded or if they can effectively reconcile the old *and* the new. They must undertake the challenging process of joining worlds and negotiating existence. Should they simply abandon their essence so that they may welcome the new? Can they? Merging separate worlds and facing a new reality is a challenging process.

"You Have To Fit"

Children begin by loving their parents. As they grow older they judge them, sometimes they forgive them. So, we find ourselves on the horns of an ethical dilemma. (West, 1992)

My freshman year was one of tremendous transition and the class differences were quite apparent—I often felt different amongst my own. In order to cope I found comfort in weekly phone calls from my mother. These conversations were always insightful because she had once been a Howard University student. I relished in her

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advice, wit, and candor. One phone call in particular stands out because it marks a

significant turn in how I would forever view Howard University, myself, *and* my mother.

It was early October, and I had been at Howard just shy of two months. Homecoming[12]

was approaching and I noticed that my mother's phone calls began to increase; I would

soon find out why.

As I walked across campus one afternoon my mother called me on my cell phone.

The conversation soon turned to my homecoming plans. I could tell she was excited for

me, but there was also an undercurrent of concern in her voice. "What events are you

going to? What are you going to wear?" I replied, "I will probably go to everything

mommy. As far as my clothes, what do you mean? Can't I just put on what I have?" She

paused and replied, "No, you can't! You have to be presentable. My friends and sorority

sisters will be there. You have my face and will not embarrass me! You have to *fit.*

When you get out of class on Friday we will go shopping." I knew that she could not

afford to buy new clothes for me, but this excursion was not up for debate. The refining

process had begun.

"You have to fit." Why was it important to my mother that I fit? What was she

forcing me to fit into? The word *fit* derives from the Old English *fitt* meaning "conflict or

struggle." During my time at Howard I *was* engaged in a struggle. I was forced to

familiarize myself with a new intellectual setting and interact with a more academically

and socially diverse student population. My mother also endured the same challenges

more than 25 years earlier. I did not understand her wishes for me then, but they are all

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[12] Howard University Homecoming is a national event where alumni return to the
university. Numerous events are held including a coronation, fashion show, football
game, and step show. During the course of a week the campus swells and welcomes over
100,000 alumni and friends of the university.

too clear now. The role of the parent is ever present in this phenomenon for myself and others who attend these elite institutions. My mother had once attended Howard and I felt pressure from her past. I did not wish to repeat her mistakes. She is an important piece to my phenomenological exploration of intra-racial class difference within elite HBCU environments. In order to understand how I have turned to this phenomenon, I must weave *her* story into *mine.*

"Sometimes You Can Have Too Much"

Cheryl D. Bonner-Mobley is my mother, but she was not always a mother. What would her youth reveal to me? Her story is complex. I am immediately drawn to an image of her past. Hanging on the wall of my grandmother's sitting room is my mother's high school graduation photo (See Appendix B). It is an eye-catching portrait that demands attention—a classic 1970s image that captures her most striking qualities. She is wearing a white graduation robe. Her hair is coifed and teased to perfection; her light caramel skin is flawless and appears to have a natural glow free from makeup. What I love most about this optic is the underlying air of rebellion and her bold style. Even though she is wearing a plain graduation robe, her white oval earrings hang effortlessly. She makes sure to hold the artificial diploma prop in a manner that displays her ornate ring and fastidiously manicured nails sealed in totality with white fingernail polish to match her graduation garb and jewelry. Her look is commanding. She was ready to conquer the world.

It was the summer of 1975, and my mother arrived in Washington, D.C. fresh from the farms of Stony Creek, Virginia as a freshman at Howard University. She had hopes and dreams of becoming an on-air news personality. Whenever I meet one of my

mother's college classmates they all emphasize that "Your mother was something else!" Affectionately referred to as "Bonner," she was the quintessential "Howard Girl." Not only was she beautiful, but she had the intellect to match. During her time at Howard she was immensely popular. She was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, a homecoming queen, and consistently on the Dean's List. She appeared to have it all, but everything is not always as it seems.

My mother admitted that her pursuit of campus popularity and status stemmed from feelings of inadequacy. "I may have had money, but I was country. I felt less than because my friends' parents were doctors and lawyers...mine were farmers" (Cheryl D. Bonner-Mobley, personal communication, June 17, 2012). She never totally felt comfortable amongst her affluent peers and became obsessed with her pursuit *to fit*, *to belong*. She used her family's wealth to attain considerable status on campus. She purchased extravagant clothes, drove a sports car, and insisted that her father rent her a brownstone off campus in the Capital Hill area of Washington, DC where she hosted extravagant gatherings. "I lost sight of what was important. Sometimes you can have too much" (Cheryl D. Bonner-Mobley, personal communication, June 17, 2012). My mother had become intoxicated with the Howard University culture, and the results were severe. She never finished her degree.

It was not until I stepped foot onto Howard University's campus that my mother disclosed these powerful pieces of her past with me. Why did she wait so long? Was she embarrassed? Upon sharing her past she actually bestowed me with an invaluable legacy. She once told me early in my tenure at Howard, "You are *my* son! I may not have graduated, but my name is all that I have on that campus, use it to *do* what I could *not*."

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My mother's time at Howard provided me with yet another "guide," but also a tale of

caution. I borrowed its glamorous features to *fit*, and in a short period of time I

succeeded, but the enticing lure of the Howard culture almost led me astray as well. I

struggled and could feel myself becoming consumed. Was this due to my feeling some

sort of pressure to perform in a certain manner? Did my pursuit of status manifest in

"elite performances?" Who was I seeking to mirror?

High Expectations

> Just as the Roosevelt's and Kennedys had Harvard and the Buckley's and the
> Basses had Yale, old families among the Black elite have selected certain
> colleges for their children and their descendants. Among the most prestigious in
> this group are Howard University in Washington and Spelman College and
> Morehouse College in Atlanta. (Graham, 1999, p. 68)

To think that specific institutions of higher learning have assisted in building *and*

maintaining the legacies of some of our country's most prominent and influential Black

and White families is astounding. Educational institutions play a ''sifting and sorting''

role, thereby contributing to the reinforcement of social class in our society (Collins,

1979; Stuber, 2009). Who is in? Who is out? What role does familial legacy play in the

process of bestowing privilege? Where does this lack of "legacy" leave the low-income

student within an elite HBCU environment?

Motivational parental encouragement and high expectations are positively

associated with college participation (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler, Braxton, &

Coopersmith, 1989). Where do these expectations lead? Is there a difference between

high expectations versus parental pressure? Within the elite HBCU context there are

many students whose parents and other family members graduated from these

institutions. Is this the reason they also choose *The Negro Ivy League?* Black students

decide to attend HBCUs for many reasons, including the influence of relatives, school

reputation, religion, and/or seeking cultural roots (Freeman & Thomas, 2002). A

classmate of mine from Howard once shared:

> My father and all of his siblings went to Howard. I was the only one of my four
> siblings and cousins to attend. I never felt that I *had* to go to Howard but I knew
> as the youngest it was now up to me to continue a tradition that was much bigger
> than me. I'd go to Howard every lifetime because that bond is strong. That
> legacy for me is very important. I expect that my future children will continue this
> tradition. (Kailyn Maxey, personal communication, February 2, 2013)

I was not the "normal" low-income Howard student. I, too, had a legacy—one wrought

with an intense history. Elite HBCUs have produced generations of alumni for many of

my peers, but *not* me.

"Elite" Performances

My sophomore year arrived, and I had attained a coveted position on the Howard

University Homecoming Steering Committee. I was given the opportunity to produce the

Mr. & Ms. Howard University Pageant. Steve Mobley, a mere sophomore was bestowed

the opportunity to execute the "kick-off"—the beginning of Howard University's

legendary homecoming events. This endeavor was special to me because I knew that my

mother had once competed for this crown. I paid homage to her and named the event

"Harlem Nights: The Essence Of Elegance." The *Essence Of Elegance* was the title of

the pageant that she competed in. While organizing this production, I became distracted

and neglected my academic responsibilities.

The draw of Howard's social scene was fierce. During this time I began to create

the "Steve Mobley Brand." Instantly, I was given status. Everyone was beginning to

know my name. I felt special. In *my* pursuit to attain eminence and climb Howard's

social ladder, like my mother, I too lost sight of what was most important. Astin (1984) contends:

> Although student involvement generally holds that more is better, there are probably limits beyond which increasing involvement ceases to produce desirable results and can even become counter-productive. Examples of excessive [co-curricular] involvement are "the workaholic"...and others who manifest obsessive compulsive behaviors. (p. 307)

Yes, I was obsessed. I was entranced by impromptu meetings with university officials, being interviewed constantly by the campus press, and the cache associated with being a "up and coming student leader." I had committed to Howard's social scene *first* and spent numerous hours in the student union planning and executing the pageant.

While the event was successful and I had begun to establish myself within the campus culture, at the end of the Fall of 2002 I had earned a 1.63 GPA and was placed on academic probation. I lost my academic scholarship largely due to overextending myself during my involvement with the Howard University Homecoming Steering Committee and quest to fit in. Was my scholarship the only thing I had lost? During this time I abandoned my academic identity—a central essence of "*Steve*" that I once held in high regard. Just two years before, I stood on the stage of Cramton auditorium as valedictorian. It is sobering to realize that in the same space two years later I produced an event that nearly caused me to throw everything away that I worked so hard to achieve.

I vividly remember calling my mother and informing her of the loss of my scholarship. It only took 20 minutes and she was standing in the lobby of my residence hall. She called me and demanded that I come downstairs. To this day I do not know how she got across town that fast. My mother was enraged and her eyes were full of

tears. In front of the entire lobby of my residence hall where many of my friends were present she screamed, "What is wrong with you? Have you not learned from me? I have poured *everything* into you!" I, too, began to sob.

At that moment my existence at Howard became even more real. I knew that I could not fall victim to the elements to which she succumbed. History often repeats itself, but I now understood that the stakes were too high and what potential penalties could manifest. Luckily, I was snapped back into reality before I became absorbed by the potent lure of Howard that led to my mother's unfortunate circumstances.

During my time at Howard I gave an "elite performance." I felt great pressure to model the privilege of my peers. These "elite performances" manifested in my attire, speech, and pursuit of popularity, all the while navigating the institution's academic and social realms. Perform comes from the Old French *parfornir,* meaning "to do, finish, and accomplish." While performing, what was I trying to accomplish? Was I there simply to finish and attain my degree? Did my peers who had parents and family members who were Howard alumni also feel pressure to give an "elite performance?" What about those who descended from "established" families? What were *they* attempting to achieve? Did they feel forced to perform too?

I immediately recall a classmate of mine. Both of her parents are Howard graduates. Her mother is a lawyer and has been a longtime member of the trustee board; her father is a physician. She was smart, stunning, and immensely popular. She once told me, "People do not understand my life here. They see an image. My mother is a trustee, and people on this campus expect me to be a certain way. So does my mother. I just wanna be me." Within the elite HBCU environment there is pressure that comes

from many sources. Parents and family play a central role in how these demands

manifest. Parents pressure their children because a dream has been realized. They once

attended the elite HBCU, and they wanted their child to attend. There is an expectation

to do well because a persona has been created. Parents who are alumni of elite HBCUs

often times do not want their child to destroy their legacy nor disappoint the institution.

Historically Black colleges are oftentimes an oasis for children of Black families who

value tradition and intellect (Graham, 1999). Is this always the case? Are these schools

always a safe haven or do they have the potential to breed angst, worry, and fear?

A (Re)Turn To The Things Themselves

Merleau-Ponty (1962) stresses that "Turning to the phenomena of lived

experience means re-learning to look at the world by re-awakening the basic experience

of the world" (p. viii). Why is this necessary? Where must one go to be re-awakened?

Edmund Husserl provides a complex answer. In phenomenological inquiry Husserl calls

for the human science researcher to return to the *things themselves* (Steeves, 2006). It is

only after we are called that we are then at ease with the knowledge and are given

things—beings that are disclosed through our conscious engagement with them (Steeves,

2006). Moran (2000) affirms Husserl and states that when following phenomenological

inspiration you then follow the *things themselves.* But what are the *things themselves*?

Where did I find these *things?* In what manner were the *things themselves* revealed? I

now see, *I see phenomenologically.*

Martin Heidegger recognized the significance of *phenomenologically seeing* the

things themselves. "For Heidegger, Phenomenology is such and its ways [are] as diverse

as the matters themselves" (Moran, 2000, p.3). He makes clear that "There is no such

thing as one Phenomenology" (Heidegger, 1962/2008, p. 328). Therefore, the manner in which I have turned and am now (re)turning to the *things themselves* will not be the same as those who have come before me. My *things* will not be the same.

(Re)Engaging A Different World

Merleau-Ponty (1962) had in mind a kind of phenomenological writing that he described as, "a peculiar attitude and attentiveness to the things of the world" (p. xiii). Why peculiar? Is this state of being odd? Strange? Eccentric perhaps? I believe that this *peculiar* attitude is far from unusual; rather it is distinct *and* essential for phenomenological inquiry. Prior to being associated with the atypical, *peculiar* derives from the mid-15th century Latin word *peculiaris* meaning "of one's own." A "peculiar attentiveness" to the things of the world—*the things themselves*, is to make these *things* your own.

To be clear, I did not want to answer Husserl's call. I understood that I would knowingly have to journey to some uncomfortable places in my past—places filled with hurt and pain. "In Phenomenology, if you do not feel some discomfort, then you are not truly giving yourself to your phenomenon" (Mark Brimhall-Vargas, personal communication, September 20, 2011). To be called to revisit the scars of your past is a bold request. Until now, I truly believed that I had healed. However, the memories burned into my psyche are still fresh and raw; they stand before me as the *things themselves.*

> Memory is a selection of images. Some elusive, others printed indelibly on the brain. Each image is like a thread. Each thread woven together to make a tapestry of intricate texture and the tapestry tells a story and the story is our past. (Lemmons, 1997)

One's memory *is* a selection of images. Why do we choose certain images to recollect while others escape us? During my adolescence the television series *A Different World* called to me; it was an escape and provided a way out of an existence that was often painful. Its images are "printed indelibly on [my] brain" and tell a story of *my past*. I associate this series with my childhood hopes and dreams.

It is easy to forget the past in order to move forward to the present. "If we simply try to forget or ignore what we already 'know' we may find that presuppositions persistently creep back into our reflections" (van Manen, 2007, p. 46). While I "know" *A Different World,* have I seen it *phenomenologically*? How would these images display themselves to me as an adult? "Moving through Phenomenology is the process of letting things manifest themselves" (Heidegger, 1963/2003, p. xiv). Upon deciding to explore my phenomenon I knew that it would be essential to (re)turn to *A Different World.* I would need to explore the series and challenge myself to both affirm and critique its impact. What would it mean to (re)turn? To return is to "come back." Its meaning also reveals that in a literal sense it is to "come home." My (re)turn to *A Different World* is a homecoming, a celebration; and like a homecoming celebration I (re)unite with old friends, (re)engage history in the present, and come face to face with my past.

A Presence Was Lacking

Historically Black colleges and universities have had relatively few television representations where they are depicted as organizations committed to the education of African-American students (Parrott-Sheffer, 2008). The television series *A Different World* (1987-1993) was lauded for its "social relevance, uncompromising construction of Blackness (Whiteness was not the normative yardstick), and the ability to use the

situation comedy formula as a vehicle to highlight the Black experience in America"

(Coleman, 1998, p. 104). Under the helm of Debbie Allen (a Howard University alumna)

the series tackled serious issues including race, AIDS, Apartheid in South Africa, and to

varying degrees—intra-racial class difference within the African-American community.

Allen was serious about the way in which she would portray Blacks on the small screen.

She asserted that "I did not want to see young Black students portrayed as people who

were just drinking and partying...It had to be about something" (Uncle Films, 2005). This

show was one of my first glimpses into HBCU student life and fundamental to my

college choice process; however, I now view its images with different lenses.

A Different World aired for six seasons; however, the series was void of a

character who came from a low-income background until its fifth year. Did a low-

income student not fit the image of what it was to *be* a student who attends an HBCU?

An air of classicism is evident. *A Different World* conveyed a specific image of an

educated Black person, or at least a student educated at an HBCU (Parrott-Sheffer, 2008).

In a critique of the series, Parrot-Sheffer (2008) highlights the costs of this skewed

representation:

> While this show portrays life at HBCUs positively, they rely on a stereotyped
> image of Black intellectualism. It is problematic because this portrayal—which is
> similar to what is often times presented by HBCUs themselves—potentially
> excludes students who do not fit this middle-to upper middle class image. (p. 214)

This representation was eventually adjusted and "Lena James" portrayed by actress Jada

Pinkett-Smith was added to the cast in 1992. What did Lena's presence mean? Lena

came from Baltimore, Maryland and was the product of an under-resourced urban high

school. Her character marks a significant shift in the show's dynamic. Her presence

challenged the *clean cut* stereotypes that permeated the series and was often juxtaposed

with one of the show's primary characters Whitley Gilbert. Whitley represented the

Black elite—her father was a prominent judge and her mother was a Virginia socialite.

Lena, however, was constantly referred to by Whitley and other characters as a student

on financial aid and from "the projects." I am struck by these references. Did Lena's

presence bring uneasiness to her more affluent peers? Should low-income students feel

shame because they receive financial assistance so that they may exist within an elite

HBCU institution? How does the presence of a low-income student challenge the elite

HBCU campus culture?

The difficulty Lena endured within her new collegiate environment was

prominently underscored. She often felt as if she did not fit. In one episode titled

Rule Number One, she emphasized that "I really miss my homeboys, they are not like

these self-centered pampered Hillman brothers...and the Hillman woman, sometimes I

feel like I'm in a foreign country. I can't relate to my teachers, the students..." (Lee,

1991). In the following scene she also admits the difficulty she had in the classroom and

stated, "Hillman doesn't exactly pick up where my high school left off..." (Lee, 1991).

 Jada Pinkett-Smith's character was a much needed depiction.

The character "Lena James" shows this phenomenon. She provides a glimpse into

the experiences of low-income African-American students and how they encounter class

at elite HBCUs. Although Lena James is a fictional representation of a low-income

student within the HBCU context, I bring her plot to the forefront of turning to the

phenomena of intra-racial class conflict within HBCU communities because her

storyline represents a prevailing conflict present within this study. Her moments on *A

Different World* convey the tensions that are present when low-income and

middle/upper-middle class students come together within a private, selective HBCU

context. During her time on the show it was made obvious that Lena James wrestled

with both her academic and socioeconomic identities. This conflict plays out in a

sobering manner in an episode entitled *Do the Write Thing.* The episode opens with a

meeting between Lena and Colonel Taylor, the chair of the Math department. He is

concerned about her academic standing and communicates that he must take away her

scholarship. Immediately following this meeting she has another encounter with an

English professor that reminds her of an upcoming assignment and emphasized that it

must not be late. She is tasked with composing a narrative on an individual that she

admires most—she chooses her father but is not honest in her depiction of him. Pinkett-

Smith's character is lauded for extraordinary work, and as a result entered into a

scholarship contest that she later wins; however, in the midst of this milestone she is

forced to confront *and* reconcile her demons in a very public manner when her father

makes a surprise visit to campus.

Grover James
Hey baby-girl…
Lena James
Hey Grover…Look, I just want to explain the essay tonight, I didn't...
[Grover interrupts]
Grover James
It's alright. You did what you had to do to stay in school. Besides you never would have
won any awards writing about me.
Lena James
I didn't say that.
Grover James
You didn't have to. I may not have been Ward Cleaver, but I wasn't Eldridge either.
What was that Black Panther stuff?
Lena James
Like you just said, I had to do what I had to do to stay in school, I guess it's just getting
by.
Grover James
[Grover walks over to Lena to embrace her]

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Babygirl, I'm so proud...
[Lena shrugs away; there is a silence]
and I have to be moving on so um, I just came by to give you this...
[Grover pulls out a thick wad of money]

Lena James
[Lena looks at Grover with frustration and sighs]
Where did you get that? The track?

Grover James
Hey, don't ask questions you know the answer to!

Lena James
Well I don't see the point in taking it! You'll just call me in two weeks, in trouble, *again*
and ask for it back!

Grover James
It seems like both of us get into sticky situations from time to time!

Lena James
Yeah? Well when does it end? The hustling? The gambling? You can't keep living like
this! I can't keep living like THIS!

Grover James
Baby, we always got by...

Lena James
[shouting]
Well I am sick of getting by! I scammed my way into this school with that Engineering
scholarship and I got caught! I'm busted and I am tired of lying!

Grover Washington
Yeah? Then why did you accept the Journalism scholarship?

Lena James
[Lena begins to cry]
Because I am just like you!

Grover Washington
Baby, you don't have to be like me! Lena what did you say in that essay? Something like,
create your own destiny and make your name count. Baby if you can make that up, you
can make it true.

Lena James
It's easier said than done

Grover James
Well, I hope I taught you more than "three card Monty." It's on you baby girl.
[Grover hugs Lena and puts the money in her pocket]
Take care and look I'll call ya in a couple of weeks alright? You know you my one and
only? I love you.
[Grover exits scene]

Lena James
[Lena turns away and begins to cry some more]
I love you too Grover.
[end of scene]
(West, 1992)

Why was Lena dishonest? Was she ashamed of her background? Did she feel forced to fabricate a past in order to fit within her new setting? Like Lena, I too, negotiated how I would reconcile both my socioeconomic and academic identities. While I never lied about my background, I did feel obligated to conform in other ways. I was constantly aware that differences between myself and my peers were ever present.

When low-income students encounter elite institutions of higher education they experience change and transformation. How do these students make meaning of these changes? They also face feelings of insecurity and uncertainty (Reay, 2005). It has also been revealed that there are consequences for low-income students who choose to attend elite universities (Jetten, Iyer, Tsivrikos, & Young, 2008). "[They] face dilemmas including the ability to maintain connections to one's social background, including family, friends and the wider community" (Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009, p. 1105). Is there a mismatch that exists between student and institution? What transpires when a low-income student is confronted with class difference? Do specific HBCU contexts pressure one to fit if they feel as if they are the *othe*r?

My "Double Consciousness" Is Complex

In W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903/2003), he introduced the notion of "double consciousness:"

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness as an American, A Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 11)

His stance was that Black identity was complex. At the center of his argument is the idea that Blacks are constantly reconciling two levels of simultaneous awareness within

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

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an oppressive social structure (Pattillo, 2007). During Du Bois' time he sought to affirm the place of the Negro as both American and Black within a segregationist and racially oppressive social context. When relating his notion to the present, I wonder what occurs when a Black person is experiencing their "twoness" intra-racially and inter-racially? How does it feel to be at war with several identities when engaging your own race *and* the majority? What is the reaction when your own race views you with an "amused contempt and pity?" How does one react when there is a "sense of always looking at one self through the eyes of others" when the "other" looks *just* like you?

Like the Negro in Du Bois' notion I, too, walked a tenuous tight-rope and constantly reconciled multiple layers of identity. During my undergraduate career the difference was not only did I engage a Black/White societal paradigm, but navigated difference within familial and higher education contexts that were both Black. Both worlds were Black, but distinct. In both existences I was constantly aware of social class.

I *still* carefully navigate these worlds. When I am with my family I am very deliberate in my interactions as not to make them feel uncomfortable due to my chosen scholarly pursuits. I am aware of my presence. With family I am "Little Steve" or "E.T." I am son, grandson, brother, and cousin. I am the one that "got out." I choose my words carefully and am often quiet. Conversely, I heavily code-switch when I am in the presence of my college friends, still very aware of class. Social class is *always* present. While I am gregarious and at ease, I still know my place. I am presented as "Steve Mobley, the former campus leader." Conversations are peppered with, "He is getting his PhD; He went to UPenn." There is limited talk of my background. I am included in this circle because not only did I "escape" my background but, now due to educational

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attainment and the way in which I "learned" to present myself, I am "acceptable." This

existence can be exhausting and is a constant struggle.

Who is *acceptable*? Is it one who is worthy? Worthy of what? Acceptable

comes into the English language from the 18th century Middle Eastern definition of the

word meaning "never defined." One who is attempting to become "worthy" and one who

"cannot be defined" are contrasting values. "The American Negro must remake his past in

order to make his future...what is a luxury for the nation as a whole becomes a prime

necessity for the Negro" (Schomburg, 1925/1997, p. 231). Do low-income students

encountering an elite HBCU context need to remake their pasts in order to reconcile their

present successfully? These students often times are forced to reconcile their pasts with

their present in order to look toward the future. Do they desire to engage this process, or

is it forced and absolutely necessary for a better and truer self (Stewart, 2008)? Classism

and its intersections with other forms of oppression shape the experiences of people of

color very differently than their non-Black peers (Yosso, 2005).

Little is Known: Using Phenomenology to Answer the Un-Answered

When I began my PhD program I decided that I was going to explore class

and the way that it manifests within HBCU environments. My topic has never ceased to

hold my attention, but there were occasions when I was fearful of conducting this

research. I have constantly second-guessed my research trajectory. When I inform

others that I study African-Americans and class I am met with intrigue *and* caution.

These attitudes are fascinating because they intersect race and class. I am constantly

brought face to face with many truths. People and situations are presented as naked

realities, clothed in their values and true character (Safranski, 1998). When the *other* is

White or *middle/upper-middle class* they are enthralled and filled with wonder because they are being informed of an alternate existence that is *not* their own. They question: "Has this been done before? Why hasn't this research been done? What do you hope to discover?" When the other is *Black* or *low-income/working class* they are also enthralled. They, too, question, but also *warn*: "What makes you want to do this research? Are you going to put all of our business in the streets? Be careful!"

Intrigue derives from the Italian *intrigare*, meaning "to meddle", and *caution* originates from the Latin *cautionem* meaning "care." Is the *intrigue* I encounter masked in a meddlesome state of intrusion? Is the *caution* from those like me—individuals who are Black and or low-income/working class, covered in a cloak of *care?* These interactions puzzle me, but I am also encouraged.

My paternal grandmother Annette Burwell recently told me, "Little Steve, I have known *you* before you knew *you*! I do not always understand what you are trying to do, but you have always stirred the pot. You never settle for safe!" Dr. Noah Drezner, my doctoral advisor asked me this question: "If *you* do not ask *these* questions *who* will?" My advisor, a White male and my grandmother a Black working class woman (re)present the ultimate paradox. They embody extremes of oppression and privilege inherent within society, but together they have challenged me to *answer* the *un-answered*. Noah and my grandmother affirmed me and provided me with the strength to explore; but I still wonder how this research will be received. There must certainly be a reason as to why *this* issue is not addressed.

Discussions about class are taboo within the African-American community. *This* topic is simply off limits, but why? "The problem is that man 'freezes into' the culture

he himself created [and] in his search for security he thereby loses the awareness of his freedom" (Safranski, 1998, p. 187). Discourse has been silenced, repressed, and shrouded in secrecy. Is this suppression an effort to protect or conceal? While residing in *security* do we relinquish our freedom to challenge? Are we crippled by a fear to challenge the controversial? Emancipation from voiceless-ness and isolation comes from breaking the silence, sharing truth, *and* being heard (Levin, 1989). In order to bring "truth" to the light one must travel to those uncomfortable spaces in the "dark"— the corners that are uncomfortable—those that may be filled with the pain, hurt, and scorn of the past. Confronting class forces us as a people to re-visit and (re)turn to places in our past that are often deemed upsetting, filled with shame, and divisive. "A tradition can certainly be oppressive; it can stand in the way of growth, of life. But a retrieval of the *origins* of that tradition can be emancipatory, a source of strength" (Levin, 1985, p. 3). The past may hold pain, but do we not draw on agony so that we may persevere, learn, and grow?

The Plight of the Storyteller

> It is a rare opportunity when you really get a chance to just share your stories with people who are willing to listen...Sometimes as a writer you just blurt it all out!...and then there are others when the writing is a labor and the tears fall onto the paper...This is the plight of the storyteller. (Scott, 2012)

There is profound power in unveiling the past to uncover the complexities of the present so that we may discover the wonder the future holds. One must approach this opportunity with care and humility. I have been given the platform to question, to challenge, and seek truth; *everyone* is not granted this freedom. The research that I have chosen to pursue is *especially* personal to me and deeply related to my past experiences, but I have been plagued with the restraints and limitations of *academic subjectivity*.

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Janesick (2000) called to me and provides this response:

> The myth that research [qualitative or quantitative] is objective in some way can
> no longer be taken seriously. At this point in time, all researchers should be free
> to challenge prevailing myths, such as the myth of objectivity. (p. 385)

While I have felt *free* to pursue *my* interests in an extremely encouraging

environment*,* I have also felt trapped and stifled in my efforts to "accurately" conduct

research. This confinement has often led to feelings of confusion, frustration, and

dejection. I have constantly asked myself, "Am I too close to my academic interests?

Why do I have to separate *myself* from *my* research in order to achieve scholarly

validation? How can I do the questions in my head justice when I do not relate to the

methods associated with *accurately* finding the answers?"

> Your essence is what is truly you,
> what cannot be taken away from you,
> what you can never lose or change or destroy
> or get rid of.
> The irreducible you.
> You can change and transform your entire universe.
> You cannot change your essence.
> (Williams, 1994, p. 62)

Is there a correct way to perform qualitative inquiry? Which tradition is best?

My essence as a researcher—one who questions, was being relegated to a peripheral

existence. "Modern thinking and scholarship is so caught up in theoretical and

technological thought that the program of a phenomenological human science may strike

an individual as a breakthrough and a liberation" (van Manen, 2007, p. 9).

Phenomenology *has* liberated me. It has allowed me to resist methodological seductions

that are often preoccupied with what is correct or incorrect (Hultgren, 1995). "The whole

point of phenomenology is that we cannot split off the subjective domain of the natural

world as scientific naturalism has done. Subjectivity must be understood as inextricably involved in the process of constituting objectivity" (Moran, 2000, p. 15).

It was not until I found phenomenology or rather when it *found* me that I began to feel *free*. I do believe that I was "called" to "do" phenomenology, however, there is a tension present. Dr. Francine Hultgren (1995), my trusted Phenomenology advisor expresses that when one decides to engage in phenomenological research that "there will be some tension (anxiety *and* comfort) that you will have to resolve, a "first leaving" (familiar paradigm) and a "first entering" (new paradigm) (p. 372). In leaving the familiar, what am I now entering into?

I Am Dangerously Close: Transformation, a Turn, and (Re)Turn

> Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. (van Manen, 2007, p. 9)

Within this study, I use phenomenology to seek greater knowledge into how low-income African-Americans experience class within *elite* HBCU contexts. I have found refuge in phenomenology because it allows the researcher to become *dangerously close* to the phenomenon being studied, meaning that the researcher has often times experienced *and* lived the experience that he/she has chosen to study (van Manen, 2007). The phenomenon of being a low-income African-American student at an elite HBCU for me and my co-researchers was once our everyday life. Hultgren (1990) contends:

> As we turn to everyday life as it is experienced rather than as it is conceptualized or categorized, phenomenology asks the question, What is this or that experience like? It does not seek to explain or control the world...Phenomenological research tries to describe an experience from the point of the view of the experiencer, and in the process it hopes to achieve awareness of different ways of thinking and acting in its search for new possibilities. (pp. 15-16)

In phenomenology, the researcher is *free* and able to engage, question, *and* combine one's experiences with one's phenomenon of choice so that a holistic portrait is illustrated. Within qualitative inquiry it is vital for the researcher to be a major component of the exploration process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).   Like the co-researchers that I engage, I too am African-American, the product of a low income background, and an alumnus of a private, selective HBCU.

In Shamus Khan's (2011) *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*, he returned to his high school in order to make sense of the environment and the current experiences its students were encountering. This context was very familiar to him as he was once a student at St. Paul's, and he openly acknowledged how his background would inform his research. Khan (2011) contends that "I cannot [be objective]. But, objectivity is often a false mark that researchers hide behind in order to assert their scientific authority" (p. 201). Like Khan, *I too,* (re)turn to a place of intimate familiarity.

My collegiate experience impacted me heavily. But why? It is clear to me that I chose to pursue higher education at an elite HBCU. I made the deliberate decision to learn from and commune with my people while pursuing the baccalaureate degree. But I wonder was I just as intentional about my choices to mirror my classmates and play the "class" game? The HBCU environment is a *seemingly* homogeneous one. Everyone is Black, but are we not all the same? I know that the answer is no, but *what* and *who* differentiates African-American students within the *elite* HBCU context? Where is the invisible line drawn?

During my time at Howard, I began to change consciously and unconsciously. Why was I transforming? How much was I modified due to this specific higher education context? These questions dominate my existence every day of my life. But what does it mean to transform? The etymology of the word transform reveals that it is derived from the verb *convert* which has French derivation. Was I converted into the campus culture while at Howard? Did this conversion prompt my transformation? Delving even more deeply into this word more is uncovered. The word convert, or French *converti,* means to turn, to transform. This definition prompts further questioning, but more is clear; not only during my transformation was I "converted," but I was literally turned; but what was I turned to? What is even more intriguing is that the French *convertir* is derived from the Spanish word *cierran,* meaning not only to turn but to return. During my "transformation" in college I was forever converted into a new environment that would perpetually alter my outlook of those around me and myself. It is hard to communicate the exact time when my transformation began, but it was swift and all encompassing.

HBCU communities fascinate me deeply, and I have a yearning to lift the veil surrounding the experiences of social class within these unique environments. During my transformation I was turned and have now (re)turned to explore and ask the question: ***What are the lived experiences of class for low-income African-American students who attend elite HBCUs?*** While the aforementioned is a central inquiry, there are other questions that I address while uncovering my phenomenon of choice. What is it to *be* low-income or working class at an elite HBCU? How do *these* students make meaning of their existence, their difference amongst their own? What influences their college

experience when creating a new existence informed by culture, tradition, and status?

How do they *choose* to engage their more affluent peers?

Seizing the Opportunity to Allow Phenomenology to Show

> Phenomenology means...letting be seen...that which shows itself, just as it shows itself from itself. (Heidegger,1962/2008, p. 58)

> Phenomenology is a raw, yet sensitive, approach that gets inside phenomena.

Rather than *tell* the reader *what* they should *believe* about a phenomenon,

phenomenology seeks to *show* and engage so that one may deeply feel the experience,

continue to question, and further explore the possibilities. While complex, I am forever

intrigued and humbled to have found this new teacher that shows me myself, so that I

may work with others to show *themselves*.

> Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style which emphasizes the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer. (Moran, 2000, p. 4)

Within this study I use phenomenology to discover that which is limited and un-explored

within higher education research. "In doing research we question the world's very secrets

and intimacies which are constitutive of the world, and which bring the world as world

into being for us and in us" (van Manen, 2007, p. 5). Throughout history it has been the

radical that has illuminated the need for change, conjured thought, and summoned us to

turn and question.

Jones and McEwen (2009) contend that it is time to embark upon research that

"explicitly situates identity as multiple and layered and existing at once within systems of

both oppression and privilege" (p. 289). Their call is especially important when taking

into consideration the diversity of the students who are attending college. In 2011, 70%

of our nation's high school graduates decided to pursue some form of higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). These students represent a multitude of racial, religious, gender, sexual, and socio-economic identities. Within contemporary higher education scholarship, it is time for those scholars who research collegiate environments to begin to consider class when underscoring student experiences and focus on the stratifying processes that take place on college campuses. In order to broaden the scope of research that centers around both the African-American experience in higher education and the HBCU environment, a need exists to explore further intra-racial differences within Black communities. Currently, inquiry that addresses issues of class, race, and sexuality on HBCU campuses is largely relegated to the popular media and books that are deemed *un-academic* in nature (Gasman, 2005).

"Just because the phenomena are mostly not immediately given [i.e., a special method for gaining access to our experience and making it explicit] is needed" (Heidegger, 1962/2008, p. 59). As I *un-cover* and answer the *un-answered* within this phenomenological journey, I am thankful to be provided with a guide to seek answers to my questions. In *Researching Lived Experience*, van Manen (2007) outlines some guidelines that one should follow when engaging in phenomenological inquiry. They offer endless possibilities and empower the human science researcher. To be clear, these guidelines are not a mandate. The six components he delineates all work together so that the human science researcher is given the ability to engage with the phenomenon organically rather than in a calculated, distanced stance. They are as follows: (1) turning to a phenomena that seriously interests us and commits us to the world; (2) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it; (3) reflecting on the essential

themes which characterize the phenomenon; (4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; (5) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; (6) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (pp. 30-31).

The goal of this dissertation is to provide thoughtful and in-depth insight into how social class impacts African-American student experiences within elite HBCU contexts. Together with my co-researchers, I am aiming to show that HBCUs are not a monolithic group and neither are their students. "Phenomenological text succeeds when it lets us see that which shines through, that which tends to hide itself" (van Manen, 2007, p. 130). Through conversations with African-American alumni who identified as low-income during their attendance at elite HBCUs I bring forth their lived experiences—experiences that have been covered and overlooked.

Chapter One has established a pivotal shift and signals the need to move forward. "Only he who frees himself from the cave of shadows (opinions, habits, and everyday attitudes) is truly born into the world, into the real world" (Sanfranski, 1998, p. 221). Within Chapter One I have provided an essential foundation for this phenomenological inquiry. I show how I turned to *this* phenomenon, present a rich backdrop of class within elite HBCU environments for low-income students, and introduce initial questioning that shall guide this human science research. In Chapter Two I discover deeper meaning of the phenomenon in pursuit. I reveal the mysterious, the entrenched, and the multi-layered facets of the phenomenon that have been hidden over time. I engage with many sources, including those situated within popular culture and prior academic research. In this

chapter I bring forth meaning into how the phenomenon lives and breathes in the world in which it is placed.

In Chapter Three I present the philosophical grounding of the study. The rigor of the method of phenomenology is interpreted philosophically, rather than originating with conceptual or theoretical frameworks. The natural science framework that has been adopted in educational research usually starts from a complex set of concepts, frameworks, and perspectives of knowledge (van Manen, 2007). Phenomenology is a rigorous human science because it investigates the way that knowledge comes into being and clarifies the assumptions upon which all human understandings are grounded (Moran, 2000). Due to the philosophical nature of this qualitative methodology a *theoretical/conceptual framework* would be inappropriate. Instead of drawing on a theoretical or conceptual framework as a guide or framework this inquiry will employ phenomenological philosophy as a base. These philosophies are not used to *bind* or *control,* but lead the phenomenologist as he/she endeavors to interpret the meaning of the phenomenon (Hatch, 2002).

In Chapters Four through Six, I further situate this phenomenon by providing historical and contemporary context regarding Black intra-racial class differences. The narratives of ten African-American low-income students who attended and graduated from elite HBCUs are also bestowed. Their stories are featured in the themes that emerged in this phenomenological exploration and provide a foundation for what it *was* and *is* to live and embody *this* phenomenon. In the final chapter (Seven), pedagogical insights are captured to open up this phenomenon further and call others to complicate

and question Black identity, elite HBCU communities, and how social class mores and standards impact Black communities and society as a whole.

CHAPTER TWO
THE POWER OF THE WHISPER TO SHOW AND UN-COVER WHAT IS HIDDEN AND FORBIDDEN

I say the universe speaks to us, always, first in whispers. And a whisper in your life usually feels like 'hmm, that's odd.' Or, 'hmm, that doesn't make any sense.' Or, 'hmm, is that right?' It's that subtle. And if you don't pay attention to the whisper, it gets louder and louder and louder. I say it's like getting thumped upside the head. If you don't pay attention to that, it's like getting a brick upside your head. You don't pay attention to that—the brick wall falls down. That is the pattern that I see in my life and so many other people's lives. And so, I ask people, 'What are the whispers? What's whispering to you now?' (Winfrey, 2011)

A *whisper* is a soft or confidential tone of voice (Oxford Dictionaries Online, 2012). This definition is revealing. The word whisper derives from the Old English word *rune* meaning a "mysterious, or dark statement; a secret conversation." What do whispers reveal? A whisper often imparts secrets that are disclosed in confidence—one's exclusive thoughts. We have all come across secret whispers. The experience can be quite personal. Your private space encounters a presence. You feel its authority. *What* or *who* is the presence? You are drawn close. You feel breath against your skin and a message is delivered. The words incite chills. They are powerful! You feel chosen, but what is revealed?

In Chapter One, I turned to the phenomenon of how low-income African-Americans experience class within elite HBCU environments. I articulated that "discussions about class are taboo within the Black community." *This* discourse has been forbidden. While wrestling with the tensions of this topic I have often ignored the whispers, but why? Its presence is commanding, but my phenomenon is a secret. "The secret produces an immense enlargement of life, why? Because the experience of secrecy offers the reality of a much more complex human life experience" (van Maning & Levering, 1996, p. 7). I have been afraid to unveil, but still questioned. Heidegger states,

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"Overnight, everything that is primordial gets glossed over as something that has long been well known. Everything gained by a struggle becomes just something to be manipulated. Every *secret* loses its force" (1962/2008, p.165). The silenced elements of the world get twisted into falsehoods. They are then portrayed as recognizable truths. This is a devious act. Hidden aspects of our world, those gained through resistance, are then susceptible to manipulation. A secret must be un-covered so that its veil is lifted and used to empower.

While addressing the whispers, I must now show their secrets—bring mystery to light. "He who wants to hear, and, even more so, he who wants to understand must feel [and listen]" (Safranski, 1998, p. 177). I have not chosen the whispers; they have chosen me. Again, I have been chosen so that I may question.

The Power Of The Whisper

It takes just a whisper and I am open
There is no denying you

Speak to me
Call to me
Show me

I may not always listen, but there is knowing
I am aware

From you I learn, before you I tremble
The possibilities are endless

I am open
Speak truth with rare abandon
(Mobley, 2012)

The whispers that we encounter in life, while soft and quiet, are powerful in nature. They are watchful, they alert, become distinct, and demand attention. These whispers are signs and serve as guides. Mine can no longer be suppressed. They are

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piercing, almost deafening. Through personal experiences and my engagement with a variety of sources regarding the whispers, I have come face to face with the injustices *and* triumphs that African-Americans have endured within the broader societal context and higher education environments. The whispers that I have encountered allow me to show existentially how this phenomenon lives and breathes within the world that we all live. What is it to be Black? What is elite? In what manner(s) do African-Americans encounter class? Why is it important for me now to question how Black students have been portrayed in higher education scholarship? Where do HBCUs as spaces fit within my inquiry? These questions and the sources that I engage are multifaceted. They bare, illustrate, and empower.

Black Is *More* Than A Color

> The [act] of lumping all Negros under the designation of "Negro people" is to deprive them of any possibility of individual expression. What is thus attempted is to put them under the obligation of matching the idea one has of them. (Fanon, 1969, p. 17)

In order to open up the phenomenon of how low-income African-Americans experience class within elite HBCU environments, a critical foundation must be established. Within this phenomenological study I cannot overlook that I am exploring existence and "being" for Black Americans within our society, but what is Black? After meaningful reflection I realize that I first began to explore this question in the third grade. During Black History Month my teacher Ms. George assigned our class the task of defining a list of vocabulary words. One of the words was "Black." I was eight years old and I remember finding the definition and was immediately enraged. I read the words inferior and dark. I raised my hand and said "Ms. George? Is this definition true? This is racist!" She stared at me and replied "What you are asking is complicated...but this

book does not define you, it does not define us." In my mind *these* words were used to describe not only a color but a people—*these* words named.

There is power in naming. *Noma* is the Old English derivative of name, meaning "reputation." *Namian* also of Old English derivation means "to call or appoint." The words used to name what is Black are wrought with untruths. "The name that is given and can be altered raises doubt about the truth of the word" (Gadamer, 1960/2012, p. 12). At eight years old, in that classroom, in that moment, I knew one day I would be charged with complicating the discourse on what Black has been, is, and could be. The journey continues.

"If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive" (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 137). Lorde's words call to action and empower those who have been oppressed to claim and assert control so that we may (re)right *and* (re)write the narrative that has dominated, reduced, and constrained the Black community. "Hardened tradition must be loosened up, and the concealments which it has brought must be dissolved" (Heidegger, 1962/2008, p. 44). For far too long Black communities have been "othered," labeled, and forced to fit into what society deems as acceptable. They have been confined and relegated to an existence marred by stereotype and deficiency. "In the larger social milieu, Blacks are often portrayed and stereotyped as criminals, gang members, athletes, and entertainers" (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 511). This is problematic and begs the question, are they [Blacks] not all the same? How will this phenomenological exploration challenge these myths?

The aforementioned depictions offer caricatures of Black people. "Master narratives are dominant accounts that are often generally accepted as universal truths about particular groups (e.g., Blacks are hopeless and helpless)–such scripts usually caricature these groups in negative ways" (Harper, 2009, p. 701). The word caricature is derived from the Italian *caricatura,* meaning an exaggeration, an overloading. Many portraits of Blacks that are created by the majority and some minorities *are* an exaggeration and quite *loaded*. These portrayals suggest distinct extremes. They invoke images of Black face minstrels, a beaten Rodney King, the eroticized vamp Beyonce' Knowles-Carter, *and* the tragically fallen Trayvon Martin. That which is Black is tightly wrapped in deception and stained with the blood of the Middle Passage[13] and the American Civil Rights Movement. These broader societal portrayals place pointed meaning, and spill over into how HBCUs and their students are portrayed in higher education study. This narrative distorts, misrepresents, and neglects so many. The discourse is challenging and intricate, but necessary to engage for *this* scholarly pursuit.

As I endeavor to show what the Black community *is*, I must be clear. I do not seek to provide definition(s) of what Black *is* but rather *show* its complexity—to impart a foundation. Define derives from the Old French *defenir* meaning "to end, terminate, or determine." The beauty of phenomenological inquiry is that it does not end nor terminate. This methodology offers a forum for one to question and provides infinite possibilities beyond the completion of study. As this phenomenological exploration progresses it is essential for one to understand why I choose to underscore a particular

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[13] The Middle Passage was the stage of the slave trade where millions of Africans were shipped to the United States, Europe, Latin-America, and the Caribbean. Kidnapped Africans were transported across the Atlantic as slaves and then sold or traded for raw materials. (Franklin & Brooks-Higginbotham, 1947/2010)

Black experience within the higher education context. Distinctions are necessary within

Black communities. The magnificence of the Black community, like phenomenology, is

that there is not just *one* but *many* (Heidegger, 1975). To define is to limit, and that has

already been done.

Breaking The Skin

> In genuine retreat into history we gain that distance from the present which alone
> provides us with the space for the run-up that is needed if we wish to leap out
> beyond our own present, i.e. to take it for what every present deserves to be
> taken...for being overcome...In the end our retreat into history brings us into that
> which is actually happening today. (Heidegger, 1931/2002, p. 24)

In order to *truly* delve deeply and explore Black communities, it is important to

not only go inside, but look underneath their skin. What does this mean? "With every

disclosure, every un-concealment, we are also effecting a hiding...in order to disclose

anything at all, it must conceal" (Levin, 1985, p.14). How has *Black* skin been used to

cover truth? What truths have been masked?

Black is *more* than the color of the community. "Negro experience is not a whole,

for there is not merely one Negro, there are Negroes" (Fanon, 1952/2008, p. 136). Our

appearances "unite" us as a race and provide a rich and evocative mosaic of ebony,

mahogany, and sepia; and like our hues that are vivid and expressive, our stories and

histories are just as bold. Possessing knowledge from the past and re-claiming history is

a powerful undertaking. While it is certainly not an easy task, it is vital for this human

science research inquiry. To begin any discussion on the complexities of social

interaction among African Americans in higher education requires a meaningful level of

historical grounding. "To better understand *this* community's intersections, a clearer

picture of the ways that African Americans exist within the social structure of the United States is necessary" (Sanders-McMurty, 2007, p. 308).

Black derives from the Indo-European word *bhleg* meaning to "gleam or shine." The Indo-European languages are a family of dialects consisting of most of the languages of Europe (Oxford Dictionaries Online, 2012). Such irony! The same group of people that colonized, oppressed, and stripped away the culture of so many, once named those who were Black as beings who "gleamed and shined" like gold. Gold is precious and rare. Were our European colonizers in awe, yet scared of our presence? In their eyes they knew our potential, and in essence, made concerted efforts to erase our value.

Black Gold

Hold your head as high as you can
High enough to see who you are
Life is sometimes cold and cruel
No one else will tell you so remember that

You are Black Gold, Black Gold
You are Black Gold

Now maybe no one else has told you so
But you're golden
Black Gold with a diamond soul
Think of all the strength you have in you
From the blood you carry within you
Ancient men, powerful men
Builders of civilization

They'll be folks hell-bent on putting you down
Don't get burned
Not necessarily everyone will know your worth
Think of all the strength you have in you

Life sometimes is cold and cruel
No one else will tell you so remember that
You are Black Gold, Black Gold
You are Black Gold
(Spalding, 2012, Track 5)

These words illuminate Black existence before the horrors of slavery and thereafter. They highlight resistance, strength, and endurance that span pre-colonial Africa to Black pride in the present. The assertion is made that this community is much more than what has been deemed in contemporary society; there is a past that names and challenges too.

Coloreds, Negros, Blacks, and African-Americans

In 2010 the United States Census Bureau announced that the term "Negro" was going to once again appear on its forms. Question number 9 on the census form inquires about race, with one of the answers listed as Black, African American or Negro (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Black communities reacted with astonishment, shock, and disgust. How could *this* term reappear? Had it not been left in the past? To many, "the term is a relic of the bad old days of segregation and Jim Crow [and] has no business in official records anymore" (Kaplan, 2010). Is it a relic, or does it *still* have the power to identify? We were once Colored. We were once Negros. Today it seems that we are either Black or African-American. Are we not all of the above? What has changed? What do these contemporary labels mean? The terms used to identify those of African descent who reside in the United States *have* and *still* warrant discussion. This population shares commonalties but their experiences differ. Acknowledging these differences and their origins is of vital importance when showing this phenomenon.

Debra Dickerson (2005) confronts the "Black vs. African-American" debate in her book *The End of Blackness*. She argues that grouping all people of African descent into one category regardless of their unique ancestry ignores the lingering effects of slavery within American society and denies Black immigrants the ability also to recognize their ancestral backgrounds (Dickerson, 2005). This is a commanding assertion, but there is

more. I am intrigued. Dickerson contends that the term "Black" should be bestowed

only to those who descend from Africans who were brought to America as slaves and not

the sons and daughters of Black immigrants who lack that ancestry. I disagree. The

semantics of her definition draw distinction, but do not speak to this study's view of the

African Diaspora within elite HBCU contexts.

I glean resonance with the African-American experience as a part of the larger

whole of what *is* Black. Williams-Forsom (2007) offers an explicit position and states,

"The use of the ethnic category of African American in the United States includes Black

persons of African ancestry whose lineal relatives (parents, grandparents, great-grand

parents, etc.) were born in the United States" (p. 127). This study features a particular

experience, and brings forward the lived experiences of African-Americans—individuals

whose ancestries derive from the plantations of the southern regions of the United States.

Within the educational context Ogbu and Simmons identify myself and my co-

researchers[14] as *involuntary minorities*. What *is* an "involuntary minority?" How are we

(pre)sent within elite HBCU contexts? This label adds even more context. Again, *"What

is Black?"* Ogbu and Simmons (2008) state:

> Involuntary (nonimmigrant) minorities are people who have been conquered,
> colonized, or enslaved. Unlike immigrant minorities, the non-immigrants have
> been made to be a part of the U.S. society permanently *against their will.* Two
> distinguishing features of involuntary minorities are that (1) they did not choose
> but were forced against their will to become a part of the United States, and (2)
> they themselves usually interpret their presence in the United States as forced on
> them by white people. Again, the people in this category may be different from
> the dominant group in race and ethnicity or in religion or language. Involuntary

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[14] Within phenomenological studies the term "co-researcher" is equivalent to that of a
"participant" in other qualitative research traditions. I use "co-researcher" because it
removes the hierarchical relationship. Importance is placed on a collective kinship rather
than engagement that may embody a hierarchical positioning between researcher and
participant.

minorities are less economically successful than voluntary minorities, usually experience greater and more persistent cultural difficulties...Involuntary minorities in the United States are American Indians and Alaska Natives, the original owners of the land, who were conquered; and Black Americans who were brought to the United States as slaves. (pp. 165-166)

Just as the line is drawn with regard to class at elite HBCUs, I have had to do the same with the Black experience so that this phenomenon is shown clearly. Black students and their experiences within higher education contexts have been the subject of an array of research. How have *these* studies portrayed these groups? Have they been painted with a broad-brush stroke? "Very little research focuses on within-group differences among Black students...the characterization or definition of a 'Black student' is certainly more complex than most of the college student literature would lead us to believe" (White, 1998, p. 91). Low-income *Black* students who attend HBCUs represent the entire spectrum of the Black Diaspora.

Negro

I am a Negro:
Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa.

I've been a slave:
Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.
I brushed the boots of Washington.

I've been a worker:
Under my hand the pyramids arose.
I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.

I've been a singer:
All the way from Africa to Georgia
I carried my sorrow songs.
I made ragtime.

I've been a victim:
The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.
They lynch me still in Mississippi.

I am a Negro:
Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa.
(Hughes, 1959/1990, p. 8)

Langston Hughes presents poignant pictures of the *American* Black experience.

They are sobering and recognize both Africa and America. Hughes reinforces that

African-American experiences in America have many stories. We carry these stories and

find strength and hope in their triumphs and tragedy. "Carry" circa the 1600s meant to

"continue to advance" and later in the century was defined as "questionable doings."

Blacks in America were once slaves and have been victims of injustice—these are indeed

questionable doings. However, there is advancement too. We have influenced American

history and aided in constructing the American experience for *all*.

The slave ships of yester-year did not just stop in the United States. The Middle

Passage produced Black beings who forged cultures in Latin America, the Caribbean, and

Europe. I recognize and honor *this* critical distinction. *Why* must I do this? Like

Hughes, I too, join Africa and America. Colin Powell once stated:

> My Black ancestors may have been dragged to Jamaica in chains, but they were
> not dragged to the United States. That is a far different emotional and
> psychological beginning than that of American Blacks, whose ancestors were
> brought here in chains. (Powell & Persico, 1996, p. 22)

This is key. His statement uncovers and sheds light on the diverse histories of Blacks in

the United States. In contrast to students who are involuntary immigrants, voluntary

immigrants[15] of African descent in the United States, even those descended from West

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[15] "Voluntary (immigrant) minorities are individuals who willingly moved to the United States.
The important distinguishing features are that (1) the people in this category voluntarily chose to
move to U.S. society in the hope of a better future, and (2) they do not interpret their presence in
the United States as forced upon them by the U.S. government or by white Americans." (Ogbu &
Simmons, 2008, p. 164).

Indian slaves, have separate outlooks on the roles of race, racism, class, gender, and sexuality in their lives. While African-American low-income students at elite HBCUs *are* similar to their peers who (re)present immigrant perspectives of the African Diaspora, their existence on these campuses and within the broader societal context is noticeably different. This phenomenological exploration seeks not to create division, but celebrate a unique perspective—an irreplaceable outlook of those who descended from slaves in the United States. The phenomenon of what it is to be a low-income African-American student within an elite HBCU context is engaged and questioned.

An Eminent Tension With Place

> I shall accord to place a position of renewed respect by specifying its power to direct and stabilize us, to memorialize and identify us, to tell us who and what we are in terms of *where we are* (as well as where we are *not*). (Bachelard, 1958/1994, p. xxxiiff)

An essential component in phenomenology is the inclusion of *place* within the method (Groenewald, 2004). HBCUs are dwellings. These institutions of higher education are *the* places and *are* placed at the center of this research. During attendance at HBCUs, the fundamental nature of being Black is revered. HBCUs engrain these ideals in their students, the academic structure, and campus cultures (Logan, 2005).

When we dwell in the world, we choose to *be* in the familiar. "[We] dwell in tranquilized familiarity...we flee into the 'at-home' of publicness, we flee in the face of the 'not-at-home'; that is, we flee in the face of the uncanniness which lies in being" (Heidegger, 1962/2008, p. 234). When low-income African-American students arrive on elite HBCU campuses they are no longer "at home." From where have they fled? To what have they fled? These students leave their families, childhood friends, and communities. I wonder, as these students encounter striking change, have they indeed

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fled into the familiar? The places we desire—those that are preferred, hinge on our

desires and the variety of interests we possess within (Heidegger, 1962/2008). What do

they now desire? When they meet the face of the "not-at-home" what and whom are they

now embracing? Individuals are drawn to places, and inspiration is sought. Do we

choose places or do they choose us?

One dwells in places and spaces each day. We live, we work, we experience our

being, but how do we dwell? Dwell derives from the Dutch *dwellen* meaning to stun or

perplex. The low-income African-American student who is (pre)sent on an elite HBCU

campus often embodies the etymological essence of what it has meant to dwell.

As I show the tension with place that is present in this phenomenon, I am

reminded of the words of Brie[16]. I was given the privilege to engage in conversation with

her about her college experiences early in my PhD studies when she was a sophomore at

Howard University. When I first began my investigation of this phenomenon I truly

believed that I was the only one who had these encounters, that perhaps I was crazy. Brie

reaffirmed my notions about *these* places. While dwelling on her campus she was

astonished by what she has discovered. She expressed:

> You can tell the distinction here between the upper elite, the middle class, and
> poorer students. I have classmates who drive BMWs and Jaguars. I am
> "thrifting." I am trying to make what little I do have work...I clearly see the
> difference in those who have money and those who don't.

Brie's experience highlights noticeable contrasts. She chose to "thrift" so that she could

emulate her peers who displayed wealth with particular status markers. Today, "thrift" is

associated with the manner that one pays attention to their economic resources so that

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[16] The names of essential informants and my co-researchers who have aided my
exploration this phenomenon have been assigned pseudonyms of their choice to ensure
confidentiality is maintained.

they may use these means carefully and not wastefully (Oxford Dictionaries Online, 2013). The etymology of "thrift," however, highlights not economic concern, but evokes a spirit of fortitude. Circa 1300 "thrift" meant the "fact or condition of thriving." The act of "thrifting" is a performance of resilience, but why is one forced to thrift? Do elite HBCU campus environments compel one to ascribe to certain social class ideals? The students who live this phenomenon encounter HBCUs in various manners. What do they experience?

Questioning Place

This Place

Taking out this time
To tell you that I
I am done with fear
I yearn for more

I seek
and need
the new
Is the old inferior?
Am I ready?
Will I ever be?

I did not know what was to come
I only knew that I chose to pursue this place

This place is new
Why Am I here?
Who are *they*?
What do they think of *me*?

I am here
And they shall deal
But just as much as they shall deal, have I?
Will I?
(Mobley, 2013)

"This Place" questions. What exactly am I questioning? *Is the old inferior?...Am I ready?...Why Am I here?* I communicate the feelings of those who experience this phenomenon during their initial encounters with elite HBCUs. To them, these are new places and they not only question their new dwellings but themselves. Where does the power lie in questioning so that we may open up lived experience? Gadamer explains:

> The path to all knowledge leads through the question. To ask a question means to bring it into the open...The question has to be posed...Deciding the question is the path to knowledge...The important thing is the knowledge that one does not know...The difficulty lies in knowing what one does not know. It is opinion that suppresses questions...To question means to lay open, to place in the open. (Gadamer, 1960/2012, pp. 365-366)

Phenomenological inquiry allows the researcher to pose questions so that the phenomenon is directly placed in the open. Once in the open *there* lies the uncertainty and struggle that the phenomenon possesses. What don't I know? Why are these questions difficult to engage? It is through the question that we are able to confront the knowledge that one does not know (Gadamer, 1960/2012)? *Still,* I must continue to question. Is the HBCU simply a place made up of buildings? What are the challenges of these campuses as places?

> Through architecture, planning, design, and technology, humans adapt physical space to suit their needs and accomplish their purposes. These spaces, however, also act on humans to shape the way they live, work, and learn. Whether one multi-purpose building on a city block or the sprawling buildings, green space, and farms of a land grant university, the nature of a college campus as a collection of spaces poses challenges and opportunities for educators to create optimal learning and development. (Renn & Patton, 2011, p. 242)

Elite HBCUs possess exceptional and challenging cultural features that have to be explored. As I situate these universities within my study I address their histories and contemporary (place)ment in higher education and the broader societal context. It is essential to name and even confront a past *and* present that has celebrated and disgraced

HBCU communities. "One can outright lie about the past. Or one can omit facts which might lead to both [acceptable] and unacceptable conclusions" (Zinn, 2005, p. 8). In uncovering truth there lies no room to twist the past in order to serve the present. When we realize that what is done in the past effects our present, we are then free to influence the future. The present and the past both should be recognized as formidable forces.

Two Sides of The Same Coin

What is an "elite HBCU?" Currently, there are four "elite HBCU" communities that are both private and selective in nature out of the 105 that exist today. They are Howard University (DC), Hampton University (VA), Morehouse College (GA), and Spelman College (GA). I have chosen to feature the lived experiences of low-income African-American alumni and how they experienced social class at two of these institutions: Howard University and Hampton University. It is vital to provide vivid portraits of these universities as I delve deeper into the phenomenon. In order to take in *these* places fully, we must "visit" them. Come with me.

It is noon on a Friday at Howard University. Located in the heart of Washington, DC, the city is alive and spring is now here. The change of season fills the air. The campus is renewed and the cold of winter is no longer present. Howard is located directly in the midst of an urban neighborhood. For its students Howard is an oasis; it is home. I was once told that "Howard can't be described, because if I describe it, I won't give it justice, you won't even be able to comprehend it, It's just Howard" (Brie). An indescribable, yet, omnipresent energy is ever present.

When the clock tower above Founders Library strikes twelve the sound can be heard across campus. Time seems to stop. When the chimes cease, "The Yard" is now

bustling. "The Yard" is a pivotal epicenter of Howard University's campus. "The Yard" is also nicknamed "The Runway." Not unlike the spectacle of a fashion show in Milan during Fashion week, *this* part of campus provides the opportunity to *see* and be *seen*. Imagine two students walking to class together. A young lady is moving swiftly with a designer handbag hanging off of one arm and books are in the other. You will hear the sound of her stilettos on the pavement. The young man accompanying her is displaying a neat and detailed collegiate look complete with vintage Gazelle sunglasses. They are proud. They are Howardites.

Many are also gathered in front of the Armour J. Blackburn Student Center catching up about classes and their personal lives. You will also see other students. They pass Frederick Douglass Hall and greet friends along the way, or they may be dashing across campus from class in Alain Locke Hall. Fraternity and sorority members are at their respective locations across the campus green chanting and singing traditional songs. Look across "The Yard" and on the steps of the Fine Arts Building it is not unusual to see students sketching, or you may hear budding artists singing or playing instruments. *This* is the spirit of Howard.

Just three hours away at Hampton University it is also spring. Listen closely, because The Memorial Chapel also signals that it is noon and its chimes reverberate across campus. Hampton University sits on the Hampton River and is often referred to by its students and alumni as "our home by the sea." Hampton University is a majestic site—simply immaculate. The flowers and shrubbery are breathtaking, and the blonde and bold red brick buildings gleam in the sunlight. Nestled in the suburbs of Hampton, VA, this university is surrounded by history. The past truly meets the present. A statue

of Booker T. Washington, one of their most prominent alumni, overlooks the campus. It is almost as if he is watching at all times. His likeness forever immortalized in stone points to "Emancipation Oak" which is a few feet away. More than a tree, "Emancipation Oak" is the place where Virginia slaves gathered to hear the first reading of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Amidst the history, a closer glimpse reveals more.

Excitement is everywhere. In front of the Science and Technology Building you will see students collecting "Hampton Hugs," and freshmen are rushing off to their University 101 orientation classes. The Student Union and the new cafeteria are also full of life. Friends gather and now it is time to "show off." The boots, coats, and scarves of winter are no more and Hampton's female co-eds are peppered in spring dresses and stilettos, while the males now don elaborate sneakers, designer jeans, and button down shirts.

Amidst the images, I ask you to look closer. What do you see? What do you feel? So many students walk, learn, and live on the sacred grounds of those who came before them. Who do you see? Who is here? Who is not? Can you tell that there are low-income students (pre)sent? Amidst the runway of the Howard Yard and the students gathered in front of the Science and Technology Building at Hampton there are low-income students who are playing with class and just trying to blend. They are "passing." What are they feeling? Can you pick them out? They *are* there. Ask yourself, why can't I tell the difference? The past is a gone that is still here (Heidegger, 1962/2008). What effect do the histories of these institutions still have on these places? Is the impact still felt today?

Historic Grounding and Found Foundation

HBCUs have a distinct educational history when compared to other postsecondary institutions in the United States (Brown & Davis, 2001; Weaver, Davidson, & Torres, 1992). Far from a monolithic group, these institutions were established to provide higher education to Black students when predominately White institutions (PWIs) denied students of color the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education, either by practice or by law (Anderson, 1988; Brazzell, 1992). Following the Civil War, millions of newly freed slaves were left in the South with unfulfilled expectations of citizenship and educational opportunity. It is estimated that 96% of these newly freed slaves were illiterate and, thus, there was much to be accomplished to correct the "Negro Problem," including the daunting task of elevating the educational status of Blacks (Peeps, 1981). What would this elevation entail?

The "Negro Problem" also known as the "Black Menace" is a term often used to describe the plight of newly freed slaves in America. With emancipation came the "'right" for Blacks to legally pursue education; however, the remnants of slavery still lingered. Coupled with segregation and the overwhelming numbers of Blacks in the U.S. who were illiterate, the task to educate this population was overwhelming (Anderson, 1988; Brazzell, 1992; Williams & Ashley, 2004). Southern institutions of higher education and the majority of northern institutions operated exclusively for Whites and excluded Blacks from full participation in post-secondary education (Brown & Davis, 2001).

Brown and Davis (2001) contend that HBCUs were created to provide African-Americans access to higher education, and as a result, served as *social equalizers*.

"Education beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery" (Mann, 1848, p. 5). Is this true? Would HBCU communities serve to equalize or assimilate the descendants of slaves?   In the midst of the Jim Crow South and the passing of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862[17] which further perpetuated a divisive educational system based on race, in order for African-Americans to access higher education it took intervention from the federal government (i.e. The Freedmen's Bureau[18] and the passing of the Morrill Act of 1890[19]). White northern missionary aid societies, White industrial philanthropists, and various factions of the Black church also assisted in providing Blacks in the United States with a point of higher education access through HBCUs (Anderson, 1988; Brazzell, 1992; Redd, 1998). Today, there are 105 HBCUs in existence. Each of these institutions has a history and legacy that lends itself to the eminent tapestry of the whole. How did they evolve?

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[17] The Morrill Act of 1862 established public universities throughout the United States. These institutions were established to provide access to members of the working class so that they could gain a liberal and practical education (Association of Public and Land Grant Universities Website, 2012; Thelin, 2011).

[18] The Freedman's Bureau was a United States federal government agency that provided financial subsidies to newly freed Blacks during the Reconstruction period. This agency is most noted for their work and influence in establishing colleges and universities created for the sole purpose of educating Blacks and providing funding to these institutions (Anderson, 1988; Thelin, 2011).

[19] The second Morrill Act (1892) was established to further expand access to post-secondary education by barring governmental funding to states that upheld the distinction of race in their admissions practices. States were however provided separate funds to create colleges and universities for Blacks. Many of these institutions are now known as many of our public HBCUs (Association of Public and Land Grant Universities Website, 2012; Thelin, 2011).

An Evolution: HBCUs As "Social Settlements"

> We always inevitably find ourselves "thrown" into a world which precedes our own existence: a world not of our own making, a world to which we contribute but we do not create out of nothing. (Levin, 1985, p. 14)

Low-income African-American students *are* "thrown" into the elite HBCU environment. They add value to these places; however, *they* did not *make* these places— or did they? The worlds that we choose are dense and we bear their weight. There lies no single interpretation nor struggle; however, we must remain conscious and continue to question (Heidegger, 1962/2008). The contemporary social and educational cultures present at elite HBCUs are captivating. They are without a doubt informed by history. These histories inevitably draw you in. You are provided answers, but questions *still* linger. HBCU communities encountered a significant shift in the past and its impact is *still* felt today.

Du Bois referred to HBCUs as "social settlements" (Du Bois, 1903/2003). He contends that "Had it not been for the Negro school and college, the Negro would have been driven back to slavery" (p.121). Du Bois (1903/2003) also expresses:

> The teachers in these institutions came not to keep the Negros in their place, but raise them out of the defilement of the places where slavery had wallowed them. The colleges they founded were social settlements; homes where the best of the sons of the freedmen came in close and sympathetic touch with the best traditions of New England. (p. 69)

The founders of these institutions, especially those who played critical roles in creating elite HBCUs, "sought to divest Blacks of their 'peculiar' cultural past and to teach them the ways of middle-class White Americans" (Allen & Jewell, 2002, p. 246). What manifested as a result? Is this still accurate?

Patillo (2007) contends that the Black middle class asserts its control through an emphasis on *respectability*, defined as the Black communities' "embodiment of conservatism, patriarchal family relations, and intellectual achievement" (p. 104). This standard excludes "any Blacks who [do] not adhere to the most puritanical of structures (i.e. loose women, practitioners of ecstatic religions, as well as gays and lesbians)" (p. 117). In framing her argument, Pattillo emphasizes that the Black community enforces these norms intra-racially. In essence, members of the African-American community "seek to rehabilitate the race's image by embodying respectability, enacted through an ethos of service to the masses" (Pattillo, 2007, p. 104). This ethos is based on Eurocentric values and is deeply rooted in racial uplift ideology and a commitment to advance the Black community. Is it true that "from its inception the education of the Negro was shaped by bourgeois ideals" (Frazier, 1957, p. 60)?

> The missionaries from New England who founded the first schools for Negros left their Puritan background upon Negro education...when the Negroes themselves began to assume control of their schools they tried to maintain the same tradition of piety. (Frazier, 1957, pp. 71-72)

Have White norms shaped elite HBCU cultures by determining *what* representations of Blackness are deemed acceptable, marketable, or worthy (hooks, 1996)? Are "exploited Black folks all too willing to be complicit in perpetuating the fantasy that ruling-class White culture is the quintessential site of unrestricted joy, freedom, and pleasure" (hooks, p. 281). What was being advanced? How are these standards modeled on elite HBCU campuses today?

When relating the idea of respectability to elite HBCU communities an inherent paradox exists. While these institutions seek to embody an ideal of racial uplift and service to the Black community via higher education, they subtly send a message that if

students do not adhere to these values that they may not belong. "The Negro student should strive to be respectable...the best and worst of the race should guide the masses away from the worst" (Frazier, 1957, p. 77). Who are the best? Who are the worst? In the beginning HBCUs were utilized by newly freed slaves as a primary tool to attain educational opportunity denied to them in majority contexts (Anderson, 1988; Brazzell, 1992; Brown & Davis, 2001; Thelin, 2011). However, the descendants of early graduates sought more. The education sought within HBCU environments was no longer seen as a conduit merely to attain knowledge, but social class standing.

> The present generation of Negro college students (who are not the children but the great-grand children of slaves) do not wish to recall their past...For they have been taught that money will bring them justice and equality in American life...(Frazier, 1957, pp. 84-85)

HBCU communities became "an indicator that the African American middle class was growing in size and strength as a result of the educational opportunities provided by Black schools" (Williams & Ashley, 2000, p. 141). A new culture was being created. What would be revealed?

"The [HBCU] modernist/evangelical fervor produced a system of draconian rules that rigidly defined 'appropriate' behavior, dress, speech, and extracurricular activity for the future 'leaders' of the Black race" (Allen & Jewell, 2002, p. 246). HBCUs have played a critical role in the construction of social stratification within African-American communities (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Graham, 1999). "These institutions gave a distinct and definite cultural meaning to class and status among African Americans" (Allen & Jewell, p. 246). What was changing? Who were HBCUs beginning to cater to? Was anyone left behind?

As HBCUs evolved, prominent leaders of the Black community worried that Black colleges and their students had forgotten their duty to serve as socially responsible leaders of their people (Anderson, 1988; Frazier, 1957). A majority of this critique stemmed from the belief that HBCU students were not being educated to advance African-American communities in America. They, too, questioned. "[Had] education merely created a highly educated bourgeois that was estranged from ordinary Black people" (Anderson, 1988, p. 277)? What was occurring instead? Were HBCU students being taught to internalize and promote a social ideology similar to that of the White philanthropists who were financing Black higher education and Black entities who were seeking to appease the majority culture?

> The first two decades of the twentieth century were about solidifying the existence of HBCUs, the next forty years would be about establishing the mores, language, and lifestyle that characterized the growing black middle class being nurtured by these schools. (Williams & Ashley, 2004, p. 148)

Today, the HBCU and its students exist at a crossroads, an intersection of border spaces constituted by race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality (Anzaldua, 1999). A border is often set in place to enforce a divide. Where do divisions lie in elite HBCU environments? Elite HBCUS are *seemingly* homogeneous contexts, but there is so much more within. The intersection of race and class that occurs in *these* spaces is powerful.

Do you believe that space can give life, or take it away, that space has power (hooks, 1990)? The eminent potential that lies in *these* spaces for the African-American low-income student is commanding. The elite HBCU does give new life; but, these places also take away. What is captured?

> In the popular mind, school is the great equalizer: By providing a level playing field where the low and mighty compete on an equal basis, schooling renders

> social inequality superfluous...but, do schools actually reinforce social inequality while pretending to do the opposite? (MacLeod, 2009, p. 11)

Are *these* institutions equal playing fields for all students? These places carry an essence that is often in a state of complex discord. They carry pain, elation, upset, renewal, and wonder—such friction, yet critical to confront. Do elite HBCUs seek to cultivate and nurture the promise within their students? Is change the goal, or do both of these occur?

Loaded Names and Heavy Perceptions

The definitions[20] and even institutional names of historically Black colleges and universities, especially elite HBCUs, have the power to evoke visceral reactions, but why? The name HBCU itself and its definition are loaded designations. We must not ignore the fact that the word Black is included and the inherent racial implications that this association creates. There are considerable effects "when race is tied to territory in a way that mimics the white's only/colored only designations of the past" (hooks, 1992, p. 15). HBCUs are viewed through highly racialized lenses within the broader societal context, and due to their status as minority serving institutions (MSIs), have been and are perceived as academically inferior (Minor, 2004). These prejudices impact the colleges and the students who choose to attend HBCUs.

Today, if one were to mention Florida A&M University (FAMU) what comes to mind?—an institution that was once held in high regard for their marching band and music program. In the present, the name paints an appalling portrait of student death and hazing (Gasman, 2012; Ng, 2012). Another example is Morris Brown College. When

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[20] The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, defines an HBCU as: "any historically Black college or university established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans" (White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, 2012).

Morris Brown is mentioned one immediately thinks of fiscal mismanagement and a loss

of accreditation (Basinger, 2003). Yes, a student at FAMU did die as a result of hazing,

and it is true that Morris Brown College lost its accreditation. My aim is not to provide

excuses or ask that these HBCUs be provided with a "free pass." However, are students

at predominately White institutions not the victims of hazing? Do PWIs not struggle with

accreditation woes? Yes, but the reaction and views of PWIs versus HBCUs are heavily

skewed due to race and racism. "The [HBCU community] experiences similar prejudices

and discrimination that an African-American individual in society might experience in

the larger society" (Minor, 2004, p. 643). The manner in which HBCUs are perceived

varies greatly amongst Blacks and Whites. Their experiences with and exposure to

HBCU communities differ tremendously. There are diverse perspectives within these

circles and higher education as a whole.

Within this study, I cannot ignore the varying connotations that are often placed

upon elite HBCUs. There is a tone associated with deeming anything as elite, especially

institutions of higher education. When I decided to recognize specific HBCUs as "elite,"

I knew that I was making a bold choice and that this decision had the potential to garner

negative reaction, especially from African-American communities. During a

conversation with a friend about the deep tension that I have and still feel about my

choice I was told:

> Black people are uncomfortable with discussing our differences, especially when
> discussing what is elite and what is not...They feel that as a group we have not
> come far enough to discuss the stratification within our race, but what people
> don't seem to realize is that it is there whether we discuss it or not. Since we still
> have HBCUs that are always in the press struggling...we are still at the bottom in
> so many things that we haven't come far enough to be able to say we have elite
> anything.

I question these sentiments. They further made me realize that I had to confront the fears that my people hold onto. I could easily deem the HBCUs within this study as "private and selective" in nature; but, I believe there is power in labeling specific historically Black colleges as elite, especially when HBCUs are often portrayed as the exact opposite. Can something Black not be elite, especially our schools? We have no problem deeming historically White institutions as elite.

There are fallacies of "collective universalism" and "homogeneity" present in HBCU literature that either ignore or simply neglect to recognize their meaningful differences (Brown, 2003). What is the consequence of continuing these errant practices? It is vital to distinguish that HBCU communities, *especially* elite HBCUs have "varying degrees of wealth, social and cultural capital, political activism, and interests in things 'Black'" (Brown, 2003, p. 39). What occurs when HBCUs—places that are inherently associated with Black history and culture, are labeled as elite?

During another conversation with a close colleague of mine who is an alumna of an elite HBCU and former National Director of a prominent HBCU non-profit, I was provided an additional perspective. I asked her opinion of why these institutions have the ability to be such polarizing places within our society. She expressed:

> When one thinks of HBCUs there is frustration, shame, jealousy, and pride. Black *and* White people have a hard time associating good with Black. When I inform others that I graduated from Hampton University I have had people frown at me. They immediately place judgment and assign me personality traits. I wonder where this is coming from? Do they feel as if they would not have been accepted? A lot of this angst comes from Black people who often state 'I could have gone there but I didn't...(Courtney)

The questioning I engaged in with Courtney (un)covered an interesting dynamic within the Black community. Why are there feelings of frustration, shame, and jealousy

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surrounding *our* institutions? Is it wrong for us to attend these colleges? Courtney has

found that simply because she graduated from an elite HBCU that *this* affiliation garners

negative response. Are these responses indicative of an elitist past and present? Are

these reactions remnants of perhaps an off-putting connotation placed on the "colleges

that count." Have these very schools engaged in and repeated the errors associated with

promoting privilege and stratification of which predominately White institutions are

guilty?

An (Un)told Story Of One Who Was Chosen

> But I bet God that if I lived, I would try to find out the vague directions whispered
> in my ears and find the road it seemed I must follow. How? When? Why? What?
> All those answers were hidden from me. (Hurston, 1942/1984, p. 145)

In Chapter One I disclosed that low-income African-American students who

attend elite HBCUs are chosen, *but*, their stories have largely been (un)told. During a

meeting with Dr. Hultgren, my phenomenological mentor, she asked me, "Are you sure

that no one has told *these* stories?" I emphatically responded "No, I have searched and

searched." But had I searched enough? Little did I know is that I would soon reconnect

with a writer that I first discovered long ago: Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston is celebrated

in the Black community for being quite the presence in the literary world and a prominent

fixture during the Harlem Renaissance.

> Educators always have had a special biographic interest in the educational lives of
> individuals. Educators want to gain insights in the lives of particular students in
> order to understand them or help them. (van Manen, 2007, p. 71)

Hurston's autobiography provides important context for this study. Her story sheds

eminent light on this phenomenon and shows the struggles of the low-income African-

American student within the elite HBCU context.

Hurston, too, yearned for more. After a near death experience during her adolescence she made a deal with God that if she survived that she would follow his direction. His whisper guided her to Morgan Academy (Hurston, 1942/1984). Do other students who live this phenomenon encounter such powerful whispers? She soon moved from rural Florida to Baltimore, MD to finish high school and had hopes and dreams to obtain her bachelor's degree from Morgan State College, an HBCU (now Morgan State University). In a twist of fate this all would change.

During an encounter with a visitor to Morgan's campus she would be told five words that would forever change her life: "Zora, you are Howard material." May Miller, the daughter of Dr. Kelly Miller, a Howard University dean, believed in Hurston's potential. Hurston was still apprehensive. She explains:

> Now everyone knows, Howard University is the capstone of Negro education in the world. There gathers Negro money, beauty, and prestige. It is to the Negro what Harvard is to the Whites...Not only is the scholastic rating at Howard high, but tea is poured in the same manner!...I had heard all about the swank fraternities and sororities and the clothes and everything, and I knew I could never make it. (Hurston, 1942/1984, p. 156)

Why did she feel as if she could never make it? "Certainly during the hungry years after her mother's death, the idea of one day attending Howard—or any university—was nothing more than a pipe dream too painful to seriously yearn for" (Boyd, 2003, p. 102). Did she not yearn? Like those who would come after her, Zora Neale Hurston was acutely aware of *how* and *if* she would fit, if she would truly belong. Social class was ever-present. Hurston "had heard about the elegant clothes Howard students wore and the elite fraternities and sororities that held sway on campus. Zora believed Howard was out of her league, and said so" (Boyd, 2003, p. 102). During her time at Howard, Zora Neale Hurston lived two lives.

In her memoir *Dust Tracks On A Road,* Hurston vividly recalls that "I could take in but so many social affairs because I had to work, and then I had to study my lessons after work at night, and I was carrying a heavy program" (Hurston, 1942/1984, p. 165). In order to fund her education she had to work as a maid in her classmates' homes and also wait tables in social clubs in the Washington, DC area (Boyd, 2003). In contrast, she also wished to be a part of the campus culture. She, *too,* wanted to fit in and belong. In what little spare time she had she attended social functions and became quite involved in the Howard community, but her insecurity regarding class still remained. Can you imagine, wanting to be a part of this world, but constantly being reminded during your attempts that somehow the yearning to belong was not enough, that you *still* were different? She expressed her difference in the following remembrance: "Let a program or get-together come along, and all the girls in my class would be backing me off in a corner, or writing me notes offering to lend me something to wear. How was I to feel" (Hurston, p. 152)?

The need to belong represents a "fundamental human motivation" (Baumeister *&* Leary, 1995, p. 497). Hurston's desire to "belong" is not a long forgotten feeling within low-income students on college campuses. Educational institutions have class-based markers that define implicitly or explicitly who "belongs" and who does not (Ostrove, 2007). As part of the *New York Times'*s "Class Matters" series, Leonhardt (2005) contends that low-income students feel a need to immerse themselves in their campus environments, and when this acclimation to their campus environment does not occur, the results can be severe. A student featured in Leonhardt's work left college after his first year in favor of working for pay, and stated that his main reason for leaving was that "college never felt like home" (p. 88).

Did Howard ever feel like home for Hurston? E. Franklin Frazier (1957) offers

another example that illuminates the frustration that may be present for low-income

students (pre)sent on elite HBCU campuses:

> The girl with a working-class background may be irritated by her mother's
> inability to buy an expensive "party" dress. But what can be expected when the
> dean of women has instructed her to tell her mother that she must have the dress
> at any sacrifice? (p. 82)

Why must one sacrifice to belong? What does one forgo in order to be deemed

respectable? Amidst her conflicted feelings, Zora Neale Hurston was *still* truly in awe of

Howard University. *This* place became special to her. During her first event as a student

she was beset with awe.

> [When we sang the Alma Mater] my soul stood on tip toe and stretched up to take
> in all that it meant. So I was careful to do my class work and be worthy to stand
> there under the shadow of the hovering spirit of Howard. I felt the ladder under
> my feet. (Hurston, 1942/1984, p. 158)

Hurston felt a responsibility to rise to the occasion of being a Howardite. Would she?

Did she? Ms. Hurston soon would become quite the force on campus. Her classmates

were enthralled and drawn to her vivacious spirit. She pledged a sorority and even

founded Howard University's campus newspaper. Was she, too, transformed? Zora

Neale Hurston's experiences and life within her elite HBCU context set a precedent,

illuminating themes of transformation, being caught being two worlds, and a rite of

passage that occurs for low-income elite HBCU students.

Complex Transformations

> Most research fails to portray Blacks as diverse and assumes they share one
> common experience and can (or should) be able to comfortably interact with each
> other because of it. When this perspective is adopted, within group heterogeneity
> is often ignored and broad generalizations become accepted as normal by
> outsiders and sometimes by members of the racial group. (Harper & Nichols,
> 2008, p. 248)

Intra-racial group differences within Black communities are highly influenced by socioeconomic status, familial background, and geographic communities of origin (urban, suburban, and rural); however, these differences have been at best "trivially considered in the published higher education literature" (Harper & Nichols, 2008, p. 247). Studies that have focused on Black student experiences within higher education contexts have not adequately addressed critical within group differences, and attempts to explore the complexity of the interactions and peer-to-peer relations amongst Black collegians has been limited (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn, 2013). Peer interactions on college campuses are a potent source of growth and development during the undergraduate years (Astin, 1993). Social interaction amongst peers within the elite HBCU context are engaged to further highlight what these students encounter with regard to social class because it is very necessary for contemporary research to assert and stand in the fact that Black students are not all the same (Harper & Nichols, 2008).

The intricacies of social class on elite HBCU campuses should be highlighted to not only dispel myths surrounding Black communities, but to also show a lived experience that is often negated in the larger societal context and fundamentally unknown to the greater higher education community. This study shows the complexity, tension, and transformations that low-income African-American students experience on elite HBCU campuses. Do peers prompt the transformation these students encounter? Is it the campus culture present within these institutions? How do these students grapple with intra-racial difference? What *are* the complex transformations they endure?

You Can't Run From *You*

You

Here I am in your face
Telling truths and not your old lies
Seems to me that you care
And I know that you're running out of time
See you can't get away,
I'll be here forever and again
Whispering in your ear,
Do believe 'cause you know

Spend most your life pretending not to be
The one you are but who you choose to see
Learned to survive in your fictitious world
Does what they think of you determine your worth?
Is special what you feel when your with them?
Taken away you feel less than again

There's feeling inside,
No, you cannot change it right away
Gotta make it
Try
And with time it will start to go away

I'll be there when you need
That one to sit and cry to
'Cause I'm the you
You forgot,
The only one you really cannot lie to

You cannot run for you
Can't hide from you,
Can't hide from you
(Jackson, Harris, Lewis, Elizondo, Brown, Allen, Dickerson, Scott, Jordan, Oskar, &
Miller, 1998, Track 3)

"You" communicates the internal conflict that arises in this phenomenon.

Educational environments have the power to affect individuals' sense of self, meaning,

and identity (Levinson & Holland, 1996; Luttrell, 1996). Social class also influences how

people differentiate their experiences, the ways in which they view the world, and

themselves (Ostrove & Cole, 2007). When reconciling "self," especially when dealing with intra-racial class differences, there is an internal struggle present. When people put on masks *are* they hiding? Do they somehow forget themselves? There is an internal and external tension present.

> I was changing…I began to realize this…I felt empowered, but I was also guilty. Was I forgetting where I came from? I thought over and over again, what is this place doing to me? Is this new stuff a good or bad thing? I know that I am becoming a better person, but it is hard…it's just [long pause]…different. (Charles)

Charles communicates that he both recognized his transformation but he also remembered from whence he came. This was a "critical remembrance"—a highly vulnerable state. Carey (2012) expresses:

> The practice of critical remembering is key for marginalized students, in particular. Often new and different social contexts can jar vulnerable students so much that they can go off-course, lose themselves to a fault, and succumb to the negative portrayals embodied in others' responses to their mere presence.

These students often remember both where they came from and all they accomplished to get into college. Embodying a state of "critical remembrance" is essential and allows one to draw from memories that can be used to "tap into wells of strength and courage thus allowing [one] to make it through difficult encounters in new spaces" (Carey, 2012). We retain memories about our unique and personal pasts and identities, but we also willingly conform to well established cultural norms so that we may be deemed as "acceptable" in order to win social approval. In what other manners does change manifest with regard to students who experience this phenomenon?

Becoming "Brand" New

> Steve: You see this world. You know you're not necessarily a part of this world...but, what's the alternative?...

Nicole: If I'm going to the school, right, am I just supposed to be...[long pause] What choice did I have? Am I supposed to be an outsider? (Nicole)

Low-income African American students on elite HBCU campuses learn to assert their presences in myriad ways. They do not want to get lost. How is this lost-ness circumvented? During my preliminary conversations with individuals who lived this phenomenon, Nicole was extremely forthcoming when describing how she established herself within the Hampton University culture. In her own words, she felt as if she had no choice. But did she? Do others feel this way? Are they be-coming "brand" new?

A "brand" is especially important to these students and their institutions. It takes on many forms. Brand is defined as "a type of product manufactured by a particular company under a particular name" (Oxford Dictionaries Online, 2012). Are the students who attend these schools merely a "product" that is being created? What goes into this production? How is one made into a "Howardite" or a Hamptonian?"

"Brand" also means "a particular identity or image regarded as an asset" (Oxford Dictionaries Online, 2012). Hampton University prides itself on its mission of being a "comprehensive institution of higher education, dedicated to the promotion of learning, building of character and preparation of promising students for positions of leadership and service" (Hampton University Website, 2013). Howard University's mission conveys that it holds the vanguards of "Truth and Service" in especially high regard (Howard University Website, 2013). The words *"Veritas et Utilitas"* which are the Latin form of "truth and service" are emblazoned on the university's coat of arms. Along with truth and service, Howard also seeks to "produce leaders for America and the global community" (Howard University Website, 2013). Not unlike other institutions of higher education, elite HBCUs utilize their missions to control their institutional images. The institutions

themselves are brands, and they protect them fiercely. How do their students reinforce and enact "elite" brand(ing) within campus life?

On elite HBCU campuses *everyone* has a "brand." When a classmate introduces you they run down your major, where you are from, and what your involvements are. Students are known both inside and outside of the classroom. You may be a highly regarded student leader, or an envied member of one of the historically Black fraternities or sororities. One may also be branded due to one's indiscretions. What messages do these "brand(ing)" practices send to the low-income African American student? I was told my first day on campus by an upperclassman that "Everything you do from this day forward *will* follow you for the rest of your time here at Howard. It can either make you or destroy you socially." These words never left me. As I indicate in Chapter One, I worked especially hard and often found myself over compensating for my social background so that *my* "brand" would be fully accepted on campus, so I would *rise* to the occasion.

Still I Rise

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?

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Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.
(Angelou, 2011, pp. 7-10)

Dr. Maya Angelou's words tell a story. This story resonates with how low-income students "learn" how to "rise" to the occasion. They come from the margins and somehow directly place themselves in the center. Is this always done? What is realized and discovered? How do low-income students gain the fortitude to make meaning of the elite HBCU culture so that they are able to both understand and navigate these environments? When rising to the occasion of being an elite HBCU student, what kind of

brand does a low-income student convey? Must students "look" the part? Should they

speak in a certain manner? Do "elite" brands have variety? Are they all the same?

Where do these brands originate?

Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 1994) utilized the notions of social and cultural capital to

explain how individual agency combines with socially structured opportunities and

aspirations to reproduce existing social structures. His belief was that cultural capital

refers to specialized or insider knowledge of "high culture." Yosso (2005) explains:

> Knowledges of the upper and middle classes are considered capital valuable to a
> hierarchical society. If one is not born into a family whose knowledge is already
> deemed valuable, one could then access the knowledge of the middle and upper
> class and the potential for social mobility through formal schooling. (p. 70)

Social capital is comprised of contacts and memberships in networks that can be used for

personal or professional gain (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990, 1994; Horvat, 2000). Each social

class possesses social and cultural capital, which parents pass on to their children as

attitudes, preferences, and certain behaviors (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Bourdieu's

theoretical notions are often used to provide scholarly insight into the academic and

social outcomes of people of color within higher education environments. What is

oftentimes unfair about these studies are that they assume that minorities lack the

"capital" required for social mobility (Yosso, 2005). "If we have been gagged and

disempowered by theories, we can also be loosened and empowered by theories"

(Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xxvi). Elite HBCU contexts and their students challenge these

theoretical assumptions. Let me be clear, the notions of social and cultural capital do

manifest on elite HBCU campuses. These ideas are useful because they incorporate

socio-cultural factors that may explain the reproduction of existing external social

structures within African-American communities and the broader societal context.

However, this study re-appropriates these notions and instead of using the majority as the standard, I illuminate how these ideals are enforced and ascribed to by minorities, in this case African-Americans within historically Black college environments. Schools are undoubtedly purveyors of social class and stratification (MacLeod, 2009). How are these forms of "capital" transferred on elite HBCU campuses? Is everyone afforded the opportunity to gain this "insider" knowledge? What occurs when low-income African-American elite HBCU students gain new awareness once withheld in the broader societal context?

A Yearning To Be Opulent

Journal Entry: It is 10:30 PM on March 8, 2013. I am sitting on a dark charter bus outside of Baltimore, MD and my phone lights up. I read the text and sigh. The message from MegaBus reads "Your trip will be further delayed. Please check your e-mail to find out further details." I am annoyed and bewildered because I am due to be in Philadelphia in a matter of hours to deliver a presentation on financial aid to a group of low-income high school seniors. I think to myself, "I am not going to get to Philadelphia tonight." In a few short hours I have experienced a delayed departure, my bus broke down on the side of the road, and to top it off once I am in Baltimore on a "routine" stop. My bus driver has abandoned the bus...I am now using Twitter and Facebook as my forums to vent my frustration. My family and friends are worried. I am stuck with a bus full of other individuals in a mall parking lot on a bus with no driver...

My phone lights up again. In a few short minutes a friend of mine texts me "JUST WRITE!"...I am now remembering and smiling. I think to myself, "If I am not going to make it to Philly, the least I can do is engage my work. Earlier today I had a poignant interaction outside of Dr. Hultgren's office with Christy, a fellow PhD student who is in the final stages of her phenomenological dissertation. She told me to read Mary Grace Snyder's study. I printed out Mary's Chapter 2 to read on my trip. I just finished and ideas flood my mind..I am more aware of my phenomenon. I think of social class. I too am now thinking of my oppressed identities of being a gay Black man and find brief comfort and inspiration. I feverishly jotted down ideas. I never made it to Philadelphia, but in that parking lot, on that bus, in the midst of stress, I was bestowed with a new direction and took heed to the whispers...

During my engagement with phenomenology, I am constantly aware that I can never escape its fundamental spirit of introspection and reflection in my everyday life. Since I found phenomenology, or rather when it found me, I cannot listen to music, or watch a movie, interact with friends and family, or embody a stressful space without pondering. Even in the midst of tremendous angst, I was able to clear my mind and engage one of *my* whispers. On this occasion I (re)membered *Paris Is Burning*. I truly had an "ah-ha moment." A light bulb erupted in my head. There are parallels with this film and the phenomenon I have chosen to engage. *This* whisper disclosed the aesthetic transformative nature of the elite HBCU context.

Paris Is Burning is a documentary that chronicles the lives of Black and Latin American gay men who are a part of the New York City "ballroom culture."[21] Many who identify with Black lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) communities view this film as a pivotal piece that addresses the complexity of race and class in America (Green, 1993). The Black LGBT ballroom culture has a significant facet that directly parallels the lived experiences of low-income African Americans who are (pre)sent on HBCU campuses. Those who engage Ballroom Culture, too, embody transformative spaces. In paralleling the Black LGBT ballroom culture with the experiences of low-income African-Americans who attend elite HBCUs, I am conscious of the marginalities present within both communities. When studying the subcultures of those who are

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[21] Ballroom culture, sometimes referred to as the "house/ball community," is a community and network of Black and Latina/o women, men, and transgender women and men who are lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGBT). The Black and Latina/o queer members of this community use performance to create an alternative discursive terrain and a kinship structure that critiques and revises dominant notions of gender, sexuality, family, and community. (Bailey, 2011, p. 367)

oppressed in society, the research often "colonizes" and presents them as "alien." I am

aware and thoughtful so that I may not enact the aforementioned fallacy. I connect *and*

show as not to appropriate either as an exotic other (Cvetkoich, 1992). While

contemplating the overt and covert transformations that low-income African-Americans

experience on elite HBCU campuses, *Paris Is Burning* called to me in a loud and

forthright manner.

Imagine a "ball."[22] During these events, portrayals of what is presumed to be elite

run the gamut. Men and women compete in "categories"[23] and wear luxurious ensembles

peppered with designer labels so that they may win a prize. What do these individuals

challenge? Members of the ballroom culture confront ideologies that are deeply

imbedded in racial and social constructs present in broader social hegemonic makeups.

When a Black gay man competes in a category entitled *Town and Country* or

Executive Realness they confront gender binaries by presenting as either male or female.

Although these performances challenge the construction of gender, they are also

dominated by dominant societal notions of race and class (Cvetkoich, 1992). What

messages are being conveyed? Within this culture, when one participates in "categories"

that display wealth and class, the race and class-based power of certain styles forces the

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[22] A "Drag Ball" or "Ball" for short, is a form of competition held within Black LGBT
ballroom communities. During these competitions members of the ballroom culture vie
for bragging rights, prizes, and national recognition (Bailey, 2008; Cvetkoich, 1992;
Livingston, 1990).
[23] Categories are intricate facets of ballroom competitions that utilize performative
gender and sexual identities through highly nuanced presentations of fashion and physical
attributes. Through these performances, the members of the ballroom community create
a kinship culture that both critiques and radically revises dominant notions of home,
family, and community (Bailey, 2008, p. 92).

re-appropriation of the symbols of our oppressors (Cvetkoich, 1992). How is this achieved?

If you get the chance to be (pre)sent at a Ball competition, one is apt to come across a transgendered woman in a full length fur, or a man in a pair of tan khakis, pink oxford shirt, shiny loafers, and cable-knit sweater draped around his shoulders. To them these symbols denote wealth. Why are these displays necessary? What is gained? In this case one may win a trophy that deems them "legendary" and "worthy" of acceptance. There is, however, so much more.

> In a ballroom you can be anything you want... the fact that you are not [what you choose to portray] is merely because of the social standing of life.-Dorian Corey (Livingston, 1990)

Black members of LGBT communities who indulge in ballroom cultures often yearn to imitate what *they* view as elite. Are they, too, attempting to be respectable? They yearn to embody a particular spectrum of what is deemed elite. *But again, what is elite?* To *them*, elite is an external aesthetic that emulates the superficial vanguards of the White middle class. Those who participate in ballroom culture often adorn themselves in designer labels and high end clothing to solidify their place in their spaces. Does this ring true for the low-income HBCU student?

> This is White America...Every other nationality not of the White sect knows it and accepts it to the day they die. That is everybody's dream and ambition as a minority, to live and look as well as a White person is pictured as being in America. Every media you have from TV, to magazines, to movies, to films...I mean, the biggest thing that minorities watch is Dynasty and the Colbys, All My Children and the soap operas...And when it comes to the minorities especially Black, we as a people for the past 400 years is the greatest example of behavior modification in the history of civilization. We have had everything taken away from us, and yet we have all learned how to survive. That is why in the ballroom circuit it is so obvious that if you have captured the great White way of living or looking or dressing or speaking you is a marvel.-Willie Ninja (Livingston, 1990)

Dorian Corey and Willie Ninja were and are eminent forces in Black gay ballroom cultures. Their words place pointed meaning. These men remind us of the privileges of the White middle-class (Cvetkoich, 1992). They also fiercely underscore the Eurocentric social class values that have been placed upon Black communities for centuries. Many of us still seek and mirror these ideals, but why?

There is a "we" evoked in the ballroom culture that supersedes the complex spectrum of those who identify with LGBT Black communities and others who identify as Black and heterosexual. Where do the commonalities lie within LGBT ballroom environments and elite HBCU contexts? Does a familiarity exist? Hooks (1996) emphatically asserts that "Certainly the class aspirations of the Black gay subculture [that have been] depicted do not differ from those of other poor and underclass Black communities" (p. 285). Hooks (1996) then expresses:

> [The] we evoked here is all of us, Black people/people of color, are bombarded daily by a powerful colonizing Whiteness that seduces us away from ourselves, that negates that there is beauty to be found in any form of Blackness that is not imitation of Whiteness. (p. 281)

During their displays of *opulence* members of the ballroom culture push mainstream norms out of the margins. What is *opulence*? The Middle French "opulence" is derived from the Latin *opulentia* meaning "wealth and power." In imitating the culture and power of those who are presumed to be elite, are we then enforcing the primary tenants of oppression and exploitation (hooks, 1996)? There is that possibility, but these performances are also a strategy perhaps to protect against micro-assaults on a sense of self while cultivating an identity in opposition to what is expected in a dominant setting (Jones, 2008). Resistance *and* assimilation are ever-present. How does this culture parallel that which is present on the elite HBCU campus? I believe that a unity exists.

"You've Got The Look"

As I show this phenomenon, I do wonder during their transformations, how do

those who experience *this* phenomenon choose to mirror wealth and class? Is what

society thinks of as White spun into a new form of Black and then enacted on the elite

HBCU campus?

> There is a beauty, a transformation, as it were, a regeneration, that takes place in
> the physical make up of a young man or young woman who goes in the habit of
> living on the high side of life rather than the low side. (Washington, 1932, p. 86)

What is it to choose the "high side" over the "low side?" Who are the high? Who are the

low? How does the "high side" look? During my conversations with individuals who

have lived this phenomenon, they place considerable significance on how they altered the

way they presented themselves on these campuses. A deliberate aesthetic change is quite

prominent. Similar to the ballroom culture, the manner in which one conveys status and

wealth through lavish adornment and attire is very important on these campuses.

> I was taught growing up that it was impolite to look poor in public, therefore I
> knew that it was out of the question to look poor at Howard. (Sebastian)
>
> It is quite subtle, but when it happens you just know...I was told by an
> upperclassman that I needed to dress and look a certain way if I was to be taken
> seriously...I gathered very quickly that the way I dressed and carried myself was
> being scrutinized...I just had to make it work…We all just have to make it work.
> (Laila)
>
> I spent a lot of money on clothes. We didn't come in as freshman, walking
> around in heels. But by the time I went home for Thanksgiving freshman year, I
> definitely had boxes and boxes of heels. You know, at Hampton they tell you that
> you need to have, you know, a black suit, closed-tow black heels and, stockings or
> whatever. I needed to look a certain way...I now wore heels and pumps to class
> every day. (Nicole)

These students revealed deliberate aesthetic change. They *all* adjusted themselves with

regard to their attire and the purchasing of specific designer labels and other types of

attire to socially fit. They were changed and so were their tastes. Do these new tastes denote status and class?

> A phenomenon closely connected with taste is *fashion*. Here the element of social generalization implicit in the idea of taste becomes a determining reality...The very word 'fashion' implies that the concept involves a changeable law within a constant whole of social demeanor...Fashion regulates as it likes only those things that can equally be one way as another. It is indeed constituted by empirical universality, consideration for others, comparison, and seeing things from the general point of view. Thus fashion creates a social dependence that is difficult to shake off...Against the tyranny exercised by fashion, taste preserves a specific freedom and superiority. (Gadamer, 1960/2012, p. 33)

Gadamer expresses the idea that social class and "taste" can be denoted through fashion. He gleans that fashion has the power to enforce specific norms. There is a social aspect that is difficult to deny. The investment in appearance and the engagement with consumption as a means to gain acceptance suggest that the politics of wealth, class, respectability, and even style cannot be dismissed in Black communities (Cvetkoich, 1992). On these campuses the way one looks can covertly imply status and wealth. The dynamic of how privilege is performed within elite HBCU campus environments is fascinating. Are there other markers of social class that low-income students must adopt? What challenges lie when embracing "Black opulence?" Certain standards bleed into elite HBCU environments.

The line that is blatantly drawn regarding social class within elite HBCU environments becomes quite blurred when low-income students are afforded insider knowledge of very specific markers of status and class that are prominent amongst Black elite communities. In their struggle to attain American middle-class ideals, do they give the impression of having to be a "Super-American" (Frazier, 1957)? There lies intense

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struggle in navigating intra-racial and broader societal contexts. Where does *this*

existence lead?

An Innate "It" Factor

> And secondly, we must have students. They must be chosen for the ability to
> learn. There is always the temptation to assume that the children of privileged
> classes, the rich, the noble, are those who can best take education. One has but to
> express this so to realize its utter futility. But perhaps the most dangerous thing
> among us is for us, without thought, is to assume that we can choose students
> because of the amount of money their parents have happened to get hold of. We
> want by the nicest methods possible to seek out the talented and the gifted among
> our constituency, quite regardless of their wealth or position, and to fill this
> university and similar institutions with persons who have got brains enough to
> take fullest advantage of what the university offers. There is no other way. (Du
> Bois, 2000, p. 136)

Black low-income students who attend HBCUs or predominately White

institutions (PWIs) are considered high-risk, underprepared, and set up for failure.

Scholarship that chronicles low-income Black student experiences are often shrouded in

accounts that relegate them to the periphery of the campus context. This is a small piece

of the story. The low-income African-Americans who are (re)presented in this study are

high-achieving students. These students understand all that they had to sacrifice, risk,

and resist to achieve academic and social successes (Carey, 2012). They thrive on these

campuses and persist. They were chosen for their ability to learn regardless of their

wealth and class positions, but, how do they feel amongst other high-achievers? Do they

use their intellect also as a means to fit? What is the standard that must be met? President

Barack Obama (2013) addressed Morehouse College (an elite HBCU) during their 2013

commencement ceremony. He stated:

> Some of you probably came here from communities where everybody looked like
> you. Others may have come here in search of a community. And I suspect that
> some of you probably felt a little bit of culture shock the first time you came
> together...All of a sudden, you weren't the only high school sports captain, you

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weren't the only student council president. You were suddenly in a group of high achievers, and that meant you were expected to do something more. That's the unique sense of purpose that this place has always infused — the conviction that this is a training ground not only for individual success, but for leadership that can change the world.

President Obama underscores a critical aspect of HBCU communities, especially those that are considered elite HBCUs. These institutions are filled with academically talented students who come from across the world. There is a standard of excellence that is joined with an ethos of racial uplift. Excellence is the standard, not an option.

Throughout my preliminary conversations with individuals who have lived this phenomenon, it is clear that many of them used their intellectual prowess to help them ascend their class backgrounds. This was especially important during their pre-college experiences and the beginning of their undergraduate years. They were valued in their home communities for being the "smart one" and used this to their advantage during college.

I always had to compete with rich kids…I have always been smart. When I first got to college I knew that I was going to have to do the same thing. I would have to compete. There was no other option for me because I didn't have the money they had. (Kenneth)

It has been revealed that these students used their academic abilities to gain access into social circles on their respective campuses. Another student states, "I knew I had 'it'…I was going to be known as smart, not poor." This is a powerful statement. Once these students were able to prove themselves academically to their peers they were then given the opportunity to gain social advantages. I had not previously considered the manner in which academic competition would be shown as I engaged this phenomenon. However, this is the power of phenomenology, to (un)cover those hidden aspects of the phenomenon we choose to engage. I am quite eager as I move forward to reveal even

more hidden aspects of what it means to be a low-income student within an elite HBCU context. Further engaging the diversity that is present on these campuses helps us to gain a broader understanding of HBCU student experiences (Gasman, Nguyen, & Kalam, 2013).

In this chapter, I have engaged with my phenomenon further and shown many aspects of being a low-income African-American student within an elite HBCU context. I was called by several whispers that revealed themselves to me—there are surely more revelations to come. The question: **What are the lived experiences of class for low-income African-American students at elite HBCUs?** kept me oriented to the life-world in which this phenomenon lives and breathes. In the following chapter, I explore the philosophical grounding of phenomenology that informs this research endeavor.

CHAPTER THREE
SOUL(FUL), CARE(FUL), AND THOUGHT(FUL) (RE)SEARCH

My Bold Choice: Using Phenomenology to Ease My Tension

We cannot view the life that we are in from the outside; we are always in the midst of it, surrounded by its details. (Heidegger, 1962/2008, p. 88)

Human life escapes us if we try to capture it from a theoretical, objectivizing attitude. (Safranski, 1998, p. 146)

I am researching a phenomenon that I once lived. As an African-American low-income student I came face-to-face with social class in a unique manner during my attendance at an elite HBCU. My undergraduate years had a critical impact on my development and shaped how I view others and the world in which we live. "Different ways of viewing the world shape different ways of researching the world" (Crotty, 2003, p. 66). It is my intrigue and passionate wonder about these encounters that fuel and drive my desire to uncover these lived experiences in a phenomenological manner. Desire is a particular attentiveness and special concern with an aspect of life. "One cannot legitimately study human existence without remembering that desires and values emanate from him and shake the contours of investigation" (Gordon, 1995, p. 9). Without desire there is no real motivation to question (van Manen, 2007).

Phenomenology's strength is that it fuels the researcher's passion while recognizing his or hers integral role in the research process. "An interpretation of human existence cannot be neutral, dispassionate theoretical contemplation, but must take into account the involvement of the inquirer in the undertaking" (Moran, 2000, p. 197). This method is unafraid to call attention to aspects of our lives that are often neglected by empiricism, in particular the background assumptions that we all bring as we seek to better understand particular phenomena (Moran, 2000). "Thus it becomes clear that in

every understanding there remains something unexplained, and that one therefore must

ask about what motivates every understanding. This changes the entire concept of

interpretation" (Spiegelberg, 1982, p. 281). Phenomenological research is always a

project of someone: a real person, who seeks to draw upon individual, social, and

historical life circumstances to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence (van

Manen, 2007).

> Researchers are grounded in philosophical paradigms in which they situate
> themselves and their work. These paradigms literally *inform*, *govern and limit*
> their work. Thus, choosing a philosophical paradigm to address my topical
> interests was not an accidental choice. I thought it over carefully and considered
> my options. (Brimhall-Vargas, 2011, p. 149)

No research methodology, either qualitative or quantitative, or research paradigm

provides "perfect" entry into research. But, as scholars we are provided the privilege to

choose our journey. I weighed my options, but, none seemed to fit. Thankfully, I was

provided with a new entry. Phenomenology is my choice. I view it as a bold, yet

thoughtful gateway to answer the question that drives this study: ***What are the lived***

experiences of class for low-income African-American students at elite HBCUs?

Recognizing Distinction: *My* Phenomenology Is Not *Your* Phenomenology

In the summer of 1927 Martin Heidegger offered a course at the University of

Marburg entitled *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, translated into English as

The Basic Problems of Phenomenology. He emphatically declared during one of his

lectures:

> There is no such thing as the one phenomenology. We shall maintain that
> phenomenology is not just one philosophical science among others, nor is it the
> science preparatory to the rest of them; rather, the expression "phenomenology" is
> the name for the method of scientific philosophy in general. (Heidegger,
> 1927/1982, p. 24)

More than 80 years after Martin Heidegger declared that there is no one phenomenology, there is still tremendous misunderstanding surrounding this methodology. A variety of research methods have become popular over this period of time including ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This is especially true in higher education research. While phenomenology has gained familiarity in my field, it is often portrayed homogeneously in this body of work. It is critical to draw distinctions within this methodological approach. Failure to highlight phenomenology's inherent philosophical and interpretive differences as a methodological approach diminishes the work of those who choose to "do" phenomenology *and* the impact of their scholarship. Neglecting to recognize the distinctions inherent in phenomenology further lends to the confusion surrounding its existence.

When I first began to learn phenomenology I was extremely excited about this new educational journey. A fresh curiosity was sparked and I wanted to consume everything phenomenological. I immediately began to peruse phenomenological higher education scholarship. However, while reviewing these studies, I became dismayed. I often found simplistic definitions of phenomenology, and there was no mention of the important phenomenological philosophers I was reading, and there was a misuse of phenomenological terms. Yes, these studies did make mention that the intent was to "grasp the lived experience" within college environments, but something was missing.

Over and over again I thought, "This is not *my* phenomenology!" What was even more trying was that I began to think that perhaps I was in error. I now realize that the manner in which I have learned phenomenology is not "wrong," and in *many* cases neither were the scholars whose work I was consuming. The error that *is* pervasive in

higher education research is its negligence in not addressing the manner in which phenomenology is approached. Most, if not all of this scholarship, uses a Husserlian phenomenological approach, not the hermeneutic manner I have learned. Why are the unique phenomenological schools of thought not recognized? Do the higher education scholars who engage phenomenological methods not know the difference?

"Husserlian phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology are often referred to interchangeably, without questioning any distinction between them" (Laverty, 2008, p. 3). Why have these distinctions not been made? What are the differences between Husserlian phenomenology and the hermeneutic phenomenology associated with philosophers including Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer? What do these different approaches offer phenomenological researchers?

A Difference in Philosophic Foundations

Edmund Husserl is credited as being the foremost founder of phenomenology. He criticized the social sciences for their attempts to apply natural science methods to their respective fields, and deemed these acts as erroneous (Bell, 1991). He contended that these disciplines ignored the fact that their inquiry was critically impacted by the internal perceptions held by the researcher (Husserl, 1970). Husserl also felt that the social sciences failed to recognize that they dealt with living subjects who were impacted by their environments (Moules, 2002). He argued that scholars who concentrate solely on external forces and other isolated responses that are then paralleled with the individuals being studied, "not only missed important variables but ignored context and created a highly artificial situation" (Jones, 1975, p. 112). Thus, he created what we now know in a broad sense as phenomenology.

Phenomenology is essentially the study of lived experience or the life world (van Manen, 2007). Husserl believed that we could effectively grasp the essences of our lived experiences through the processes of "reduction" and "bracketing." "Bracketing" is the act of suspending the impact of the outer world, as well as the researcher's individual beliefs about the phenomenon, in order to see it clearly (Husserl, 1970). Husserl viewed "reduction" as the thought of the singular, or one essence of an experience that is brought forth. He contended that in reducing the essence of a phenomenon to a singular notion or idea that "one needs to see past or through the particularity of lived experience to the universal" (van Manen, 2007, p. 185). Husserl saw the reduction process as an end itself (Moran, 2000; van Manen, 2007); he proposed that once these procedures were complete we would then be provided a rich description—the true essence of a particular reality that was unique from others. How does a hermeneutical approach differ?

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science—a stark contrast to the Husserlian approach. Human science research always explores the structures of meaning of the lived *human* world (van Manen, 2007). Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer transformed phenomenology and introduced hermeneutics into its interpretive process. Heidegger believed that the phenomenologist could not "bracket" oneself from phenomena and that the act of "reduction" was limiting. He nullified any distinction between the individual and their experiences, and interpreted them as interrelated and unable to exist without the other. This perspective maintains that one cannot stand outside the pre-understandings and historicality of one's experience (Heidegger, 1962/2008).

Gadamer was also concerned with Husserl's beliefs regarding the role of the

researcher in phenomenological inquiry and his notions of subjectivity. Like Heidegger,

he, too, believed that phenomenology's in-depth descriptive work must retain the

cultural, social, and historical forces that shape our experiences (Vessey, 2007). He

expresses in his most prominent work *Truth and Method*:

> In a series of many investigations he [Husserl] attempted to throw light on the one-sidedness of the scientific idealization of experience....To me, however, he still seems dominated by the one-sidedness that he criticizes, for he projects the idealized world of exact scientific experience into the original experience of the world, in that he makes perception, as something directed toward merely external physical appearances, the basis of all other experience. (Gadamer, 1960/2012, p. 347)

Gadamer firmly asserted that there is no pure perception, and that "reduction" and

"bracketing" further remove us from the phenomena we wish to uncover. "There is a gap

in Husserl's phenomenology between what it seeks to grasp, its essences, and the actual

state of affairs it attempts to explain" (Vessey, 2007, p. 16). To Husserl,

phenomenological investigation was not the viewing of many essences of lived

experiences, but a conduit to encounter their limits and finitude (Spiegelberg, 1982). Had

Husserl begun to engage in the very acts that he first fought against?

Hermeneutic Discernment: Is There Nothing New Under The Sun?

The hermeneutical approach allows researchers to use a process of self-reflection.

Stated previously, in direct contrast to Husserlian phenomenology, the biases and

assumptions of the researcher are not bracketed or set aside; rather, they are included and

essential to the interpretive process. The researcher is acknowledged on an ongoing basis

as a necessary conduit who provides considerable thought to one's own experiences, and

as one who explicitly maintains the ways in which their position impacts the issues being researched (van Manen, 2007; Moules, 2002).

> Hermeneutics involves recognition of sameness, place, and belonging. Hermeneutic interpretation comprehends the recognition that occurs when something rings "true" of what is said; there is a familiarity, a kinship, a resonance, and a likeness. It is neither a replication nor a justification. It is an acknowledgment that things come from somewhere; they are not simply fabricated. However, along with sameness and recognition, hermeneutics requires a bringing forth and a bringing to language of something new. We work out this newness by working it into a world of relationships that can sustain it. In these relationships, others start to recognize not only something of themselves, but also of the world; they recognize something old and something new. (Moules, 2002, p. 3)

Hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges that we live in a world of relationships—some old and some new. When interpreting our existence with relation to our place with others and in place(s), there is an ever-present knowing that in our existence we yearn to fit into our world(s). How do we seek to belong in our being? We are aptly able to recognize familiarity, but know that differences can and do often impact our relations. When recognizing ourselves in the places and people with whom we dwell, we can then begin to uncover that which has been bestowed to us in our past, present, and futures. "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Is this true? When questioning being we also yearn to have its own history made transparent (Heidegger, 1962/2008). Our lives are always informed by events and history that precede us. We as beings have a tendency to repeat the past, but in our "repetition" do we not evoke "newness?" The power in recognizing our historicality is in the uncovering of why the old informs the new.

This phenomenological exploration of intra-racial differences within African-American communities on elite HBCU campuses is grounded in hermeneutic

phenomenology. The hermeneutic approach bestows me with the permission to underscore the fact that students who experience the phenomenon of being low-income students at an elite HBCU are impacted due to the pasts that they bring to the campuses, as well as by the histories of these institutions. Within this study history takes on many forms and is ever-present *in* the present. What else drives me to approach this study in a particular manner?

> Why then should one adopt one research approach over another? The choice should reflect more than mere whim, preference, taste, or fashion. Rather, the method one chooses ought to maintain a certain harmony with the deep interest one has in the first place. (van Manen, 2007, p. 7)

My decision to engage hermeneutic phenomenology is so much more than a whim. I have truly embodied the tension that is ever-present in the method. My choice has been soul(ful), care(ful) and thought(ful). These hallmarks are held in high esteem in hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry. This approach allows me to embrace many truths, and not be bound or forced to arrive at one conclusion about my phenomenon. I am also encouraged to include my past encounters as I engage my phenomenon so that I may illuminate myriad possibilities in others who, too, lived the experience of being low-income on an elite HBCU campus. "Those who engage in hermeneutic phenomenology do not go anywhere. He or she stays right there in the world we share with our fellow-human beings" (van Manen, 2007, p. 19). What is quite salient for me is the eminent potential for me to show that *my* experiences could be *our* experiences (van Manen, 2007).

Words Cut Deep

> I felt knife blades open within me. I resolved to defend myself…I intended to react to the world and to show…I put all the parts back together. But first I had to change my tune. (Fanon, 1952/2008, pp. 118-120)

When I inform others that I am engaging phenomenology for my work, I encounter confused looks, am constantly questioned about the method, and even taunted. The words used by others to negate my choice to engage phenomenology cut me deeply. Do they not realize that there is power in the spoken word? The inflictions of these wounds from those who I hold in high esteem are especially intense. They hurt the most, but it is now time to stop the bleeding.

Words

Can't tell you nothing you ain't already heard
No matter what I say it's nothing but words
Just let me prove to you what I know is real
Let me express to you the way that I feel
(David & Irie, 2008, Track 1)

I now have the opportunity to use my words to indeed show what I discern as real—to offer the endless possibilities of a particular lived experience. What is lived experience?

A lived experience does not confront me as something perceived or represented; it is given to me, but the reality of lived experience is there-for-me because I have a reflexive awareness of it, because I process it immediately as belonging to me in some sense. (Dilthey, 1908/1985, p. 223)

I heed phenomenology's call to bring forth the lived experiences of African-American low-income elite HBCU students. The lived experiences that are engaged were given to me so that I could bestow them to a broader audience. However, I am met with much resistance. Am I the only one? I have often discussed my annoyance with the myths and untruths that surround this method with others who have also chosen to walk phenomenology's path. They have been told: "I just don't understand what this is." "Why didn't you just do a case study?" "Oh, that's just creative writing? or "You all

write too much!" More words that cut deeply. Where does this opposition originate? Are those around me not listening? Do they not hear my (our) words?

I engage phenomenological methods not only as a manner to get inside my phenomenon effectively, but also as a way for me to engage this study authentically. Phenomenology imparts a research methodology that directly confronts the rigid confines placed upon us by empiricism.

> But we are not necessarily 'stuck' in this restricted field, not necessarily immobilized by the boundaries which are imposed on us by virtue of our initiation into a social world and our education into the ways and traditions of our culture. (Levin, 1985, p. 101)

Since its beginning, phenomenology has attempted to correct the problems of educational conformity that students pervasively endure. "Phenomenology has been attempting to solve a problem which is not the problem of the sect but, perhaps, the problem of our time. The sciences of man (psychology, sociology, history) have found themselves in a crisis situation" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 43). In response to these scholarly crises, phenomenological inquiry provides researchers with a sense of freedom. What does this sense of freedom entail? "Freedom means overcoming the strait-jacket of encrusted traditions, and this also means rejecting the inquiry by externally imposed methods" (Moran, 2000, p. 5). I now feel free to engage my research.

Silencing Myths And Untruths: Phenomenology Is And Is Not…

Phenomenology does not negate or void my voice as unimportant or a hindrance; rather, it embraces it. Phenomenology does not shun my direct experiences with my phenomenon; it allows me to use my pre-understandings as cherished resources. Stated previously, Martin Heidegger, refused to ascribe to the ideal that researchers must detach themselves during engagement with phenomena:

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To approach the phenomenon without presuppositions of any kind, to "bracket" them, as Husserl hoped to do, is, according to Heidegger, in the first place inadvisable, and in the second impossible. Inadvisable because it would involve discarding not only the errors but the wisdom of our tradition; Impossible because without thoughtful insights, there can be no genuine thinking about, and thus no serious approach to the phenomenon in any event. (Bontekoe, 1996, pp. 63-64)

Again, is it truly plausible to expect one to "bracket" and "objectify" human life and experience? Those who do phenomenological work are "sensitive observers of the subtleties of everyday life" (van Manen, 2007, p. 29). When we "do" phenomenology we are gifted with myriad possibilities.

Phenomenology is not like other studies that are termed "-ologies." Theology is the study of God. Psychology is the study of the human psyche. Each of these terms tell us *what* is to be studied. Phenomenology is concerned with *how* the thing is approached. Phenomenology as an approach lets us see by helping to uncover what is hidden or concealed. Phenomenology resists imposing a structure of understanding. Rather, it tries to let things reveal themselves. (Johnson, 2000, p. 15)

Phenomenology provides an entry to our lived-world. A door is opened. This entrance is "in a broad sense, a philosophy or *theory of the unique*, it is interested in what is essentially not replaceable" (van Manen, 2007, p.7). What is unfortunate is that phenomenology is frequently shrouded in myths and untruths. Phenomenology is a term that has been and is often misused (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002).

Phenomenology has been portrayed by its critics as a mystical, irrational intuition that seeks to renounce science and the scientific view of the world (Moran, 2000).

…& On

Rolling through like a burning flame
Like a super nova star
I be the light
When they in the dark

But everybody want to ask this earth
What?

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What good do your words do if they can't understand you?

Remember there in school one day
I was told I was inferior
Remembering is good if you don't
Let it be the fear in you

But still the people really wanna to know
What good do your words do, If they can't understand you?
(Badu, Cantero, & Martin, 2000, Track 4)

In a song titled "…& On" Erykah Badu, poses a question to her listeners: *"What good do your words do if they don't understand you?"* What is it to understand? Understand is derived from the Old English *understand* meaning to literally "stand in the midst of." The etymology of understand also has Greek origins. The Greek *epistamai* means "I stand upon" or to "be close to." There is more. The Indo-European meaning of understand divulges a sense of "putting together" or to "take grasp." As I interpret the experiences of African-Americans who have lived and experienced being different amongst their own within elite HBCU contexts, I bring my own pre-understandings. I stand in the midst of this research because I have lived the phenomenon, so I both stand upon and am also close to the inquiry. In my states of closeness and vulnerability I have been called to "put together" and "grasp" these experiences to show my people, my field, and countless others. Again, as my advisor Noah Drezner once told me, "If *you* do not ask *these* questions *who* will?"

Badu also highlights a contradictory relationship when something or someone may be relegated to an inferior existence due to misunderstanding. This is done out of fear. While "they" may place you in the margins, they still question and wonder about you. You are the light when they are in the dark. I never would have thought that one of the major challenges in "doing" phenomenology would also be educating others about the

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method. I now realize that unfortunately "scientific approaches" permeate higher

educational research. "A convenient model of an exact discourse now exists. Its objects

of study amount to which one can work within the confines of 'all there is'" (Gordon,

1995, p. 51). The "exact" is confining, and "convenient models" should be challenged.

While I do become irritated by the many confrontations I encounter, I also find strength

in these "teachable moments" too. After all, I am an educator.

> So we are faced with the dilemma: whether to talk phenomenology in
> phenomenological terms or to talk about phenomenology in the language of
> everyday life…On the one hand we are talking about phenomenology as a
> philosophical position, that to some, appears unnecessarily wordy, complicated,
> and even alienating due to its special vocabulary. (Hultgren, 1990, p. 14)

Human beings are fearful of the unfamiliar. Phenomenology is often viewed as

an unknown "other." This is unfair. Instead of embracing the inherent beauty of this

method, individuals inside the academy often choose to remain heavily influenced by

theoretical, prejudicial, and suppositional intoxication (van Manen & Adams, 2010). Van

Manen (2007) expresses:

> Are the human sciences less rigorous or less rational than the behavioral or
> experimental sciences? The answer depends on the criteria of rationality that one
> applies…If the criteria are the same as those that govern the natural sciences then
> the human sciences may seem rather undisciplined…The point is that the
> constraints of meaning on the criteria or standards of science define the horizons
> and pose limits on what we can study and how we can rationalize the research as
> being scientific. The meaning of human science notions such as "truth, method,
> understanding, objectivity, valid discourse," and the meaning of "description,
> analysis, interpretation, writing," etc. are always to be understood within a
> rational perspective. (p. 15)

Phenomenological research is a human science approach that must be viewed differently.

It should not be scrutinized with a scientific rubric. The fundamental essence of this

approach is that while conveying phenomena we bring forth lived experience of everyday

life with the intent to increase one's thoughtfulness and practical resourcefulness or tact (van Manen, 2007).

> The difference between natural science and human science resides in what it studies: natural science studies "objects of nature," "things," "natural events," and "the way objects behave." Human science, in contrast, studies "persons," or "beings" that have "consciousness" and that act "purposefully" in and on the world by creating objects of" meaning" that are "expressions" of how human beings exist in the world. (van Manen, 2007, p. 4)

What is also unique about this method is that while the philosophy guides, you are free to yield to the infinite possibilities inherent in the world to show, not tell, of our everyday existence.

In phenomenology, philosophy *is* the entry, but *this* approach is not successful until we evoke response and understanding in the reader. "Phenomenology allows us to 'see' the deeper significance, or meaning structures of the lived experience it describes" (van Manen, 1989, p. 23). How do we achieve deeper understanding? There is a tension present in both showing and eliciting understanding in others when conveying your phenomenon. The very tension between phenomenology as philosophy and as a way into inquiry calls us to offer possibilities of meaning in everyday life (Hultgren, 1990). "The researcher/writer must 'pull' the reader into the question in such a way that the reader cannot help but wonder about the nature of the phenomenon" (van Manen, 2007, p. 44). Only then, can we come to mutual understanding. "Our social world, the everyday world of human experience is founded on the belief of shared understanding" (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1979, p. 5). The phenomenologist must not be deterred. It is our response(ability) to remove the mystique from this philosophy and help make it more accessible. This manner of thinking must escape the confines of a philosopher's study and become of benefit to wider circles (Boss, 1988). "And so we need to search

everywhere in the life-world for lived experience material that, upon reflective

examination, might yield something of its fundamental nature" (van Manen, 2007, p. 53).

This phenomenological study draws upon various sources to bring forth mutual

understanding. I have and am able to summon extant higher education research, African-

American fiction, poetry, television sitcoms, cinema, and even song lyrics to bring the

reader into the phenomenon. The philosophical views of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg

Gadamer, and Edward S. Casey have also led me to further (un)cover that which has been

veiled for far too long. "The point is, of course, that the meaning of lived experience is

usually hidden or veiled" (van Manen, 2007, p. 24). It is also extremely important to me

that I unite the previously mentioned philosophers with Black voices as I explore a

particular facet of the Black higher education experience. I have chosen to feature Black

philosophers and scholars including W.E.B. Du Bois, Lewis Gordon, Frantz Fanon and

bell hooks. A compelling research environment has been opened to me. It is truly a gift.

(Re)Turning To The Souls of Black Folk

> We seldom study the condition of the Negro today honestly and respectfully. It is so much easier to assume that we know it all. Or perhaps, having already reached conclusions in our own minds, we are loft to have them disturbed. And yet how little we really know of these millions—of their daily lives and longings, of their homely joy and sorrows, of their real shortcomings and the meaning of their own being. (Du Bois, 1903/2003, p. 90)

> There is something peculiar about how Blacks are studied which requires reflection on one's method more so than one would with normative populations. (Gordon, 2000, p. 69)

The major problem that often arises when studying African-American

communities is the failure of researchers to understand and provide a sense of humanity

to Black populations. Higher education scholarship also continues to adopt deficit

perspectives and use negative Black stereotypes inherent in society to glean resonance

and produce knowledge that continues to "other" and further demonize this population. "One might think that such an error could easily be alleviated by merely studying [African-Americans] as human beings" (Gordon, 2000, p. 71). Why aren't Black communities explored honestly and respectfully? Is their humanity always lost? Is it easier to be led by destructive assumptions when engaging Black research topics?

W.E.B. Du Bois (1968) once expressed, "I concluded that I did not know so much as I might about my own people" (p.198). Most remarkable about these words are that they appear in his one of his final works: the *Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy On Viewing My Life From The Last Decade Of Its First Century.* Much of Du Bois' scholarly endeavors delved into how Black communities interacted socially, inter-racially and intra-racially. By focusing on the social, Du Bois extended the U.S. discourse on "Blackness" into what was then and is even now placed on unfamiliar ground (Lewis, 2000). He challenged the dominant notions that existed about the social existence of Black communities in American society. Du Bois made the world truly think about the way that we perceive and ponder how Black individuals experience their existence. He created a space for researchers to engage African-Americans as human beings—complex creatures who think and feel.

During his reflections on his life and scholarly work, he admits that even though he had engaged and studied African-American communities in depth over a prolonged period of time that he was still left with questions. Du Bois informs us that while we may find answers about African-Americans during our research endeavors and even in our daily interactions, that we will undoubtedly still be left with questions. Because I do not

know all there is about my own people I am even more compelled to (re)search their

lived experiences.

Infinite Possibilities

Infinite possibilities
I can see them now
Infinite possibilities
I can feel them now
With infinite possibilities
Infinite...possibilities
Stand in the sun and see
(Larrieux, 2000, Track 6)

As I engage this study from a hermeneutic phenomenological stance, I know that

the many answers I find will be coupled with infinite possibilities for further questioning

once this study is complete.

> To *do* hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to
> construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to
> remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of
> meaning can reveal. (van Manen, 2007, p. 18)

An intense facet of phenomenology is the force that lies in the possibilities of the

impossible. I am reassured in knowing that I will not come to a single conclusion about

the experiences of low-income students and their encounters with class on elite HBCU

campuses. This study will not find a finite conclusion, but my hope is that others who

come into contact with my work will be prompted to explore and question further—that

they, too, will be called to action.

I now wonder though, where is the "soul" of the methods that are used to question

and seek answers to that which are African-American experiences? The preparation and

execution of human science research is "soulful" in its efforts to bring many meanings of

life's phenomena to our reflective awareness (van Manen, 2007).

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> A strong and rigorous human science text distinguishes itself by its courage and resolve to stand up for the uniqueness and significance of the notion to which it has dedicated itself. And what does it mean to stand up for something if one is not prepared to stand out? This means also that a rigorous human science is prepared to be "soft", "soulful", "subtle", and "sensitive"...(van Manen, 2007, p. 18)

Van Manen (2007) quotes Nietzsche and states that "Whoever is searching for the human being must first find the lantern" (p. 22). During my quest to gain a greater understanding of my phenomenon, *my* lanterns have lit a flame of courage within to illuminate souls—to recognize the humanity of those who have lived the phenomenon I am exploring. With the courage to stand, I also know that what also drives this study is the love I feel for African-American communities and historically Black colleges. Is there a place for love in scholarly research?

To Care: With Courage Comes Love

> I meet the other person in his or her weakness, vulnerability or innocence, I experience the undeniable presence of loving responsibility. (van Manen, 2007, p. 6)

> Then research is a caring act: we want to know that which is most essential to being. To care is to serve and to share our being with the one we love. We desire to truly know our loved one's very nature. (van Manen, 2007, p. 5)

A while ago I purchased two t-shirts. Both of them in my opinion express powerful messages. One states "I LOVE BLACK PEOPLE" and the other "I LOVE HBCUS." I know that when I wear these garments that the words emblazoned across my chest will convey two of my deepest feelings. I do love my people *and* the schools that were founded to educate us. My hope is that this is made quite apparent in this study. "One learns to know only what one loves, and the deeper and fuller the knowledge is to be, the more powerful and vivid must be the love, indeed the passion" (Binswanger,

1963, p. 83). My love for the people and places in this study rouses my fervor to engage

this phenomenon on a deeper level.

> In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick 'em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. (Morrison, 1987, p. 104)

We flesh! What is it to flesh? "Flesh" derives from the Old English meaning 'kindred."

Toni Morrison acknowledges that African-Americans as people share a united kinship as

human beings in our communities. In our pain we have fleshed. In love we have fleshed.

We live and experience our being in our flesh—flesh that is often misunderstood.

Together, we have been discarded and despised in the United States. As one, we have

not been loved.

"We can only understand something or someone for whom we care" (van Manen,

2007, p. 6). It is critical for me to assert my love and care for the schools and individuals

who are at the center of my phenomenon, especially because the topics that I confront are

sensitive subjects amongst Black communities. "Nowadays it is fashionable to talk about

race or gender; the uncool subject is class. It's the subject that makes us all tense,

nervous, and uncertain about where we stand" (hooks, 2000, p. vii). Where do I stand?

Not only is class at the forefront of this study, but I am also intersecting race in the

discussion.

> There are many details but I must not become lost. It is easy for us to lose ourselves in details in endeavoring to grasp and comprehend the real condition of a mass of human beings. We often forget that each unit in the mass is a throbbing human soul. (Du Bois, 1903/2003, p. 94)

I am care(ful) not to become lost in the details as I "do" phenomenology. I also do not forget that I am engaging and uncovering the "souls" of the people and places that are prominently underscored within this study. The etymology of "soul" reveals that it is an "instinctive quality felt by Black persons as an attribute." We as a people share a history that is filled with tremendous happiness and agony. Did my instincts lead me to phenomenology to uncover our many truths? Was it my keen kinship with Black people and as one who identifies with Black communities that led me to engage my phenomenon?

> The point of phenomenological research is to borrow other people's experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience. (van Manen, 2007, p. 62)

Within this scholarship I capture a unique African-American experience. I also dedicate these experiences back to those I love *and* those who are unknown to me. While I do have an immense devotion to HBCUs and Black communities, this has not stopped me from also being critical during my phenomenological journey. However, unlike others who share my skin and have completed prior study about our people, my critical lens is wrapped in care. *My people must know that I care!*

A Care(ful) Outlook

The tension that arises when studying African-Americans and their class positions in society is raw, flagrant and palpable in this study. These anxieties become even more intense when HBCU environments are added to the discourse. This study has been a powerful undertaking because as a researcher I have been present with not only my pain, but the hurt of others that derives from "hidden injuries" that are inflicted by social class.

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There are emotionally hurtful forms of class difference inherent in our cultures that often cause many African-Americans to simply suffer in silence. Social class is quite complex in that we measure our value against those values that society attaches a social premium (Sennett & Cobb, 1972).

> To the degree that we can simply be present with our pain, we are engaged in a process that opens a new dimension of its truth, and we therefore make ourselves available for a new disclosure of its deeper historical meaning. (Levin, 1985, p. 88)

Warnings flood my mind. They come from everywhere, but, they are alleviated in my knowing that my study is wrapped in care. While I care, I am also anxious and careful. I am aware that my work will force not only African-Americans but non-Black communities to grapple with and face topics that have been and are quite distressing. Could it be that the anxiety and angst that society, especially those who identify with Black communities, comes from a place of care. Conversely, is the reason that I am so careful as I engage this study due to my own anxieties? Care, concern, and anxiety are incredibly intertwined. Care derives from the Old English *cearian* meaning to "be anxious; to feel concern or interest." The etymology of care reveals that although we as human beings are concerned with others that these feelings also have the potential to manifest in anxiety.

"The phenomenon of care in its totality is essentially something that cannot be torn asunder" (Heidegger, 1962/2008, p. 194). The concept of care is quite strong and apparent in this phenomenological exploration. Heidegger (1962/2008) contends:

> Because Being-in-the-world is essentially care, Being-alongside the ready-to-hand could be taken as concern, and Being with the Daesein-with of Others as we encounter it within-the-world could be taken as solicitude. (p. 193)

Care is made complex because it also takes the form of solicitude. A difference is apparent. Concern relates to the "cares of this world" (Dreyfus, 1995, p. 239). Solicitude is a state that we share with people. What else does the concept of "care" reveal?

> In one's concern with the Others, there is constant care as to the way one differs from them, whether that difference is merely one that is to be evened out, whether one has lagged behind the Others and wants to catch up in relationship to them, or whether one's Dasein [self] already has some priority over them and sets out to keep them suppressed. (Heidegger, 1962/2008, p. 164)

> With concern for others comes the recognition of our differences. Heidegger

emphasizes that with difference there are demonstrations where individuals seek to "catch up." Upon detection of these differences what exactly do we seek to "catch up" to? He also acknowledges that while one may seek to equalize one's differences, there are individuals and forces that may suppress and shut them out of the mainstream.

Within elite HBCU environments there are differences with regard to social class that further highlight the diversity of the students who attend these schools. Are there forces within elite HBCU contexts that seek to both level and oppress or suppress those within? Do these students seek to "catch-up" to their more affluent peers? How do African-American low-income students on these campuses experience this aspect of care?

Complex Being(s): Lifting The Veil To See Through A Glass Darkly

> For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. (1 Corinthians, 13:12)

> In those somber forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself, darkly through a veil…He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another. (Du Bois, 1903/2003, p. 14)

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This phenomenological exploration embodies my fervent effort to uncover a

particular lived experience that has been veiled and concealed throughout history and in

the present. As I engage and interpretively render the encounters of how low-income

African-American students experience social class on elite HBCU campuses, I have

bared witness to their lives and worked tirelessly to show others their "being"—a state

that has been disguised, guarded, and masked amongst their own and by the majority.

How does phenomenology engage "Being?"

"So phenomenological research is a being-given-over to some quest, a true task, a

deep questioning of something that restores an original sense of what it means to be" (van

Manen, 2007, p. 31). In what manner does our "being" manifest in our everyday lives?

How is "being" made apparent in a phenomenological study? Conversely, how is

"being" veiled?

> We are ourselves entities to be analyzed. The Being of any such entity is in each
> case mine. The kind of Being which belongs to Dasein is of a sort which any of
> us may call his own. These entities, in their being, comport themselves towards
> their Being. To avoid getting bewildered, the term "existence", as a
> designation of Being will be allotted solely to Dasein. So when we designate
> this entity with the term 'Dasein', we are expressing not its "what" (as if it were a
> table, a house, or a tree) but its Being. (Heidegger, 1962/2008, p. 42)

As I "lift the veil" that cloaks the lived experiences of those who have encountered this

phenomenon, I am sensitive to the fact that human existence is a unique continuum

impacted by place and time. Human existence essentially takes place in time and

encompasses the past, present, and future; it is only radically limited upon death

(Heidegger, 1962/2008; Moran, 2000). Within this paradigm there also is a revealing and

concealing of "being." "Heidegger had spoken of this dynamic of revealing and

concealing, as a sending, or mission, or destiny of Being. Being 'gives itself', or

conceals itself" (Moran, 2000, p. 199). What parts of our lives are veiled in uncertainty or even concealed or kept from us by ourselves and by others? How does this veil manifest amongst Blacks in our society?

> Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from the world by a vast veil. I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows…for the world I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine. (Du Bois, 1903/2003, p. 10)

Du Bois showed that the veil is a lack of clarity that African-Americans have to see themselves outside of what White America describes and prescribes for them. I now ponder, what occurs when this veil hides and enforces stratification, secrets, and other intra-racial differences amongst White society *and* within Black communities? Du Bois' "veil" concept is widely interpreted as an obstruction, or the inability for White individuals to "see" the racial struggles that Blacks endure in the larger American societal context. But, this not-so-invisible veil also hangs boldly within Black communities. *What is the nature of truly feeling difference amongst your own?*

Low-income African-American students on elite HBCU campuses experience extreme changes during their time in college that are directly related to the cultures of their newfound campus contexts. They also endure major existential shifts as they negotiate their oppressed racial and socioeconomic identities. Are these experiences hidden or made apparent by *the veil*? Is the veil a source of separation? What does the veil conceal, or even reveal, on elite HBCU campuses? As a phenomenological researcher, I am tasked with illuminating the meaning of being-in-the-world or *Dasein* from those who have experienced this phenomenon from the inside of *their* everyday worlds. I accomplish this by carefully and thoughtfully lifting the veil.

The Complexity of "Dasein" In Our Everyday World

Dasein is a fundamental concept in hermeneutic phenomenology—a Heideggarian term used to portray that entity or specific aspect of our humanity which is able to wonder about its existence and inquire into its own being (Heidegger, 1962/2008; van Manen, 2007). When we wonder about our existence we delve further into our complex natures. *Dasein* is so much more than mere individual existence. *Dasein* exposes our true vulnerability to live and be in a constant state of existential complexity. "As long as Dasein is, there is something in it that remains open, something that is and can become" (Levin, 1985, p. 6). *Dasein* encompasses our relation to others, the manner in which we "see" ourselves and our existence in the life-world. Like my phenomenon it has *not* been easily captured.

> We mortals are alone among all other beings in existing through self awareness. We are therefore so constituted that, even if we do not question, do not think very deeply, we still cannot entirely avoid the sense that our being, and indeed being as a whole, are always in question. Most of us, caught up as we are in a web of relationships with a multitude of beings, do not pause to think very deeply about Being as such, our inherence in Being as a whole, and our understanding of Being as a whole in its decisive relation to our own Being, i.e., our potential for becoming, each one of us, an individuated Self. (Levin, 1985, p. 9)

We must take time to pause and truly reflect on our relations with ourselves and with others in-the-world. This is not an easy task, especially because our worlds are so complex. A critical element of *Dasein* is its manner to always be in a world—*Dasein* is world-involved and world-disclosing (Heidegger, 1962/2008). What is the "world?" World in this instance is a context or environment where myriad meanings reside (Heidegger, 1962/2008). The "world" in this study is the elite HBCU campus and the society that the students who live this phenomenon encounter. Both are intricately intertwined with self and history.

We are historical beings who belong to history (Gadamer, 1960/2012). "Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live" (p. 278). The histories of elite HBCUs and those of African-American low-income students in our world summon the need for me as a researcher to recognize the eminent impact that these facets have on how I interpret these aspects of being in the world and with others; however, *Dasein* is *still* veiled. As we exist in our humanity we *still* conceal. But, we are delivered too.

> This characteristic of Dasein's Being – this 'that it is' – is veiled in its 'whence' and 'whither', yet disclosed in itself all the more unveiledly; we call it the 'thrownness' of this entity into its 'there'; indeed, it is thrown in such a way that, as Being-in-the-world, it is the 'there'. The expression 'thrownness' is meant to suggest the facticity of its being delivered over. (Heidegger, 1962/2008, p. 135)

What are we delivered over into? How does one feel this deliverance? We are definitely "thrown" into some-thing—it is the world. Heidegger emphatically proclaims that we are 'thrown' into the world and that our Being-in-the-world is a state of "thrownness" (Heidegger, 1962/2008). This concept illustrates that we experience our world with no prior knowledge or option in a world that was there before and will remain after we are gone (Steiner, 1978). Beings, places, and an existence precedes us even before we come into our being—our existence.

> Basically, the difficulty derives from the fact that the typical, consensually validated understanding of Being, the shallow understanding which is characteristic of everyone-and-anyone, and which we all tend to in-habit without giving it deep and original thought, reduces Being to thinghood…Thus, we must recognize that the misunderstanding is both deep and pervasive, and that despite the fact that we are gifted by nature with a true, if only rudimentary pre-understanding of Being-as-a-whole, both the world we live in and our own inveterate tendencies stand in the way of our access to an authentically lived ontical understanding. (Levin, 1985, pp. 11-12)

It is evident that being is an intricate human state. *Dasein* for my co-researchers, their

being in our world, during their time as low-income African-American students at elite

HBCUs is unique—it is their experience, as mine will infinitely be mine.

> *Dasein* is our form of human existence, our way of being-in-the-world. It is a
> concept that goes beyond the conceptual. It eludes apprehension and
> comprehension; and yet, its presence allows for comprehension. *Dasein* is that
> capacity human beings have which allows us to wonder about our existence, our
> being- in-the-world. The concept of *Dasein* is fundamental to hermeneutic
> phenomenology for without our capacity to wonder, human beings would not be
> able to interpret experience in the world, nor would we even be called to question,
> and being called to question is what allows hermeneutic phenomenology to exist.
> (Eddy, 2008, p. 116)

Dasein allows me to disclose. I embrace this phenomenon in its time, in its place,

and engage its being. Many truths are provided. *Dasein* provided a space for myself and

my co-researchers to travel this phenomenological journey together. We once

encountered the phenomenon separately, but now we have shared its meaning together—

we communed.

I Should Be Watched: Audaciously Heeding My Call To Phenomenology

Don't expect to see any explosion today.
It's too early…
Or too late.
I'm not the bearer of absolute truths.
I honestly think, however, it's time some things were said.
Things I'm going to say, not shout.
I've long given up shouting.
A long time ago…
Why am I writing this?
Nobody asked me to.
Especially not those for whom it is intended.
(Fanon, 1952/2008, p. xi)

When a Black man is able to quote and use European philosophy in his efforts to

proclaim his existence, then he is surely starting something and should be watched

(Fanon, 1952/2008). What am I starting? Who should watch me? I now stand on the impetus of a limitless horizon. "What is one to think of all these manifestations, all these limitations, all these acts" (Fanon, 1952/2008, p. 126)? Throughout my phenomenological journey, I have been warned. I have also been encouraged. The time has now come for me to journey into what I "know" so that I may un-cover the unknown.

My phenomenological journey is quite invigorating. I am renewed by its lessons and feel empowered as a researcher. It has truly been a privilege. Yes, tensions are ever-present, but, they are necessary for each of us who choose to "do" this work. If we are not (pre)sent and able to live in our complexity, then how can we aptly illuminate our phenomenon in others we choose to engage on our phenomenological paths?

My experiences as a low-income student on an elite HBCU campus forever impacted my life and led me to engage these encounters with others.   "For something to display certain essential properties does not necessarily mean that we know for sure where it ends and another object begins" (Eagleton, 1996, p. 98). My phenomenological path has many beginnings. I believe that it first commenced during my time at Howard during *my* lived experiences with social class. It also began again before the start of my doctoral studies when I was again called to my phenomenon by "The Book." However, my journey almost came to a sudden halt due to fear, but, thankfully I began to and am now heeding my call to this work. How shall my path be illuminated?

In my efforts to show my phenomenon in others so that I may reveal their encounters to a wider audience, van Manen (2007) provides phenomenological research activities to inform my work. These activities are not specific steps to be completed in a rigidly direct or sequential fashion. "The paths (methods) cannot be determined by fixed

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signposts" (van Manen, 2007, p. 29). These six research endeavors are provided to lead

the phenomenological researcher to find his or her own way inside their phenomenon of

choice. Van Manen's (2007) human science research components as outlined in his work

Researching Lived Experience are as follows:

1. Turning to a phenomena that seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (pp. 30-31)

Again, although I present these research activities in a rather linear and direct manner,

they are not undeviating guidelines. Each are joined and influences the other within the

human science research process.

Turning to the Phenomenon That Seriously Commits Us to the World

Every project of phenomenological inquiry is driven by a commitment of turning
to an abiding concern. (van Manen, 2007, p. 31)

In Chapter One, I shared how this phenomenon is indelibly a part of my

existence—my lived world. I was turned and showed my (re)turn to this portion of my

being. The phenomenological turn is the realization that in one's concerned interest with

a phenomenon that one must recognize their understanding, presuppositions,

assumptions, and biases that are present during interpretation and understanding. My

encounters with class during my time as a low-income student on an elite HBCU campus

are an intrinsic part of me. These experiences were informed by my past, impact my

present, and affect my future. My life was forever changed.

Lived experience does not confront me as something perceived or represented; it
is not given to me, but the reality of lived experience is there-for-me because I
have a reflexive awareness of it, because I posses it immediately as belonging to
me in some sense. (Dilthey, 1908/1985, p. 223)

I have constantly been aware of my phenomenon's presence. My experiences do belong to me, but the phenomenological turn also signals the opportunity to yield understanding in others. "To think is to confine yourself to a single thought that one day stands still like a star in the world's sky" (Heidegger, 1962/2008, p. 4). My focus on my phenomenon does not mean that I am consumed or overwhelmed, but, rather I am recognizing and "minding the whole" (van Manen, 2007, p. 31). I am focused on the commitment I have made to engage and explore.

The phenomenologist is tasked with inspiring others and evoking fresh possibilities—to make known that which has not been known before. Those who engage this work are also aware that their start is not an end. "The hermeneutic turn signals a moment in a complex struggle, a moment marked by its admission of incompleteness and probably impossible closure" (Gordon, 2000, p. 63). Turning to a phenomenon is a rather circuitous process. Its impact is constantly felt, but its influence is only made apparent when one recognizes its force—when one is "truly given over" and then made able to walk phenomenology's path. I did not know what I would find as I delved even further into the issues of class within African-American communities present on elite HBCU campuses. What I do know is that my call to action illuminates and has (un)silenced an uncomfortable topic amongst my people. My hope is that this dissertation will now bring new awareness and incite critical discourse amongst Black and HBCU communities, and the field of higher education as a whole.

Investigating Experience as It Is Lived

The life-world, the world of lived experience, is both the source and the object of phenomenological research. (van Manen, 2007, p. 54)

Phenomenona are shown, *not* told, in human science research. As we investigate everyday experiences and how they are lived, we often draw first from our personal experiences. We seek to highlight how our individual encounters have the potential to be recognized as the possible experiences of others (van Manen, 2007). "However, the phenomenologist does not want to trouble the reader with purely private, autobiographical facticities of one's life" (van Manen, 2007, p. 54). In our efforts to extend and display how phenomena exist, phenomenological researchers move beyond the personal and consult myriad sources in our everyday worlds to further breathe life into the phenomenon's existence.

The ability to engage sources of inspiration beyond extant higher education literature to engage my study was one of the aspects of hermeneutic phenomenology that ultimately attracted me to "do" this work. Within this research activity we as phenomenologists are able to draw upon experiential resources as we investigate lived experience including interviews, observations, literature, the tracing of etymological sources, and art. I have used many of these and even more. Song lyrics, television scripts, and even biographical memoirs have allowed me to convey what it is like to be a low-income African-American student on an elite HBCU campus. These "texts" revealed so much. The key to these forms of exploration lies in the language used to bring them forth.

It has become quite apparent to me that while doing this work, the words and the language that we all use are much more powerful than I had once perceived. Van Manen (2007) states:

Ordinary language is in some sense a huge reservoir in which the incredible variety of richness of human experience is deposited. The problem often is

that these deposits have silted, crusted, or fossilized in such a way that the original contact with our primordial experiences is broken (p. 61).

This sentiment is compelling and made me think: Am I always using my words correctly? Do I truly know the meaning to the witty quips that are often peppered throughout my conversations with friends and family? How was the power of language revealed to me in this study? What I now realize is that language, words, *and* the way in which we choose to use them in phenomenological sources is powerful during investigations of lived experience; they influence and illustrate our existences. This is especially important to consider.

Phenomenological sources allow us to reflect even more deeply on the way we make sense of the lived experiences we study. They also allow us to see our limits while transcending them so that we may illuminate the inherent possibilities in our phenomenon of pursuit (van Manen, 2007). I have been fortunate to un-cover plentiful sources of inspiration to inform my work as I engage this phenomenological journey.

Refection on Essential Themes that Characterize the Phenomenon

> Making something of a text of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure— grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of seeing. (van Manen, 2007, p. 79)

Attaining essential themes is vital in phenomenology, for these "themes" greatly inform the phenomenon that is pursued *and* uncovered when doing this work. Themes are essential components of phenomenological studies. They are experiential structures that not only highlight and underscore lived experiences, but, provide "insightful invention, discovery, or disclosure" (van Manen, 2007, p. 79). Phenomenological themes

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are also a manner in which phenomenologists capture the phenomenon they seek to understand (van Manen, 2007).

> Phenomenological themes are not objects or generalizations; metaphorically speaking they are more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes. (van Manen, 2007, p. 90)

The act of thematizing in phenomenology allows the researcher to reflect deeply and glean meaning from the many parts inherent in the whole of the phenomenon being studied. Themes "are the stars that make up the universe of meaning we live through," and "by the light of these themes we can navigate and explore" (van Manen, 2007, p. 90). How do we grasp these themes? Van Manen offers three methods and each bestows the phenomenologist with a way inside of this research activity to reveal and make meaning.

First, the wholisitc or sententious approach attends to text as a whole and seeks to capture essential meaning and significance from the texts used to underscore the phenomenon (van Manen, 2007). Next, the selective reading approach obtains key statements or phrases that are especially revealing about the lived experience being shown (van Manen, 2007). In this approach statements are circled, underlined, or highlighted during "analysis." Lastly, the detailed or line-by-line approach adopts a manner where the phenomenologist "looks at every single sentence or sentence cluster and asks, 'What does this sentence or sentences reveal about the phenomenon'" (van Manen, 2007, p. 93).

Un-covering the themes that are inherent in my phenomenon has allowed me to render and elucidate meaning from the many parts of the lived experienced being studied. Themes allow phenomenologists the opportunity to bring the reader further into the phenomenon. The goals of thematic descriptions are to underscore specific facets while

remaining true to the unique essence of the phenomenon being studied. I did not limit myself to one of the three manners that were available to me during this critical process.

I desired to engage and unveil the infinite possibilities that were inherent within the phenomenon of being a low-income student within an elite HBCU context and how they chose to engage social class by utilizing the wholisitc and selective approaches. I listened to each conversation several times and also constantly read and re-read the transcripts. There were also occasions when I would listen to a conversation and then have to read and re-read the accompanying transcript to glean additional meaning. While an often times daunting and repetitious process, it was also pivotal in my meaning making process.

As I engaged the voices amongst the narratives that were also accompanied by "texts" I noticed subtle nuances. I often noted words and colloquial language that re-occurred and would have to re-visit these loaded terms in order to uncover their complex meanings. There were other instances where I recognized different phrases and lengthy passages that I knew could be woven into the tapestry of this phenomenon. I used these passages to further *show* and not *tell* the phenomenon being uncovered in this study. . While three approaches are provided, I could not confine myself to just one because it held the possibility to further conceal the abundant meanings and possibilities that were inherent in this phenomenological exploration.

Bringing Forth the Phenomenon through the Art of Writing and Rewriting

> The art of writing, like the art of speaking, is not an end itself…(Gadamer, 1960/2012, p. 395)

> For the human sciences, and specifically for hermeneutical phenomenological work, writing is closely fused into the research activity and reflection itself. (van Manen, 2007, p. 125)

Human science research requires a commitment to write…writing for a human science researcher is not just a supplementary activity. (van Manen, 2007, p. 126)

The rigor of human science research lies in the consistent acts of writing and re-writing. During the writing process phenomenologists do not seek an end, but to illuminate potential in possibility. The processes of researching, reflecting, reading, and writing are seen as indistinguishable in human science research (van Manen, 2007). Within this methodology, "Research does not merely involve writing; research is the work of writing—writing is its very essence" (Barthes, 1986, p. 316). Mastering the "art" of writing and re-writing is far from an easy process. During the phenomenological writing process, the phenomenologist does not only "live" with his own experiences and those of others, the researcher is also ever present and also "lives" with the text he is providing, so that he may aptly convey lived experiences.

Live derives from the Old English meaning "to be, to have life, to experience." Being is expressed in this work. Life for the low-income African-American student on an elite HBCU campus is further divulged. The word *live* originates from the German *liben* meaning to "remain, continue, persist, and persevere." During my engagement with this work I worked tirelessly to show how these students stood in their human existence. They live, persist, and persevere in higher education environments that were once unknown to them, but then they become familiar. I have written and re-written so that I am able to convey these students' lived experiences with social class on elite HBCU campuses.

Ahead lies mystery
All of fate's a chance
But all is fair
It's either good or bad

I had to go away
A writer takes his pen
To write the words again
It's either good or bad
(Wonder, 1973, Track 7)

When crafting phenomenological texts there *is* mystery. Is this process always fair? During the writing process, there was an intense mystery. I did not know what I would (un)cover within the lived experiences that were bestowed to me—they would unfold through textual rendering. Did I uncover pain? Was there joy? I was constantly aware that what I hoped to underscore in this study would evoke various responses in the reader.

Throughout my human science research process, I often became frustrated with the words I would write. I found myself having to take a step back and "go away" from this research project. But, even when I was "removed" from the writing process I was constantly reflecting and seeking inspiration so that I could write. I took time so that I could continue to engage. In hermeneutic phenomenology, writing is thinking *and* thinking is writing. Even while "away" I was "writing", and these periods were joined with times when I literally took my "pen" and wrote again.

When the eminent philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre began to age he found writing became quite difficult for him (van Manen, 1989, 2007). Sartre (1977) once expressed, "I still think…but because writing has become impossible for me the real activity of thought has in some way been repressed" (p. 5). Sartre was addressing the critical effects that his loss of sight created for him as author *and* thinker; for him, writing was not just a "mere moment in the intellectual life of [a] thinker" (van Manen, 1989, p. 28). Writing and thinking for Sartre were his forums to engage others through true erudition. His

statements further reveal that "writing is the method" in hermeneutic phenomenology

(van Manen, 1989, p. 28).

During the writing and rewriting processes, I was provided the chance to question

the text during this research activity. Hermeneutic phenomenology provides

conversations with others, *and* with the phenomenological texts being produced. The

reader will find questions throughout the study. This form of questioning is when the

phenomenon truly unfolds. Phenomenology requires a written going back and forth

among diverse levels of questioning (van Manen, 2007). This questioning comprises an

internal dialogue with ourselves and externally with others. "The methodology of

phenomenology, to be able to do justice to the fullness and ambiguity of the experience

of the life-world [is when] writing may turn into a complex process of rewriting (re-

thinking, re-flecting, re-cognizing)" (van Manen, 1989, p. 32). During my constant

engagement with phenomenological texts, I was thoughtfully aware that their foundations

were formed through writing and re-writing throughout this research process.

Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Pedagogical Relation

> Unless the researcher remains strong in his or her orientation to the fundamental
> question or notion, there will be many temptations to get side-tracked or to
> wander aimlessly and indulge in wishy-washy speculations, to settle for
> preconceived opinions and conceptions, to become enchanted with narcissistic
> reflections or self-indulgent preoccupations…(van Manen, 2007, p. 33)

HBCU communities have provided higher education researchers with many

questions that have guided a plethora of studies. How did these schools come to be?

How do HBCU students experience these institutions inside and outside of the

classroom? Those who have chosen to research these environments have found many

answers to the aforementioned. However, over the past 40 years, although we as a

scholarly community have conducted a myriad of research on these institutions, we still have questions that orient us to (un)cover even more (Gasman, Nguyen, & Kalam, 2013). "Overall, little to no research has examined the intersection of identities, including race and class on the experiences of Black undergraduate students, particularly those at HBCUs" (Gasman, Nguyen, & Kalam, 2013, p. 222). The scant research on intra-racial difference amongst Black communities on HBCU campuses has oriented me to address this gaping hole in the extant higher education research.

Van Manen (2007) expresses "We are not simply being pedagogues here and researchers there – we are researchers oriented to the world in a pedagogic way" (van Manen, 2007, p. 151). Phenomenological researchers do not separate their lives from their research. As a student of higher education, one of my foremost goals in this work is to inform my field in a pedagogical manner. I can only accomplish this by remaining oriented to my research endeavor. What does this mean? Pedagogy does not only include classroom or teaching contexts. The experiences that low-income African-American students have on elite HBCU campuses inform other diverse educational spaces where these students learn in formal and informal manners. I have sought to produce a phenomenological study that is strong, rich, deep, and oriented to the question that guides this study: **What are the lived experiences of class for low-income African-American students at elite HBCUs?**

> Research on the social class identities of undergraduate students at HBCUs is limited. Although researchers acknowledge that many HBCU students are low income-students, researchers almost never combine this fact with the issue of race…there are intra-racial differences among Blacks and class is one of those differences. (Gasman, Nguyen, & Kalam, 2013, p. 225)

I have maintained an orientation to this project and sustained focus throughout the

research process. I was led by this orientation so that I could produce strong and rich

phenomenological texts that show lived experiences that are rarely explored within

higher education contexts. These experiences are presented to provide holistic

pedagogical insights meant to enhance educational research.

Balancing the Research Context by Considering Parts and Whole

Within phenomenological research it is critical to maintain a balanced research

context. Phenomenologists engage extremely diverse research environments made up of

many "parts" that must then be made into a cohesive "whole." It is easy to become

overwhelmed, but recognizing the significance of each part of the research project is key

to achieving the balance that is vital to engage in human science research. "One needs to

constantly measure the overall design of the study against the significance that the parts

play in the total textual structure" (van Manen, 2007, p. 33). I engaged many parts in this

study including my role as researcher, various "texts," and my co-researchers, just to

name a few, so that I was able to strike a delicate balance to bring for the lived-

experiences I have (un)covered.

> A certain openness is required in human science research that allows for choosing
> directions and exploring techniques, procedures, and sources that are not always
> foreseeable at the outset of a research project. (van Manen, 2007, p. 162)

As I delved further into this phenomenological study I knew that I had to remain

open to fresh phenomenological directions. Many possibilities presented themselves, but,

I did not "get stuck" or "fail to arrive" to the clearings that gave these lived experiences

the power they needed to evoke the necessary pedagogical insights I needed to bestow

(van Manen, 2007, p. 33). Thoughtful contemplation of all the parts and the whole of this study were taken into account during my endeavors to show this phenomenon to others.

Homecoming: (Re)Turning To the Familiar To (Un)Cover A Phenomenon

> However much we may think we may prefer to think of what happens in a place rather than of the place itself, we are tied to place undetectably and without reprieve. (Casey, 1993/2009, p. xii)

Each Fall HBCU graduates come from across the world to (re)turn "home" and celebrate their schools during homecoming events. These events are huge occurrences—special occasions where former students come back to the places they love—to reunite with old friends and remember their undergraduate years. HBCU homecomings are prominent events for these institutions. When I reflect on my experiences with the homecomings I have attended, I always first hear the word "home" and it immediately makes me think of the song "Home" made popular by Stephanie Mills (Dorothy from the Broadway production of *The Wiz*).

When I think of home
I think of a place
Where there's love overflowing
I wish I was home
I wish I was back there
With the things I've been knowing
(Smalls, 1989, Track 3)

This song describes the feelings that *should* be invoked when one thinks of possibly returning "home" and attending homecoming. I now recall the lyrics and I question them, too, while reflecting on how when (re)turning to these places they can evoke many emotions. Are these "homes" places where there is love overflowing? Should one wish they were back there, because perhaps some do not?

I consider this phenomenological exploration to be a "homecoming" of sorts. As

I engaged with my co-researchers, we all in a sense returned "home" to rekindle

memories, and share our experiences together so that we could make meaning of the

lived experiences of how low-income African American students experience class within

elite HBCU environments. How did these memories bring us back to the "places" that

are placed directly in the center of this (re)search?

> So memory brings us back into the domain of the actual and the already elapsed:
> to what has been…If we are rarely securely in place and ever seemingly out of
> place, it behooves us to understand what place is all about. (Casey, 1993/2009, p.
> xvii)

> Over the years I have questioned my friends and acquaintances who attended

Howard with me as to why they may or may not have chosen to attend homecoming since

we graduated. These conversations evoke passionate emotions. Two responses stand out

to me. One friend told me:

> I have not gone back on purpose, I was in an abusive relationship with Howard
> University for 4 years, and I am just not ready to go back and see those people, to
> even see that place…I do not like feeling like that 19 year old I once
> was…(Samara)

Samara communicates the pain with place that comes with the lived experiences that are

featured within this phenomenological exploration. She did not want to re-visit home.

Her response alerts me to the state of "painful place" that I encountered within this study.

My other friend had an opposite response from Samara. She once told me:

> I go back every year because homecoming is a time for me to go to a place I love
> and see people I miss…Howard forever changed my life…Homecoming is
> humbling for me because I am given time to remember where I came from, where
> I am now, and where I am going. I am uplifted because Howard will forever
> mean so much to me. (Angela)

Angela provides insight into an opposite spectrum I came across during my research journey. She loves and reveres her alma mater and does not mind (re)turning to her memories because they provide her with joy. Both Samara and Angela were low-income African-American students during their time on an elite HBCU campus. They alert me to the importance of place and how place has the power to bring us either into spaces of elation or hurt even when we depart from them. Place matters, both in our everyday existence and how we evolve and grow into our future selves (Casey, 1993/2009).

> Despite the costly character of an accelerated life, it remains the case that where we are—the place we occupy, however briefly—has everything to do with what and who we are (and finally, that we are). This is so at the present moment: where you are right now is not a matter of indifference but affects the kind of person you are, what you have been doing in the past, even what you will be doing in the future. (Casey, 1993/2009, p. xiii).

We are inextricably tied to the places we have encountered throughout our lives. As we move through life and live, the places where we have dwelled are forever a part of our human existence. They have profound effects in the present and the future. It has been made clear from the conversations I have had surrounding this phenomenon that there are challenges for those I chose to engage and how they decided to re-visit their pasts. I was also challenged as I sought others to continue to walk this phenomenological journey with me.

A Bold Request: Finding Those Who Will (Re)Turn To "Class"

It is a bold request to ask one to knowingly re-visit places and moments in their pasts that may be uncomfortable. Mentioned previously, when I engage others who shared my ancestry with this topic I have been met with either resistance or enthusiasm. I am thoughtfully aware of the sensitivity of my dissertation topic and the manner in which I engaged others to participate in my study. Those who are marginalized in society due

to their oppressed identities may feel unsafe to participate in research, particularly if they are being requested to involve themselves in especially vulnerable topics (North, 2010).

In phenomenological research, "The researcher develops a certain moral obligation to his or her participant that should prevent a sheer exploitative situation" (van Manen, 2007, p. 98). I am cognizant of my ethical concerns for my co-researchers who participated in this study. Due to my concern and state of care, in order to protect my co-researchers, their identities are kept confidential throughout the study. They allowed me to *borrow* from their lives so that I am now able to bring forth their lived experiences (van Manen, 2007).

Those who chose to participate in this hermeneutic inquiry became co-investigators during the study (van Manen, 2007). A partnership was established. "It has been noticed by those conducting hermeneutic interviews that the volunteers or participants of the study often invest more than a passing interest in the research project in which they have willingly involved themselves" (van Manen, 2007, p. 98). There is intense reflective work that is done on the part of the researcher and those they engage before, during, and after conversations have taken place.

I am thankful for the relationships I have built personally and professionally throughout my doctoral study. It is through these relationships that I was able to recruit ten individuals to participate in my study. In order to recruit co-researchers, I contacted members of an extended network that I have developed throughout my professional career and through relationships forged with members of the extended Howard and Hampton University alumni communities. I contacted the previously mentioned entities via e-mail (See Appendix C), phone, and face-to-face meetings. I also strongly believe in

the power of social media as these outlets have proven to be extremely helpful during my research pursuits. During my investigation of this phenomenon I engaged my communities present on social media outlets, including Facebook and Twitter, and they were highly beneficial during my pursuits to recruit study participants.

I was also extremely mindful that during my recruitment process I would possibly be presented with more than ten individuals to engage with me in my study. I was. Focused, exploratory research and the quality of the experiences matters more than the quantity of participants involved (McCracken, 1988). I ultimately made a decision regarding who to include in the total number and was aware that for this type of work "quality" is what I sought, not "quantity."

My Co-Researchers: Once Apart and Now Together

The participants in this study are alumni of private, selective HBCU contexts—specifically Hampton University and Howard University. We once experienced this phenomenon separately—in our pasts, in our own time. We came together to share and bring forth our lived experiences collectively. Given the unique focus of this study I sought to obtain co-researchers that were *purposeful* in nature.

The logic and power of "purposeful" engagement in qualitative research lies in selecting those where one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research project (Patton, 2002). Fortunately, I was able to find individuals with whom I was able to glean tremendous understanding, and thus increase awareness of the depth of their lived experiences. Due to the insights I obtained from preliminary conversations and the in-depth research I completed on African-American communities and social class, I sought diverse co-researchers to engage.

Just as Black communities are diverse in nature, their involvements with class based norms are just as distinct. Again, first and foremost African-Americans are not a monolithic entity. Class amongst these communities has many "faces." Context and place are extremely important to consider. For example, middle to upper-class Blacks who live in Colorado and California white water raft and ski in keeping with the recreational habits of the general population in those areas. These interests are not readily associated with African American communities; however, it is apparent that Blacks do enjoy these pastimes (Prince, 2006). Conversely, those who are Black and low-income in various parts of the United States also engage and live their lives in unique fashions. The experience of a rural low-income student who was raised on a farm is going to be quite different from one who was raised in an apartment complex in New York City.

During the recruitment of my co-researchers I sought ten participants to capture the diversity I sought. I succeeded. The criteria was as follows:

Primary Criteria

- Self-identify as either low-income or working class. These class designations were based on how my co-researcher felt they most identified while in college, *not* their current socio-economic statuses.

- Co-researchers were Pell eligible[24] during their time in college.

- Each co-researcher completed an undergraduate degree from one of the universities at least three years prior to their interviews.

- Co-researchers graduated between the years of 2001 to 2010.

- Co-researchers equally represented Howard University and Hampton University.

- There was equal gender representation amongst the co-researchers that I engage.

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[24]The Federal Pell Grant Program provides need-based grants to low-income undergraduate students to promote access to postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

Secondary Criteria

- At least one co-researcher grew up in the Northern region of the United States.

- At least one co-researcher grew up in the Southern region of the United States.

- At least one co-researcher grew up in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States.

- At least one co-researcher grew up in the Western region of the United States.

- At least one co-researcher grew up in the Mid-Western region of the United States.

The intent of these criteria was not to "sample" different aspects of the phenomenon in order to generalize, but, a diversity of perspectives is needed to provide rich textual accounts of the lived experiences that are then interpreted.

This study joins the narratives and lived experiences of ten individuals who were low-income African-Americans *and* experienced social class within their respective elite HBCU environments. As I identified co-researchers for this study, I sent an introductory e-mail (See Appendix D), and from there entered into conversations and engaged the additional research activities that were needed to complete this research project. My desire was that that my co-researchers would be eager to engage with me about their irreplaceable journeys and would also be enthusiastic to "do" the demanding work of uncovering lived experience.

Genuine Conversation: (Re)Establishing Kinship

> Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as said and transposes himself into the other to such an extant that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. (Gadamer, 1960/2012, p. 397)

A major strength of phenomenology is the manner in which conversations are used to capture the essence of the phenomenon being explored. In other qualitative traditions semi-structured interviews are often used as a primary source of data collection. A list of questions is created and formed into an interview protocol that is then used when interviewing participants. Patton (2002) contends:

> This form of interviewing provides topics or subject areas so that the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject…it makes sure that the interviewer has carefully decided how best to use the limited time available in an interview situation. (Patton, 2002, p. 343)

Patton's assertion regarding this form of questioning places great emphasis on the interviewer. This type of questioning "frees" the researcher to *probe* and *explore*. Is this experience free(ing) to the participant as they are being probed and explored? The interviewer is also described as *illuminating* the subject through *their* questioning. Is this true? If the researcher is illuminating the phenomenon then what role does the participant play? Are they not sharing their perspective too? Are they not aiding during the process? It is also described as a questioning that occurs within time restriction. Can a researcher truly enforce a time limit during engagement and truly uncover the essence being sought?

The parameters of the semi-structured interview are in stark contrast to the manner of conversing that occurs within phenomenology. During phenomenological research, conversations are used in conjunction with other phenomenological resources to capture the phenomenon being studied. Gadamer (1960/2012) contends that "in a conversation, you are far less the leader than the led" (p. 345). Li (2002) further states:

> [A] conversation draws the participants together and creates a shared space. A conversational world turns into one world. By sharing something (a certain thought, a landscape, a poem, or a story) we enter the shared world and we

become this world. And conversely, a good conversation not only creates a shared world, but is also created by this shared world. (p. 93)

Importance is placed on a collective kinship rather than engagement that may embody a hierarchical positioning between researcher and participant. During phenomenological study the researcher spends a great deal of time with conversant. Can this be done when limited semi-structured interviews are being used as a primary source of inquiry? Prolonged engagement is key in phenomenology and requires the researcher(s) to invest sufficient time in relating to the phenomena and with participants (Hasan, 2004).

> Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even we become involved in it…No one knows in advance what will 'come out' of a conversation…All this shows [is] that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears own truth within it—i.e., that it allows something to 'emerge' which henceforth exists. (Gadamer, 1960/2012, p. 385)

Conversations are one method within phenomenological research that allow for an intimate commitment to the phenomenon being studied *and* to the participants whose stories are being borrowed to unveil the matters in question. It is through conversations that we make lived experience known. This manner of phenomenological inquiry is much more organic than "traditional" social science interviews where questions are prepared and adhered to with little to no deviation (Monahan-Kresihman, 2012).

> In phenomenology, there is a question and response interplay, and there is greater freedom for the researcher…If a participant says something that could lead to deeper meaning via a further probing question, there is room for the phenomenologist to move in that direction. Doing so allows the conversation to delve deeper with questions and comments that may encourage the participant to disclose at the level necessary of a true phenomenological study. (Monaham-Kreisham, 2012, pp. 168-169)

I conducted two one-on-one conversations that lasted between two to three hours with each co-researcher. Before the start of each initial conversation, I gave an overview

of the research project and reviewed a demographic questionnaire (See Appendix E) that

each co-researcher completed. Once the overview of the project and demographic

questionnaire were completed, I then explained and had my co-researchers sign the

Institutional Review Board (IRB) forms (See Appendix F for Consent Form). Once these

informational logistics were completed, I then entered into conversations with my co-

researchers. Phenomenological conversations do not yield to a scripted list of questions,

but, I did consider the following as I engaged in the conversations that were critical for

this study:

- What drew you to the HBCU environment?

- What images come to mind when you think of [insert institution name]?

- What does [insert institution name] mean to you?

- How was the HBCU environment different from the one in which you grew up?

- What was your first year at [insert institution name] like for you? What stands
  out as most memorable?

- How did you feel amongst your peers while at [insert institution name]?

- What was it like for you when you began to return home after you had begun to
  attend [insert institution name]?

Once individual face-to-face conversations concluded, a third and final meeting

occurred. I gathered six of my co-researchers together, and they were able to engage the

phenomenon of being a low-income African-American student at an elite HBCU. The

conversation began with pre-college experiences and how "My Perfect Ten" decided to

attend their respective elite HBCUs. It then moved into how they were impacted by

social class during college. I was impressed with the comfort that my co-researchers felt

with each other. The conversation soon evolved and they even delved into issues that

they still face today regarding their new found social class status, familial shifts, and the insecurities that some of them still reconcile daily as they negotiate their myriad identities.

Because these encounters held the potential to lead to the development of unplanned and unpredicted topics, I was aware that my participants could experience anxiety and become triggered during this process. There were tears and long pauses during our conversations. These encounters became intense but were also often times cathartic to both myself as the researcher and my co-researchers. Together, we were given the opportunity to address personal issues that are not discussed on a consistent basis. "The art of the *hermeneutic interview* is to keep the question open" (van Manen, 2007, p. 98). In these conversations I questioned this phenomenon from the heart, from the center of the central question being explored (van Manen, 2007). It is through the art of indulging in conversational questioning that I was led to illuminate authentic phenomenological understanding.

Engaging the Past in the Present To Further Question: The Power of A Letter

> Whatever I encounter in my past now sticks to me as memories or as near forgotten experiences that somehow leave their traces on my being—the way I carry myself (hopeful or confident, defeated or worn out), the gestures I have adopted and made my own (from my mother, father, teacher, friend), the words I speak and the language that ties me to my past (family, school, ethnicity), and so forth. (van Manen, 2007, p. 104)

My decision to engage elite HBCU alumni who once identified as low-income African-American students during their attendance at an elite HBCU was not by mistake. Why engage those who are removed from the undergraduate context? The transition from college to the years that ultimately follow marks a significant transition where *these* individuals will have been given time to reflect on their class sentiments. "Social class

sentiments are attitudes and beliefs illustrating awareness of inequalities and conflicting

interests between groups or strata in society" (Brimeyer, Miller & Perruci, 2006, p. 471).

Reflection on class sentiments was vital for this phenomenological study. Furthermore,

"a person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through the experience" (van

Manen, 2007, p. 10). In order to grasp the lived experiences that African-American low-

income students have with social class on elite HBCU campuses, participants in this

study needed to have had enough time to reflect on the impact of this phenomenon on

their lives after they graduated. Post-graduate life provided individuals with a renewed

awareness so that they were able to view their lives in college with markedly different

lenses (Fox, 2011).

As I engaged these alumni, their state of "class maturity" undoubtedly provided

essential meaning during this study. To capture my phenomenon of pursuit further, I

requested my co-researchers to engage in a reflection activity at the conclusion of our

conversations. This activity required them to reflect on their pasts and write a letter to

their eighteen year old selves.

> Letters are an interesting intermediate phenomenon, a kind of written
> conversation that, as it were, stretches out the movement of talking across
> purposes and seeing each other's experience. The art of writing letters consists in
> not letting what one says become a treatise on the subject, but in making it
> acceptable to the correspondent. Yet on the other hand, it also consists of
> preserving and fulfilling the standard of finality that is intrinsic to everything
> stated in writing. (Gadamer, 1960/2002, p. 369)

My hope was that this form of engagement would bring them into an existential space of

re-collection. The purpose of this activity was for my co-researchers to engage their pasts

so that they would impart knowledge and words of wisdom to their younger selves. I

imagined a letter being produced that they would have read right before they began their

college journeys. They ultimately "collected" aspects of their present and past essences to further lend their voices as I interpreted and further (un)covered what it means to be a low-income African-American student on an elite HBCU campus.

> Writing letters is a call and response, self to self that helps the lived experience emerge. By writing, stepping away, reading, and writing more, there is time for the mind to idle on that which has been said, instead of rushing…(Monaham-Kreisham, 2012, p. 153)

This reflection activity allowed the opportunity for conversation to continue even after face-to-face interaction concluded. The act of writing a letter is quite phenomenological in nature. This activity offered even more possibilities for my co-researchers to further disclose the immense understanding that can be revealed about this phenomenon.

"Watch Me Work": The Journey Unfolds

> ...in order for this to happen, your entire frame of reference will have to change, and you will be forced to surrender to many things that you now scarcely know you have. (Baldwin, 1962/1992, p. 80)

Zora Neale Hurston once said, "Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein" (Hurston, 1942/1984, p. 143). This (re)search process is a humbling experience where I have explored and pried with a purpose. It is not by happenstance that I was drawn to (un)cover the lived experiences of low-income African-Americans and how they encounter social class at elite HBCUs. This phenomenological exploration is the chance for me to provide meaning to a specific aspect of an "enduringly fixed expression of life" (Gadamer, 1960/2012, p. 389).

What did I find after entering into conversations with my co-researchers? How did their stories lift the "veil" and (un)cover the essential themes of intra-racial social class difference on elite HBCU campuses?

Reflection more deeply transforms me. I more deliberately seek understanding of myself, of others, and of the world. It seems I have found a way of research that complements the way I choose to live, and that the way I choose to live further strengthens me as a researcher. For me, this is the beauty of phenomenology. (Sampson-Kelly, 2013, p. 100)

Through each story that I (un)covered I found strength, vivid expression, and intense

Being. These narratives also conveyed complexity. During my (re)search pursuits I

sought the myriad possibilities inherent in *this* phenomenon.

Watch Me Work

Come up from behind the shade
There's a spotlight, that's shining just for you
Go the distance, then show 'em what we're really made of

Watch me work
Something different
Something new
Watch me work
Out the box
Out the blue
Watch me work
Out the box
Blow your mind
Watch me work

Show them that you're here to stay
Cause it's alright, don't have to be afraid
There's a spotlight, that's shining just for you
Go the distance, then show 'em what we're really made of

Time to break free from these chains
I'm on a mission
I thought I told you
Talk is cheap so it's better if I showed you
Set the status quo ablaze

Watch me work
Something different
Something new
Watch me work
Out the box

Out the blue
Watch me work
Out the box
Blow your mind
Watch me work
(Suecof, Holmes, Fields, Reyes,& Myricks, 2012, Track 10)

It is now time to confront the lived experiences of what it means to be a low

income African-American student on an elite HBCU campus. *I am on a mission*, to face

something different and I have sought to (un)cover that which has been silenced and

hidden. I yearned for limitless potential to unfold in my phenomenological

interpretation and reflections, so that I could invoke what it is to be a low-income

African-American student within an elite HBCU context. *Watch me work!*

CHAPTER FOUR
TROUBLING THE WATERS:
WADING THROUGH THE EXTREME DEPTHS OF SOCIAL CLASS WITHIN ELITE HBCU ENVIRONMENTS

Building a Bridge

Bridge Over Troubled Water

Don't trouble the water
I won't leave it alone
Why don't you, why don't you, let it be?
Still water run deep...yes it do
I know that
If you only believe

Just like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down
Like a bridge
Just like a bridge
Over troubled
Over troubled water
I will lay me down
(Simon & Garfunkel, 1970)

My favorite rendition of *Bridge Over Troubled Water* is sung by Aretha Franklin.

Although she did not write the song, she breathes a renewed life into Simon and

Garfunkel's words. They resonate with me. Mrs. Franklin's interpretation is soul(ful).

Her voice also holds pain. *"Oh when darkness comes and pain is all, is all around."*

Within this study how deep does the pain flow? Was there always pain? Would the

"hidden injuries"[25] of class manifest themselves? She also warns. *"Said I*

wouldn't…leave it alone…I will lay me down." I took heed. Franklin calls the listener to

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[25] Sennett and Cobb (1972) contend that there are "hidden injuries" that are inflicted by social class amongst poor and working class individuals in American society. There are emotionally hurtful forms of class difference inherent in our cultures that often cause many individuals to simply suffer in silence. Their stance is that social class is quite complex in that we measure our value against those values to which society attaches a social premium.

reach within and come to action. The themes that have emerged within this phenomenological exploration of how low-income African-American students navigate elite HBCU environments serve as a bridge—a gateway built over "troubled waters" to reveal and un-silence conversations that have needed to be engaged for quite some time. *"Sail on…Sail on by…Your time has come…"* I use the metaphor of "troubling the waters" to reveal what has been submerged regarding elite HBCU experiences.

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The Power of The Water

The Water
Shall I resist?

I am scared
But why?

The Water
It *can* cleanse
But does it also drown?

What does the water hide and submerge?
What shall the water reveal?
(Mobley, 2013)

</div>

I was called to wade the powerful waters of social class that have often concealed and submerged the undergraduate experiences of low-income African-American students who attended and graduated from elite HBCUs. I waded and *still* I am wading. "Wade" derives from the Old English "waden" meaning "to go forward, proceed." Circa 1600 wade was "wad" and meant, "To go into action." Today "wade" means to become involved in a discussion in a direct manner; to move or proceed with difficulty or labor; to step into a medium that offers much resistance; or finally to set to work with determination or vigor (Oxford Dictionaries Online, 2012). During my phenomenological turn I made known that it was not by happenstance that I sought to

(un)cover and reveal the clandestine and myriad truths that have been cloaked by fear, doubt, and secrecy. I yearned to be taken to the water!

> It has been difficult for Black folks to talk about class…I began to write about class in an effort to clarify my own personal journey from a working-class background and in an effort to be more class conscious. I choose class now because I believe if we do not collectively expand the discourse surrounding classism in Black communities and attend to the widening gap between rich and poor and the have and have-nots, then we further create division and separation…To work for change, we need to know where we stand. (hooks, 2000, pp. 8-9)

This phenomenological exploration directly confronts, but is also care(ful). This work seeks to (un)veil with a spirit of determination how low-income African-American students encounter social class within elite HBCU contexts. I have remained open to the infinite possibilities so that I may show and not tell the nuances of this phenomenon. Another foundation is now needed so that I may (dis)close the emergent themes that are present in this phenomenological exploration. "A certain openness is required in human science research that allows for choosing directions" (van Manen, 2007, p. 162).

Once again I draw upon various texts, especially those that relate to social class within Black communities. These sources aid me in presenting the complex, yet subtle distinctions that appear as I convey the relationships between Black social class standing and these communities' notions of status and wealth amongst their own. In order for me to invite others to even attempt to wade the dense and difficult waters of social class that exist within elite HBCU communities, I must provide additional context that clarifies and illuminates. There are many sides to the stories of low-income African-Americans who encounter elite HBCUs. The manner in which low-income students encounter social class within elite HBCU contexts is deeply impacted by history, and I must now bring these experiences to the forefront.

Reaching Back and Re-Placing the Conversation

> Since so much misunderstanding or rather forgetfulness and carelessness on
> social class is common, let us now try and truly discern the different social classes
> among Negroes that deserve attention. (Du Bois, 1899/2010, p. 310)

African-Americans who have been deemed low-income, working-class, or poor in

the United States have been the focal point of many studies. What is troubling is that a

significant portion of this scholarship has assigned this population to places of historical

and contemporary urban unrest, criminal behavior, pervasive poverty, gang activity, and

welfare placements (Artani, 2010; Bracy, Meier, & Rudwick, 1970; Bush, 2000;

Furstenberg, 2007; Long, Kelly, & Gamoran, 2012; Patterson,1997). Why the deficit

perspective? Why has the tone of this particular research inquiry taken on such a

subversive approach? Are there no low-income African-American communities that

embody both challenge and resilience?

During my engagement with this phenomenon I was bewildered by the

aforementioned perceptions. Are they clouded with internal and external oppressive

notions that have and are embodied by Black communities and the White majority?

"Black behavior has often been fascinating to 'scholars' whose various studies about us

are almost silly generalizations about the whole race" (Morrison, 1974, p. 220). I knew

that there was more that I had to uncover and show so that scholarly inquiry could be

extended, re-placed, and (re)positioned. I bring forth a renewed perception and

awareness to how these communities exist, thrive, and experience their challenges while

invoking resilience. This study does not seek to diminish the stories inherent in previous

works on low-income and poor African-Americans, but, it is important to acknowledge

that these prior narratives distort and overwhelmingly present toxic and one-sided

portraits of these communities. When one chooses to engage African-American

communities and the often times uncomfortable issues surrounding social class, it is

important to ensure that African-American communities are not portrayed as a monolithic

group. Individuals who make up Black poor or working-class communities endure

different challenges *and* have diverse experiences within the American societal context

and educational environments.

Complex Pieces: Class versus Status

> The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. (Marx
> & Engels, 1848/2012, p. 5)

When "doing" the work of phenomenology one does not seek to define or make

generalizations about the phenomenon of his/her pursuit. This study provides a renewed

insight into what we know about "class" and "status" within higher educational

scholarship. My phenomenological exploration delves into and challenges the notions

that surround African-American intra-racial social mobility, social class perceptions, and

how low-income students view themselves in relation to their Black middle and upper

middle class peers within elite HBCU environments. Who is deemed better and why? A

power dynamic and hierarchal stance amongst African-Americans exists within higher

education contexts—especially on elite HBCU campuses. Yet again a paradox is present.

It is indeed complex. Could it be that perhaps the tension that is present within this

phenomenon derives from the previous definitions of social class and status that have

been involuntarily placed upon Black communities? Previous definitions of social class

give me pause. Who are they for? What are their stances? Do they even relate to

African-American communities?

A majority of the extent social class theory that is often connected to Black communities derives from the philosophy of Karl Marx. Marx was a sociologist who believed that class equaled the ownership of the means of economic production within a capitalistic society (Marx & Engels, 1848/2012). His premise of social class was defined as the exertion of labor by the poor to produce, and the manner in which the rich gained wealth as a result of the work done by the poor. Marx's theories identified a two class system often wrought with tension between a bourgeoisie (the upper/middle class) and a proletariat (the poor/working class) (Marx & Engels, 1848/2012). His work is influential because it called attention to not only the class disparities that exist within society, but the conflicts that can arise amongst the oppressors and the oppressed. How was his work expanded?

Max Weber, a sociologist, economist, and philosopher was inspired by the Marxist frameworks that preceded him and drew from this philosophy to present an alternate view of how individuals are "classed." Weber interpreted "social class" to apply to economic groupings. He examined differences within social class categories. Specifically, Weber showed how individuals within class groupings choose to associate with each other and how these groups also divided themselves amongst themselves. He brought forth the term "status" which is based on subjective notions of prestige and power amongst social classes that in turn, stratifies social class groupings (Weber, 2001/1948).

Weber's philosophy implies that intra-racial social distinction is best described in terms of "status" rather than one's "social class" (Weber, 2001/1948). He blurred the previous lines that had been drawn. Moving beyond Marx's emphasis on absolute

economic division, he also introduces the idea of "stratification." What does this notion

reveal? Weber recognized the importance of lifestyle, community morals, and unspoken

benchmarks that are often used to divide classes, which ultimately leads to class

stratification (Geier, 2007). "Social class is constituted by a complex combination of

social, structural, economic, and cultural factors that are enacted through material and

discursive inequalities" (Archer, 2003, p. 11). Weber's philosophy underscores how

one's culture, social class standing, and status may impact their lived existence. Are his

theories useful when discussing social class interactions amongst Black communities?

The theories conveyed by Marx and Weber serve as a basis and are valuable when

discussing *some* of the ideals surrounding social class within African-American

communities. But, can they stand alone and appropriately convey all of the tensions that

are inherent within these communities? Their scholarship is revered and has been the

basis of many theoretical frames, but it rarely offers tools for confronting the complexity

of class in daily life (hooks, 2000).

> Class is much more than Marx's definition…Class involves your behavior, your
> basic assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself
> and from others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and
> solve them, how you think, feel, act. (Brown, 1972, p. 15)

How are low-income students who attend elite HBCUs taught to behave? What do they

expect from themselves and their peers while they are students? How do they think, feel,

and decide to act during their time on these campuses? The intricate intersections of

social class within African-American communities emerge in the themes of this

phenomenological study. How will my work extend contemporary notions of African-

American social class standing, status, and wealth and how they manifest within a

specific higher education context? When discussing intra-racial class differences

amongst African-Americans, there is complex interplay, subtle nuances, and varied

perceptions. In order to situate the themes within this phenomenological study, I must

bring some difficult positions to the forefront. These stances are often-times hard for

Black communities to digest. Furthermore, the White majority has often-times failed to

accept, or even try to understand these perspectives.

My co-researchers' class pre-suppositions and their overall views of their class

status amongst their own are significant in this work. While this phenomenological study

primarily focuses on low-income African-American students, I am reminded of a

question I received during my proposal defense: "Where is the Black middle class?"

Their presence is felt throughout this phenomenon. Even though they are not at the

center, it would *now* be irresponsible of me not to recognize *their* existence and how they

impact, influence, and have affected the experiences of my co-researchers. A brief

glimpse into their dense placement within this phenomenon is needed to situate the

themes in this study further. I must continue to wade the waters, but, not go too far into

the deep end.

"There's Levels to This": Bringing Some Background to the Foreground

> Perhaps I didn't really meet the best society after all. Maybe I met only the snobs,
> and the lovers of fur coats and automobiles and fraternity pins and A. B. degrees.
> Maybe I'm all wrong about everything. Maybe those who said they were the best
> people had me fooled. Perhaps they weren't the best people—but they looked
> tremendously important. Or, perhaps they were the best people and it's my
> standard of values that's awry…(Hughes, 1927/2002, p. 44)

There are levels to the social interactions that exists amongst African-American

students that are ever-present within the emergent themes that arise in this study. What

do they expose? When one encounters a "level" what is (un)covered? A "level" is a

position in a real or notional hierarchy; A social, moral, or intellectual standard (Oxford

Dictionaries Online, 2014). Each level has revealed to me the "right" and "wrong" — the standards that are inherent within this group, and a hierarchy that is *very* real.

I open this section with a quote from Langston Hughes to disclose the meaning of *level* within this study. It is wrought with judgment and confusion. He notes a level of Black social class interaction that is not the most pleasant. Is this always so amongst other African-Americans who encounter this particular group of Black individuals? This level is significant to understand, for it is a point that further unveils the placement and a more in-depth understanding of middle/upper-middle class African-American communities in this scholarship. Did my co-researchers also feel like Hughes even though they did not come from *his* world? Were their peers simply snobs who were infatuated with materialistic status markers? Again, who is the "best?"

Previous research has revealed that members of the Black middle class are not much better off financially than their working-class counterparts (Collins, 1983). While this may potentially be true, the Black middle class *has* and continues to hold a pivotal position in Black social class hierarchy, for it is the class which many Blacks equate with success in life and where members of the Black lower class often aspire to gain membership (Durant & Louden, 1986). This ideal manifested during many of my conversations with my co-researchers. Black middle class communities are viewed as palatable to the White majority, who has, in essence, exerted *their* life-styles and socially "acceptable" behavior patterns onto marginalized communities. What does this mean? Again, what is acceptable?

Vanneman and Cannon (1987) contend that middle class African Americans are well aware that there is little guarantee that their upward mobility will be sustained either

in the short term or for future generations. Thus, an internal contradiction exists with

those who identify with the Black middle class, one that persists even among those who

have achieved success in educational and occupational arenas. They, too, have a

prevalent consciousness of belonging to two worlds—both the Black working class and

the Black middle/upper-middle class. Williams (2006) found that "a discrepancy often

exists between Blacks' self-identified class status and their actual status" (p. 11). Is this

"discrepancy" a state of confusion? Perhaps it is a reluctance to admit a level of privilege

or subordination within the broader societal context. How do low-income African-

American students perceive their Black upper and middle class African-American peers?

Conversely, how do more affluent Blacks view low-income or poor Blacks? How do the

class tensions between Black communities manifest when upper and middle class

African-American students interact with their classmates who are low-income or working

class? To which group do they *most* identify—themselves or the "other?"

"Where Do I Belong?": Another (Un)told Story of Class

> Class involves a more complicated set of relationships…relationships expressed
> not just in possessions or even in more personal attributes—like patterns of
> speech and dress—but mainly in ways of feeling, thinking, and understanding. To
> say it another way, class involves not just what you 'have' or even what you 'are'
> [but] 'a structure of feeling.' (Lauter & Fitzgerald, 2001, p. 3)

In an essay titled *Our Wonderful Society: Washington* Langston Hughes addresses

Black class conflict. Hughes has multifaceted views of social class. How did he think,

feel, and understand his social class standing amongst his own? Hughes was raised in

rural Missouri, and had ties to Washington, D.C.'s Black upper-middle class through

distant family. Hughes' background is quite complicated. His great-grand mothers were

slaves and his great grand-fathers were both slave masters (Berry, 1992). What

juxtaposition! His maternal grandmother was one of the first African-American women

to attend and graduate from Oberlin College and his grandfather was a participant in the

famous abolitionist Harpers Ferry Raid (Berry, 1992). Hughes' mother was a college

educated school teacher. Given his presumably rich heritage, what is striking is that

Hughes was reluctant to admit that he belonged to a family that was considered among

the Black elite. Why did he feel distant from his "elite" social class heritage?

As a child Hughes found himself in awe of the *Black elite* in Washington, D.C.

even though he was hundreds of miles away. He states:

> As long as I have been colored I have heard of [Black] Washington society. Even
> as a little boy in Kansas vague ideas of the grandeur of Negro life found their way
> into my head. I wanted to see the town. 'It must be rich and amusing and fine,' I
> thought. I arrived at Washington. 'Of course, you must meet the best people,'
> were almost the first words I heard after greetings had been exchanged. 'That is
> very important.' (Hughes, 1927/2002, p. 41)

Hughes was and had become enamored. He sought out "Washington society." The

"grandeur" of their lifestyles spoke to him, but why? Would he still feel this way once he

arrived in Washington, D.C. and encountered the individuals he had sought out? Who

were the "best" people that he was advised to meet and know? Once he became

acquainted with the "right" Black people, he would soon have a pivotal moment where he

realized how he truly related to his family members who were a part of the Black elite.

He states:

> And I was reminded of my noble family ties and connections. But a few days later
> I found myself a job in a laundry, carrying bags of wet-wash. The dignity of one's
> family background doesn't keep a fellow who's penniless from getting hungry.
> (Hughes, 1927/2002, p. 42)

All at once Hughes felt a difference. Though he had ties to the status and esteem

associated with the "Black elite," he felt as if these relationships were not enough to

sustain his being. Did he feel as if he was both a "have" and a "have-not." My co-researchers were also told who the "best" were and who they should seek to emulate. How would they respond? Some, like Hughes would be in awe and enamored. Others would choose their own path.

Hughes identified more with low-income Black individuals although he had familial "ties" to the *Black elite*. What does this mean? He had an internal conflict similar to my co-researchers, but the difference is, he was part of a world that many of my co-researchers aspired to enter. He denounced it. While he felt a kinship with low-income African-Americans, some of my co-researchers felt the opposite.

I unveil his story because it further discloses that class lines are definitely distorted within the Black community. Even those who are of the Black middle class do not always feel a part of *their* communities. Does this sound familiar? Although he had social class privilege, Hughes' experiences with his upper middle-class family in Washington, D.C. led him to feel that the Black elite were shallow and out of touch with their cultural heritage. "His juxtaposition of status based [on] dignity and dirty laundry suggests that social esteem in black communities did not always correlate with wealth passed down from one generation to another" (Williams, 2006, p. 199). Those within Black middle/upper middle-class communities are also called to the water. Another perspective has been provided to further trouble the waters of social class within elite HBCU environments, all as context so that I may now show the themes that have emerged within this study. Yet, I still ask and question: What occurs when other low-income African students are called to the water?

Calling "Others" To the Water

Just as I was called to the water, I was in need of others to join me—individuals

who lived this phenomenon and who *too* were called to the complex "waters" of social

class that were present at their respective elite HBCUs. What would this calling

disclose? What would my co-researchers convey to me so that I could then show the

emergent themes within this phenomenon? In a letter[26] to her eighteen year old self,

Summer, who I introduce later, expresses that she was taken to "curious waters" and

experienced a sense of renewal during her time at Howard University. She states:

> For all of the opportunities you have enjoyed, and the success you have earned,
> and the progress that you've made, your hometown reality as a urban Detroit girl
> born to substance abusing parents who does not have a high class wardrobe and
> has no understanding of the dining rules that people in the know refer to as
> "etiquette'" will be quickly become clear to you. And you will learn. Think of
> this as baptism by fire. You will go to Howard, and for every awesome
> experience you have, you will receive an equally as curious experience. I call it
> "curious" because I hesitate to refer to these experiences in the negative. It's a
> baptism of curiosities, indeed…you will be ignorant to what you are experiencing,
> you will process these moments for yourself, and they will slowly change you…"
> The reality is you will find out that the true baptism that Howard will give you
> will be the quick opportunity to learn all of these lessons that Detroit and your
> family could not begin to teach you…

Summer's letter to her younger self conveys that she, too, had been taken to the complex

"waters" of social class that are ever-present within this phenomenon. Summer

powerfully names her encounters at Howard as a "baptism of curiosities." What does this

mean? Was she made anew? Did she have to shed and leave parts of her essence

behind? She articulates significant aspects of her early life, and how she encountered

"moments of clarity" during her time in college. She provides a candid glimpse of what I

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[26] Each co-researcher was asked to engage in a reflective activity following our
conversations. This activity will require them to reflect on their pasts and write a letter to
their eighteen year old selves. Please see Appendix G for these letters.

hoped others who I chose to engage would also share.

My ultimate aspiration in this phenomenological inquiry was that together with my co-researchers we would make meaning of *this* phenomenon's "waters" that are muddy and often-times convoluted. In Chapter Three, I emphasize that being bestowed with the responsibility to choose who I would engage in this study was a tremendous and formidable task. While recruiting my co-researchers, I often thought, "Who am I to deem worthy or choose who is 'good enough' to include in my study?" I was faced with hard choices, but, I had to quickly let go of my fears. I knew that the task of selecting co-researchers for this work would not simply be a matter of convenience. One could not *just* identify as an African-American low-income student who graduated from one of the elite HBCUs that would be prominently featured within this study. I would require more of them. Above all, I also knew that these individuals were going to be unique. Unique derives from the 16th century Latin "unus" meaning "remarkable or uncommon." Those who I have engaged were indeed remarkable and certainly "uncommon" during their attendance at their respective alma maters.

Who was I searching for? For this phenomenological journey, I needed others who would be willing to engage the sensitive topics surrounding this phenomenon *and* also do work on their own. Each of us who are present in humanity has a story to tell. Our narratives may linger at the surface or are buried deep within the bowels of our existence in the world. The stories that are brought forth in this phenomenological exploration show the presence of social class within elite HBCU environments and Black communities as a whole. Their powerful and long lasting effects can no longer be deemed invisible. The presence is real! It is not just interpersonal, but also structural. It

is a web of systems one cannot so readily see. If you simply open your eyes it is all around. Together, my co-researchers and I walked a phenomenological path and waded through the dense and extreme depths of social class that are present within elite HBCU environments. I now bring forth their stories and capture the experiences of how low-income African-American students encounter social class on elite HBCU campuses.

(Re)Negotiating "The Talented Tenth": Introducing "My Perfect Ten"

> Why do we need to collect *other* people's experiences? We gather other people's experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves. (van Manen, 2007, p. 62)

I have deemed my co-researchers "My Perfect Ten." I decided on ten individuals with the gentle nudging and guidance of my dissertation committee co-chairs. Yes, I am well aware that "perfect" is a strong word. Let me now be clear. Phenomenology does not strive for the "perfect" or "perfection," but, I did knowingly seek specific characteristics from those who I ultimately chose to engage for this study. *Perfect* derives from the Latin *perfectus* circa the 11th century and means "excellent, accomplished, and exquisite." "My Perfect Ten" are all of the above and so much more. They have engaged with me, made themselves vulnerable, and I truly believe that they have been just as invested in this work as I am. As much as I chose them they too chose me.

Over 100 years ago there was mention of another *chosen* "ten." In his now famous essay titled "The Talented Tenth," Du Bois (1903) emphatically asserts that the Black race will be guided by a chosen elite and in essence saved:

> The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the best of this race that they may

> guide the mass away from the contamination and death of the worst, in their own and other races. (p. 21)

In this work, he presents in its rawest form the very elitist notions that I challenge, confront, and attempt to unravel regarding how low-income African-American students experience intra-racial social class divisions. Who are the best? Who are the worst? Du Bois' (1903) idea of a *Talented Tenth* does not have "My Perfect Ten" in mind. His notion deems them as "the worst" due to their social backgrounds. While he feels that they are amongst the "masses" who need to be guided away from the "worst" within their own and amongst other races, he is also unintentionally speaking to their very existence in higher education—they too were chosen:

> The best and most capable youth must be schooled in the colleges and universities of the land…All men cannot go to college but some men must…A university is a human invention for the transmission of knowledge and culture from generation to generation, through the training of quick minds and pure hearts, and for this work no other human invention will suffice…(pp. 26-27)

Within their respective home communities, "My Perfect Ten" were considered some of the best and brightest amongst their peers. Many of their classmates and some childhood friends were not afforded the opportunity to attend college. However, they made deliberate choices to overcome the obstacles in their lives that were presented to them so that they could one day attend their respective elite HBCUs. They yearned to be educated and sought knowledge from their own. What is ironic is that in Du Bois' elitist and contentious notion of a *Talented Tenth* he still speaks to the experiences of my co-researchers.

Hidden within the bourgeois messages in his essay are also mentions of difference that Black communities may internalize during attempts to assert their humanity in the broader societal context as they seek access to higher education. He states, "You

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misjudge us because you do not know us" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 21). What the men and women in this study did not know was that their choices would force them to come face to face with notions of difference and questions surrounding their place in these new worlds. Their peers would not know them. Would they be misjudged? Was there change?

During one conversation that occurred at the very beginning of my study, I recall a pivotal moment that set a tone. Right before I pressed the "record button" on my recording device, one of my co-researchers whispered to me "I just want to tell my story!" These words flooded my mind. I realized more than ever that I was *truly* being given permission to borrow and bestow to others what had once been overlooked, pushed to the margins, and perhaps forgotten.

> Like a lotus flower that grows out of the mud and blossoms above the muddy waters surface, we can rise above...The thicker and deeper the mud, the more beautiful the lotus blooms. (Gibson, 1993)

The ten individuals who were once apart but now joined together in this work as my co-researchers are Nicole, Summer, Kodi, Nia, Emmanuel, Nora, Xavier, Alonzo, Blair, and Roman (all pseudonyms). They represent two elite HBCUs and hail from cities including Detroit, San Francisco, Kansas City, Washington, D.C., and Houston. "My Perfect Ten" provided tremendous insight into what it is to be a low-income African-American student at an elite HBCU. *The thicker and deeper the mud, the more beautiful the lotus blooms.* Their individual encounters with social class provided me with collective insights that were truly powerful. How would we make meaning? How did they recognize social class within their respective elite HBCU environments? How was social class hidden and

made apparent to each of them? What do their lived experiences disclose so that we may now bring the (un)known from the shadows and into the light for all to now see?

I present "My Perfect Ten" as whole and as genuine as possible. These are real people and their narratives and truths are multifaceted—these are not simple stories. I am thankful that I was given permission to not only engage them, but, also be an active participant and reflect (Gamble, 2014). I am forever in their debt, but, who are they?

Emmanuel Laurreaux. Emmanuel hails from Houston, Texas and graduated from Howard University in 2010. When I first approached him to be a part of this study, I asked him to describe himself during his college years. He proudly acknowledged that during his time at Howard that he was considered an African-American, low-income, first-generation college student. I knew that because he was able to candidly name his past, that he would definitely be a commanding presence in this phenomenological exploration. It was evident from our conversations that Emmanuel truly enjoyed his Howard experience. He immersed himself in the campus culture and became quite the force to be reckoned with during his time at Howard. He was highly involved with the Howard University Student Association (HUSA)—the central student government organization where he attained a prime elected position, and even played in the marching band for two years.

Emmanuel admitted that his success at Howard was due to key individuals being placed in his life during his time in college. His peers, campus administrators, and even alumni played critical roles in ensuring that he was successful. Emmanuel recalled these instances quite a bit during our conversations. During his recollection of one of these examples, he states:

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> I went home the summer of my freshmen year, but after, I was like "never again"…it just felt different. So that was it, I was not going home another summer…The only way I survived my first summer not being back in Houston was because Ms. Sapphire [a campus administrator] let me stay at her house and keep my dorm stuff in her basement. She knew that I didn't have money or a place to stay and took me in. She even helped me to get a job. She treated me like her son my whole time at Howard. I will never forget her.

Emmanuel *was* able to find a community, but, he also admitted that his social class standing was always in the back of his mind. Initially, he struggled in courses within his major and blamed this on the under-resourced high-school he attended before he came to Howard. He often became frustrated and wondered why he was not as prepared as his peers. He was used to doing well academically and this was a shock to his academic identity.

Emmanuel was also forced to balance family turmoil with his Howard life and would often use his scholarship money to aid his family when emergencies would arise. Emmanuel noticed his difference amongst his peers. He wondered, "Why aren't they struggling?" "Why can't I just call home for money when I am in trouble?" What is intriguing about Emmanuel's story is his fortitude and tenacity. He was unapologetic about where he came from, still able to navigate Howard's intense social class dichotomy, and embraced his "new" world. In his words "I had to make it work, there was no other option."

Blair Fields. Blair was constantly forced to make "hard choices" during her youth and even while she was in college. She always felt that she was destined for more and chose to leave home at the age of 16 and live with her aunt. Blair had grown tired of her home life that was filled with child and domestic abuse, neighborhood violence, and extreme poverty. She knew that moving in with her aunt would not be an ideal situation

because she would not totally escape the obstacles associated with urban blight, but she still felt that this was the "right" decision at the time.

Blair was born and raised in Washington, D.C. and is an alumna of Hampton University. Growing up she believed that "not having money makes you think more about how to survive for your future. I wanted to live, not exist…" Blair did not want to exist, she wanted to live *and* belong. But to *what* did she yearn to belong? During her college choice process she became enamored with Hampton University. She visited the campus during homecoming with one of her mentors and immediately felt at home. She only applied to Hampton and longed to be a part of its legacy. Why did she want so badly to belong this environment? Blair truly believed that Hampton could provide her the "family" that in some instances she had been denied in her past.

What struck me most about Blair was her benevolent and giving spirit. She had endured so much in her past but often sought the good in others even when they did not do the same for her while she was at Hampton. "I was told that I was wrong on so many levels because of my upbringing…It was hard. I love Hampton, but I did not always understand it." Blair did not want to be seen as poor. She played the "class game" because she did not want her peers to shun her, and this came with a cost. She made financial sacrifices and found herself being cautious of her more affluent peers. "Did they only begin to like me for what I went into debt to portray?" Blair did not always understand her alma mater, but, there is one fact that could not be denied; she was there and asserted her place in her *own* way.

Alonzo Carrington. Alonzo Carrington initially felt like an outsider when he arrived on Howard University's campus. He was born and raised in Kansas City, Kansas and had never even visited a large, urban city before coming to college. He was scared to go to Howard, but, was lured there after receiving an academic scholarship. Alonzo soon put his fears aside and decided to become a "Son of Howard." Throughout our conversations he underscored that he often ate lunch alone during his freshmen year, and did not have the social life he wanted because initially he was not able to gain successful entry into the "prominent" social circles that were present on campus.

He soon became tired of this existence. Out of all of my co-researchers, Alonzo was the most calculating in how he chose to navigate social class while in college. He refused to become discouraged. Alonzo made some shrewd choices. He observed his middle/upper middle class peers and became aware of the organizations that they were a part of on campus and their backgrounds. It appeared that he "studied" his peers. Alonzo wanted badly to become "one of them." He states, "There is certainly some soaking up and being a sponge. I'm trying to find out as much as I can. If you say 'Jack and Jill' or 'Hilton Head' I was going to know what that meant." He aspired to be a part of a particular group of Howard students. Were these aspirational peers?

Alonzo joined specific campus organizations and would later disassociate himself from the friends he made early on during his tenure as a Howard student because he did not feel that they would serve his attempts to climb the "Howard social ladder." Was this a ruthless choice? Were his actions selfish or self-serving because he purposely left friends behind because they could not aid his attempts to "socially climb." Surprisingly, this was not a hard choice for him to make.

Alonzo truly believed that the choices he made were an effort to not only survive Howard, but aid him once he graduated. "You have to make people like you…I learned what I had to learn, so I could and can relate...I may not have come where you came from, but I was going to make you like me…That was huge…" Alonzo was quite frank in expressing that his life at Howard was often "exhausting," but necessary for his success. Why did he feel the need to choose this path? Did he have any regrets? Alonzo *still* feels the impact of his Howard existence today and has no remorse for the choices he made. He took a leap of faith and made Howard his own.

Kodi Gladstone. Kodi is a proud Hampton University alumnus. He was raised in Pennsauken, New Jersey by a single mother. While growing up his mother deemed him as "the one who would get out." He did not like being placed in this position for fear of making his siblings feel slighted and the pressure that this designation put on him. Kodi still negotiates this existence as "the one" and it still makes him feel uncomfortable. While he may have been "the one" in his home community, during his time at Hampton he did not feel this way. He felt as if he was constantly in-between two worlds. He expressed, "I think people act like divisions weren't made, but they were there." What were these divisions? What stands out most to me is how he described his first day at his new campus home.

Kodi felt the divisions on his campus the first day that he arrived at Hampton. His family packed up a van and he drove from New Jersey to Hampton, Virginia. He remembered becoming lost on campus and having to find the football stadium where new students were checking-in for freshmen orientation. His family would soon locate the stadium and they unpacked the truck right there in front of the football field. He thought

to himself, "Wow, ya'll are literally leaving me right here in the street." This instance would set a tone. At that moment he felt alone. Unlike the majority of his peers whose families stayed the entire weekend, his parents could not afford to be with him in Virginia for the duration of orientation weekend.

Kodi found himself in a new place and did not know what to expect. Based on his arrival in this new setting he also began to formulate thoughts of what would be acceptable at Hampton University—the "right" and "wrong" way for one to exist in this campus culture.

> Before I got to Hampton, I did know right and wrong, that I wouldn't drop my kid off and just be like, "We're done. Bye."…I didn't feel bad about it, but I didn't think everyone else's parents would leave them, though. So I didn't know . . . You know, I didn't know if it was normal even if it wasn't.

Did he always feel alone? What was right and wrong at Hampton? During his time at Hampton, Kodi encountered a community and forged lifelong friendships in his freshmen residence hall. He found like-minded individuals who supported him during his college years. They would become his social connection to campus and ensure that he was made to feel a part of the campus community. Kodi grew to love Hampton, but he found that he would have to make a concerted effort to make *this* place feel like home. His peers from more affluent backgrounds both challenged and affirmed him. He would often find himself in situations where he would consciously and unconsciously face social class.

Summer Gladwell. Summer is loyal, selfless, and what I would call a "thoughtful watcher." These qualities derive from her youth in urban Detroit, Michigan. Before she arrived at Howard in the fall of 2000, she found herself constantly having to fight her circumstances so that she could successfully walk into her own truth and immense promise. Both of her parents were victims of substance abuse. She was

uprooted constantly, moved quite a bit during her adolescence, and was placed into a

"parental role" to help to raise her younger siblings. This was very stressful for her.

How would she negotiate this existence?

She often found solace in school. It was one of the places that provided her with

"peace of mind." Her early educational experiences were pivotal to how she viewed

others and herself outside the "safety" of school walls. The formation of her academic

identity was shaped in the sixth grade. She recalls:

> My mom never went to parent-teacher conferences ever, ever, ever. And she
> decided to go to one the end of my sixth grade year. My teacher, Ms. Taylor said
> "Let me show you something." She showed my mom my file. My mom saw that
> I had been absent a third of the damn school year…Ms. Taylor then told my
> mother, "What I find remarkable is that Summer can get all As, but she's not here
> for a third of the school year…I have students who are here every day and have
> horrible grades…You have a remarkable child."…My mom was sitting there very
> confused…and I know she was thinking, "How the hell is she able to do this
> given the fact that I've kept her out of school?" At that point I had a revelation,
> "Is this what she is trying to do?...Is she trying to ruin me?"...

In this moment, Summer decided that she was going to strive for excellence and move

beyond what "others" had prescribed for her. She believed that succeeding in school and

ultimately going to college was the only way for her to not fall victim to the paths that her

parents had chosen. What is intriguing about Summer's story is that she had no intention

to leave the state of Michigan to attend college. "I just knew that I was going to the

University of Michigan-Ann Arbor...it was close to home and I just could not leave my

brothers and sisters." How did she find Howard?

Angela Gilbert came into Summer's life during her high school years. Gilbert

was her high school counselor and took a vested interest in her success. During our

conversations, Summer affectionately recalled her experiences with Gilbert. She would

become her confidant and even took her shopping for prom and purchased her dress.

Angela Gilbert went above and beyond for Summer. While she was applying to college,

she told her "I think the HBCU experience is a great one…and you need to leave your

family. You need to grow and Howard would be a great place for you to go." She felt

that Howard would be the place for Summer to "escape" and be relieved of the obstacles

that had plagued her youth so that she could eventually come into her own. A Hampton

University alumna and HBCU advocate, Ms. Gilbert knew all that Summer was going

through and wanted more for her. Applying to Howard was not an option for Summer.

Gilbert told her, "Just apply to Howard. Do this. You're gonna do this." She had no

awareness of Howard. "That was all Angela, it was all Angela."

Before Summer knew it she would get accepted to enter Howard University and

her life would change forever. Her father and his best friend would pack up her

grandmother's motor home and move her to D.C.. She still chuckles remembering her

arrival in Washington, D.C..

> This was an event for my father…I mean can you imagine?...I was not going to
> California, just D.C. and we had this spectacle of a motor home navigating these
> small streets…I was embarrassed, but, my father was just proud, he was also
> overwhelmed…He did not know what he was doing…I feel like he knew that this
> was bigger than him and it manifested in some ways with that damn motor
> home…all he knew was that his baby girl was going to college and to him this
> was arriving in "grand fashion"…

Summer was away from her family and all that was familiar. Howard was very new to

her. While she admitted that she would conform in many ways to the Howard culture,

she always had what she described as an "ulterior motive."

> I knew exactly what I was doing. Tell me what to do or how to dress, but once I
> get into 'those circles' I made a vow, once I get there, I'mma bring 10 people
> behind me and they're gonna be people just like me…

Summer learned how to "work" the system. Not only did she forge meaningful relationships with her more affluent peers, but, she integrated into their prominent social circles. How did she do this? Summer embodied a complex existence at Howard. She was careful about what she disclosed about her social background. She was not ashamed of her past but was extremely selective about who she chose to invite into her *whole* world—and truly experience *all* of her. Summer would knowingly "conform," but what made her unique was that she would observe her peers and make efforts to seek out others who shared her social class standing to be supportive and also help them to navigate and successfully become a part of what was considered the "Howard Experience."

Roman McCall. Roman McCall was born and raised in Washington, D.C., and is a proud product of the District of Columbia Public School system. He was raised in the Northeast quadrant of the city in a neighborhood named "Trinidad[27]." In his words, this community was "one of the toughest neighborhoods to grow up in." One of eight children, he is one of two of his siblings to graduate from high school and the only one to attain a bachelor's degree. He has older brothers who are incarcerated and sisters who could not finish high school because they fell victim to the perils often associated with teenage pregnancy. Roman felt immense pressure to succeed and was able to channel an inner fortitude to combat the systemic obstacles that were present in his life. His foremost goal was to make his mother proud of him.

> My mom's biggest dream was for me to graduate from college. She had seen what
> happened to my brothers and sisters…she wanted me to go to college…She

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[27] The *Trinidad* neighborhood is a section of Washington, DC that has encountered difficulty to rebuild and thrive following the riots of 1968 that ripped through the city following the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. More than 40 years after these occurrences the neighborhood is still plagued by gang violence, drug activity, and extreme poverty (Small, 2013).

wanted me to get out of D.C. because…just the type of neighborhood we grew up in.

Roman chose to attend Hampton University. He always knew that he wanted to go to an HBCU. He loved their school spirit and wanted the opportunity to attend an institution with others who looked like him and who would one day make a difference in society. He had to work very hard to get into Hampton. Initially, he was not accepted into the university and had to complete a summer pre-college program successfully so that he could gain admittance. Roman was determined to go to Hampton. Why Hampton? "I worked very hard…I wanted to go to a prestigious HBCU that was not too far away from home. I could have gone to Howard, but I really needed to get out of D.C…" Roman yearned for prestige and legacy, but what he did not know, was that his choice would cause him to feel considerable discomfort and anxiety.

Roman cherished his D.C. roots and considered them to be central to his identity. He described himself during his time in college as "a typical D.C. dude." He retained his "D.C. style," used D.C. slang, and was not going to change. His peers at Hampton did not deem the aforementioned as acceptable.

> I got to Hampton and I became "shell-shocked."… I mean these are people that pretty much was [sic] rich. I mean you had celebrity students…celebrity kids that went there. So I'm just like, "Oh man. I don't fit in." So when I got there, they're like, "Oh, what school you went to?" H.D. Woodson. So they had this look on their face like, "How you get in here?"

He felt that his classmates did not think that he belonged there because of where he came from, where he went to high school, and his social class background. He was intimidated by his more affluent peers.

Roman often tested his fellow Hamptonians and the Hampton culture. He was not willing to change and had a difficult time adjusting. He became disappointed with the

Hampton University culture. He respected his alma mater because he believed that he

was getting a stellar education. However, he did not have a positive college experience.

Roman would retain his "Washington, D.C." identity and this was not a fit for Hampton

University. He also did not like the rules (i.e the dress code and the curfew) and felt that

the Hampton culture was trying to change him. He did not react well to this realization.

Roman often thought "Why are they trying to change me?...I should have been enough."

He wrote off his middle/upper-middle class peers as "fake" and did not believe

that they were genuine or wanted to see beyond his background to get to know him as a

person. He knowingly resisted the Hampton culture, and the more it tried to change him

the more isolated he would become. What is interesting is that he endured and was able

to survive and ultimately graduate from Hampton. Roman's story reveals one who would

not succumb to the pressure to fit into the dominant elite HBCU culture, and the costs of

his intentional choices not to conform or be changed.

Nora Stone. Nora Stone truly loves Howard University. "I owe everything to

Howard…it taught me so much." She describes it as the place that made her the woman

she is today, but Nora did not always feel this way. In the middle of her freshmen year

she almost transferred. She explains, "It wasn't what I expected… I felt totally out of my

comfort zone, and I felt like I didn't know how I could shine when I felt that way." Nora

decided to stay, but she and Howard would have a complicated relationship. "I just

wasn't happy…I kind of surrendered in the beginning." She constantly compared herself

to her more affluent peers and became frustrated. "When it's cold, it's rainy, you ain't

got no car like the rich kids and you catching the bus and you trying to survive and just

live, it's like life happens." That is a powerful memory to recall. Nora was simply trying

to "live and survive." What would this mean for her? She came face to face with the realities of social class at Howard.

Negotiating the presence of social class standards and difference were not what Nora imagined her college experience would be once she arrived at Howard. She was unaware that she would have to navigate these mores. Nora was caught off guard because she assumed that she would go to college, perform well in her classes, and eventually find her place, but this was not the case. "I just felt different." Nora grew up a lot while in college and was forced out of her comfort zone. She searched within and channeled a spirit of resilience. From where did her resilience derive?

Nora is from Detroit, Michigan and was raised by her father. He sacrificed and invested everything in her to ensure her success. During our conversations she often became emotional when describing their relationship:

> At Howard I had to be successful because I didn't want him to ever be disappointed in me…I knew the sacrifices that he made to send me there and I wasn't gonna fuck that up and be something that he wasn't proud of.

She knew that she had to return on the investment that her father bestowed upon her. What she often had a hard time with was how she would accomplish this within a campus culture that she felt excluded from on a regular basis. "I was never ashamed of where I came from but I often felt that my story was not as cool." She describes her Howard years as her "awkward phase:"

> For some people high school is where they have a tough time. That was not the case with me. I was the cute, smart girl. I even dated the captain of the football team. I was definitely one of the cool kids. But then I got to Howard and everyone had been that…I didn't know that I automatically wouldn't be accepted, that I automatically wouldn't make friends, that I automatically wouldn't get the culture… Howard, to me, was that awkward phase where I had come into my own…Nothing was going to be given to me, I had to earn it.

She would use these uncomfortable experiences and "learn" Howard. Howard University was challenging to her. Nora initially gave her peers and the campus culture too much power. "I allowed my light to dim a bit because I was used to being the 'it girl'…In the beginning I surrendered to Howard, but I knew that in order to stay I would have to shine and rise above my insecurities." Ultimately, Nora knew that she belonged at Howard and she would use her college years to not only make her father proud but prove to herself that she, too, deserved to be deemed a "Daughter of Howard." "All at once you come out of that surrender and you realize 'alright, I can do this,' and it prepares you to not only survive Howard but succeed in life after you leave its gates."

Nicole Lyle. Unlike the majority of my other co-researchers who are featured in this study, Nicole grew up in a rural community. She is from a small town in North Carolina. "There were some farms and farmers if you can believe that…We had one corner store, a Walmart, and a McDonalds…I remember we were excited when we got a Wendy's!" As Nicole mused about her hometown it was evident that she had fond memories. She was raised by her grandmother and her mother. These women have been formidable influences in her life. They believed that she was special and spoke greatness into her life. When Nicole was in kindergarten her mother told her, "You are going to go to college." Her grandmother once told her, "You belong to this family…You don't have to be like everyone else." There is power in the spoken word and these messages would never leave her.

During her youth Nicole did not always feel that she "fit in" with her classmates, especially in high school. Nicole was a "stand-out." She was not like the other African-American youth in her rural community. Many of the girls who she grew up with

became pregnant as early as 6th grade. "Pregnancy was like a big thing….We had someone pregnant in my sixth grade year…Each year, it just like increased….It was very common to see bellies walking down the hall." The choices her female peers made were alarming to her. Nicole chose another path. Early in her K-12 years she was tracked into college preparatory classes and in high school was one of only three Black students in honors classes. Due to her being "tracked" into a college preparatory curriculum she was further separated from the majority of her Black peers. How did this make her feel? Nicole felt "different" but she was unashamed of this state:

> I never really fit….I wasn't the awkward kid. I wasn't the weird kid, but I was never the popular kid. In my own words my peers deemed me an "Oreo" but, people still respected me…They knew I was smart. Like, I was class president all four years of high school.

Again what is Black? She admits that she although she was respected by her peers they deemed her an "Oreo." Was she not Black enough because she valued scholastic achievement? Had Nicole begun to negotiate Black intra-racial difference even in her youth? Nicole did not let the choices of her peers or their thoughts phase her. "I did not mind because I knew that this place was temporary…I always knew I was going somewhere and I was always looking forward to that next phase." Nicole deemed her small town existence as temporary. She knew that she would be destined for a life that would extend beyond the city limits of her town in North Carolina. Where was she going? For what did she ultimately search?

Nicole wanted to attend an HBCU and ultimately chose to attend Hampton University. She embraced the campus community and immediately felt at "home." She was enamored with the Hampton culture and embraced it. Nicole immersed herself in all that was Hampton. She named these experiences—she would become "Hamptonized."

> Hampton does have a culture, you get "Hamptonized"…We would hear the word
> "Hamptonized."…Like, we would hear it and we could see it…Hampton has its
> own feel, its own way of doing things. The teachers reiterate it, the administrators
> reiterate it, your peers reiterate it, your upperclassmen reiterate it.

Nicole did not resist the enculturation process that Hampton would bestow on her. Nicole had felt different for so long, but, it was there that she truly felt a common kinship amongst her peers even though she did not share many of their class backgrounds. "I felt that I belonged…this was my family." This was what she wanted. To her Hampton was a family. She would watch and learn. Nicole became enthralled and welcomed the "changes" that she would undergo. She was never the same. Nicole would embody the "Hampton brand:"

> Hampton is a family, and just like a family has their own way of doing things, so
> does Hampton…It is a brand. They're so serious about it…it's not about, Oh,
> depending on the year, this is your experience. No. Like, this is the Hampton
> experience. This is our brand. This is what we want you to look like when you
> leave. This is what you've been exposed to, and people should be able to tell.

What would the "Hampton Brand" instill in her being? Nicole believed that Hampton was where she belonged. "I could tell that the people matched me and I matched them…This is what I want to be around…and the scholarship didn't hurt." She delved deeply into the campus culture, adapted to its norms, overcame myriad challenges and embraced a new "authentic self." Nicole would prove herself and embraced all that was the "Hampton Experience."

Nia Toms. When you think of San Francisco, California you may imagine images of iconic cable cars, the Golden Gate Bridge or the city's prominent colorful houses known as the "The Painted Ladies." The city is framed in a sort of fantasy for tourists and the rest of the world to see the (un)seen, but just a few miles away was where "real life" existed for Nia Toms. "It's weird because people who travel to San Francisco,

they're just like, 'Oh, it's so beautiful. It's so nice.' But then they never go to the pockets of neighborhoods like where I grew up..." She was raised in Section 8[28] subsidized housing. Like others in this study her community was plagued with the perils of urban blight. Nia grew up in a neighborhood with Blacks, Asian-Americans, Latinos, and some Whites. She was exposed to many faces of poverty during her youth. Because of her upbringing and the dysfunction occurring in her home life she felt that, "I need to get the hell out of San Francisco…This is a bad place." Nia worked tirelessly to prepare herself to go to college and soon set her sights on Howard University.

There are no HBCUs in the Western region of the United States. Yet, at Howard there are students who arrive there from Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland, Portland, and even Seattle. These students arrive at Howard from the West Coast, and they experience their first snowstorms and even having to buy their first winter coats. During our conversations I would engage Nia and ask, "How did you find Howard?" She states:

> It was the success of the alumni. I would see them either on television or in the news, and so it was just like, okay, so the graduates . . . People who graduate from Howard are doing, like, amazing things; I wanna do amazing things. I must need to go to Howard.

Nia wanted success. What was success to her? She also wanted "out" of her environment. "Howard was far away…I wanted to get as far away as possible." Nia was also mad at her life during this time period. Once she had been accepted she knew immediately that this was her chance to start a new life. "I was mad, it was just kind of like 'Hell yeah I'm leaving. I'm done with this place.'" She also believed that Howard

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[28] The housing choice voucher program is the federal government's major program for assisting very low-income families, the elderly, and the disabled to afford housing in the private market across the United States (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Website, 2014).

was "speaking" to her even though she was thousands of miles away. Nia received "signs" that this was her destiny.

> I don't know what the term for it is, but I saw Howard everywhere. So everywhere I went, I would see someone who graduated from Howard who was accomplished. Or I would see just the word "Howard," so I almost felt like it was speaking to me. And I had never, ever been there, ever.

This is powerful. She had never even seen the school or stepped foot on the campus. She had only seen pictures and met current students from her community. However, she knew that Howard was the place where she needed to be. "I got on that plane *by myself* and never looked back!"

Nia believed that she had achieved her goal. Her dream was beginning to come into fruition, but she still had feelings that this new life would be taken from her. Initially Nia was consumed with doubtful thoughts. She felt that it would all be ripped away—everything that she had worked so hard for. "It just seemed like it was just too good to be true. It took me a week to realize that I was actually in, 'I'm here for sure' because I really just didn't believe that it all happened." She was in a "dream state." When and how would she "wake up" and be confronted with her surroundings? Howard for Nia was a fresh start. It was a place where she could leave the "bad" of San Francisco behind. Could she? Did she?

Nia would encounter a "culture shock" of sorts. "I had never been around these type of Black people before." In the beginning she not only struggled socially but inside of the classroom as well. "I had control over one thing and that was school...that was what was going to keep me there." She was not afraid to seek help from professors and used their feedback to sustain her academic identity. She also rose to the occasion and broke into some of Howard's prominent social circles. Yes, she struggled and often felt

alone. But, Nia was bold and fearless. In one of our final conversations she looked me

directly in my eyes and told me:

> Outside of all of the other stuff with Howard in most ways it was easy. Steve,
> you have to remember where I came from. Back home, if I could pick my
> alcoholic mother up off our steps and see that she had been beaten up after a fight
> with a black eye then of course I was going to survive Howard…what choice did I
> have?

Nia channeled her inner strength and would use this focus as a type of "control" over her

life at Howard. She was determined to make her way and truly made the most of her

Howard experience.

Xavier Claiborne. Xavier grew up in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area in

a single parent household. His mother was not college educated, but she ensured that

there was a standard of academic excellence in their home. Coming home with a "bad

report card" was never an option for him. He knew that he had to rise to the occasion in

the classroom if he wanted to do anything "extra." "My teachers and coaches knew

growing up that my mom did not play." Xavier was consistently enrolled in honors

classes during middle school and high school. Ultimately, he knew that he was going to

college. He had witnessed his older sister navigate high school and the college process

with ease. "My sister was in honors classes, captain of the cheerleading team,

homecoming queen, got her homework done while talking on the phone and could just do

everything." Xavier's big sister set a standard and blazed a trail that he would soon

follow. While she chose to attend a predominately White institution, he made the

deliberate choice to attend an HBCU, but why?

While growing up in the greater Washington, D.C. area he was surrounded by

HBCU culture. He was constantly on Howard University's campus due to his high

school co-curricular activities. Also, for a period of time he lived across the street from

Howard's campus. Xavier also grew up watching *A Different World* and had many

teachers in his schools that went to HBCUs and promoted these schools heavily. He took

notice of his teachers' strong sense of institutional pride, especially in high school.

> They were proud of where they went to college… I think that was important because I didn't get that experience in my classes. In my classes it was…if you're not going to Harvard, Yale, Brown, anything else was almost lesser.

The HBCU advocates that were present during his college choice process were critical to

him and many of his classmates. Many of his core group of friends ultimately decided to

attend HBCUs, either Hampton University or Howard University.

Xavier was provided informal mentoring and guidance by his high school Biology

teacher Mr. Braeburn. Although he was a National Merit Scholarship finalist, he did not

receive encouragement from his high school guidance counselor. "She asked me, 'What

do you want to do after high school?' I said, 'I'm gonna go to college.' And she said,

'Well, what are your other options?'" Xavier was upset because she just looked at him as

"one of the brown faces in school." She did not consider his stellar grades nor his

impeccable standardized test scores and relegated him to the margins. Mr. Braeburn

would step in and tell him, "Don't go to her any more. Come to me." Mr. Braeburn was

an alumnus of Hampton University. He spoke highly of his college experiences and

inspired Xavier. He chose to attend Hampton University and major in Biology. "I knew

I was gonna be in the sciences, again, because of Mr. Braeburn, so I went into biology,

which is what Mr. Braeburn taught…which is what I was good at also." How did Xavier

engage *his* Hampton University experience?

On August 23rd, 1997 Xavier arrived at Hampton University. He describes this day as "magical." Xavier was in awe of his new surroundings. "I remember moving onto Hampton University's campus and it was the most magical day. I mean it was…It was…To see and be around these academically driven Black people…" Although he attended a diverse high school, he did not perceive many of his Black peers to be serious about school, whether they went to college or not. He was excited to be around other like-minded people that looked like him and became enthralled with his new school. Would he notice differences in social class within his new campus home?

Like my other co-researchers who are featured in this study, Xavier discerned social class differences between himself and his peers immediately. "Income and income disparity between me and where I am and these folks became apparent to me day one." How would Xavier react to the class differences that he noticed at the very beginning of his time at Hampton? He made the conscious decision that he was going to engage the social class dynamics that were present at Hampton and the university culture as a whole on his own terms. Xavier was extremely confident during his college years. He was not going to change himself to fit into the social circles of his more affluent peers:

> I am who I am, so I was not gonna be…I was not gonna lie about what my parents did…I was not gonna get a credit card to go out and buy the latest of everything because they had the latest of everything. Nah, that's not how it was going down…

Xavier did not alter himself to "fit in" with his peers, but, he did notice himself changing in other ways. His social circle would shift and he found himself having to make choices regarding how he could remain true to himself and still be a part of the Hampton community. He was well aware that he and his peers began to conform to the Hampton University culture. The more he immersed himself in his campus culture and became

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involved in co-curricular activities he began to realize that Hampton University had clear intents for their students.

> Hampton groomed us to be a certain way when we left out of campus, you know?...Hampton is very much about molding you. And I will say maybe sometimes to a fault, but I will say for the most part, I think it works.

The "Hampton Model" worked for Xavier, but, does it work for everyone in that context?

He would establish himself on campus and would become a highly regarded student

leader. It appears that Xavier welcomed the Hampton experience, its lessons, and his

peers. He is a proud alumnus. "Hampton was my home…I could have just took it as 'I'm

here to take classes,' but I wanted the experience."

And *Still* the Water Calls

This Love

This love
has been tested
has been tried
has been questioned, held to the fire

This love
It has faced storms
the wind and rain
Has been forced to feel some pain

This love
Has known doubt
uncertainty
known patience
and urgency
This love will have freedoms and its demands

But this love
never giving up
never giving up on this love

This love will have glory
will have shame
will be praised, it will be blamed

will have passion
will have its purpose

This love
will have its price but it's so worth it

This love
at times will triumph
at times will fail
it can be heaven
or
it can be hell

This love
it will be right
or
It can be wrong
(Irie, 2013, Track 3)

During my time as a PhD student in "dissertation status" I cherish every spare

moment that I have to dedicate myself solely to my dissertation. Every hour of the day

counts. My morning commutes to work are treasured moments in time when I am able to

read an article on the train, take notes, or review and edit drafts of chapters that I have

submitted to my dissertation co-chairs. These flashes in time are always accompanied by

music. I place my "earbuds" in my ears and I select an album to orchestrate my ride on

the Metro through the diverse neighborhoods of Washington, D.C. I am always taken to

another place far away from my crowded train car, its noisy passengers, and the possible

delays that may ensue on the "Red Line."

Recently, during one of these commutes India.Irie's "This Love" filled my ears. I

had heard the song many times before, but at this moment I was present and truly heard

her words. *Again* I was called. I was immediately in awe because I realized that her

lyrics described the "love" I have for my phenomenon and what each of my "Perfect 10"

endured during their time in college. Unconsciously, I had stepped back into the

hermeneutic circle. "In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial

kind of knowing" (Heidegger, 1962/2008, p. 195). The hermeneutic circle has the power

to reveal new understanding of a holistic reality that is developed only in one's

exploration of the details inherent in each of our existence (Gadamer, 1960/2012). The

circle is not bound by time and does not reveal new knowledge in a haphazard manner.

A whole reality is bestowed, developed, and fostered by exploring the details of the

existence that surrounds us.

> Given that the hermeneutic circle involves the constant bringing to bear of new
> information upon the object of inquiry, and the integration of that information into
> increasingly adequate interpretations of the object, hermeneutical inquiry has no
> natural resting place, no point at which it can suspend its operations with a sense
> of the job well and thoroughly done, short of an understanding of the entire world,
> and of the entire world, moreover, as an *integrated* world. (Bontekoe, 1996, p. 10)

When one steps into the hermeneutic circle there is a realization that one's phenomenon

is all around you. This fate is not chosen; one is called without choice. You are given

over to your phenomenon of pursuit. It permeates your existence and often shows itself

in myriad manners.

India.Irie's words struck me in an unexpected and poignant manner. She paints a

portrait of how being in a state of love is often wrought with not only devotion and

adoration, but tension and conflict as well. My co-researchers love their respective alma

maters, but the themes that emerge in this study reveal that there was a palpable tension

present—this love is complex. *"This love has been tested...has been tried...has been

questioned, held to the fire..."* They felt that their presence on these campuses was

sometimes challenged. Their existence in these environments was questioned by

themselves and their peers. *"This love it has faced storms...has been forced to feel some

pain..."* Some wondered if they could endure their campus environments. There would

be frustration, disappointments, and even tears. *"This love will have passion...will have its purpose...will have its price but it's so worth it!"* The men and women in this study would make choices. Was there a price to be paid? They felt that they were in these environments for a reason even if during many occasions they did not understand why. Was it all worth it?

The themes that have emerged within this phenomenological exploration show that this project has been a labor of love for me and my co-researchers. To "labor" is defined as working hard, making great effort, or to move or proceed with trouble or difficulty (Oxford Dictionaries Online, 2014). The etymology of "labor" reveals that circa the late 14th century *labor* meant to strive and endeavor. A pivotal point in phenomenological exploration is writing one's way through his/her own journey. This process can be intense as one endeavors to aptly show one's phenomenon. Writing and re-writing my way through the emergent themes of this phenomenon has been a tremendous effort. I have experienced euphoric highs and melancholy lows.

There is a palpable silence that surrounds this topic. "To write phenomenologically requires that we be sensitively attentive to the silence around the words by means of which we attempt to disclose the deep meaning of our world" (van Manen, 2007, p. 131). I have knowingly journeyed into the unknown to (un)cover myriad truths that surround the presence of intra-racial social class interactions within elite HBCU contexts. I address the silence and give voice to those whose life experiences have been suppressed by unmitigated circumstances.

During the thematization process I have simultaneously searched for, reconciled, and made meaning. While engaging the themes that have emerged, I have been anchored

by the love that I have for my phenomenon, my co-researchers, and the institutions that are placed at the center of this work. *Love* derives from the Germanic and Proto-Indo-European word "leubh" meaning "to care and desire." "Human science research is concerned with meaning—to desire meaning, this 'desire to make sense,' [the] 'desire to make meaning'…Desire refers to a certain attentiveness and deep interest in an aspect of life" (van Manen, 2007, p. 79).

I have remained steadfast and intensely in tune with the phenomenon that I have chosen to reveal. To be clear, the themes that are presented in this work are not absolute truths or finite in their meaning. "Phenomenological themes are not objects or generalizations; metaphorically speaking, they are more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes" (van Manen, 2007, p. 90). How shall I untie the "knots" of this phenomenon so that I may link them together into a cohesive and meaningful whole?

Yes, I have labored. I have made great effort, worked hard, but also strived and endeavored to show the phenomenon of what it means to be a low-income African-American student within an elite HBCU context. The themes that have emerged within this phenomenon articulate the importance of (re)vealing and recognizing the complexity of Black social class interaction. When African-Americans choose to discuss class and status, what is deemed appropriate and disclosed? This discourse is uncomfortable, but necessary. My co-researchers and I adore our institutions, but we have struggled with them too. I must now be critical and unveil in an ethos of care the hidden student life encounters within elite HBCU communities. What standards and mores have been placed upon African-American low-income students within elite HBCU communities?

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And again the water calls. Here in Chapter Four, I begin the process of "troubling the waters" of social class that surround elite HBCU environments. This chapter divulges the critical narratives of diverse Black and White philosophers, scholars, and artists who serve as my muses as I endeavor to further *show,* and not *tell,* the intricate details of how social class, status, and feelings of difference shape the phenomenon of how low-income African-Americans experience their being on elite HBCU campuses. Each of these has their place. Who or what else is (pre)sent?

"My Perfect Ten" are also introduced amongst these waters. Their stories are carried amongst its ebbs and flows and make this phenomenon more transparent. The waters that have sprung forth carry the flow of time, coming-of-age experiences, and endless possibilities that are sincere and meant to resonate with each reader of this study. The themes that have surfaced show what has occurred within elite HBCU contexts when certain standards are voluntarily or involuntarily forced upon African-American low-income students. This study (un)veils the (in)visible lives of low-income African-American students and how they experience social class within elite HBCU environments, and makes it known that Black people are so much more complex than what skewed historical perspectives, distorted statistics, or muddled anecdotes have previously displayed.

CHAPTER FIVE
(UN)COVERING ESSENTIAL REMEMBRANCES: TREADING THE WATERS OF WONDER AND REALITY

A New Awareness Is Bestowed

> Wonder shows that the usual and the unusual are two sides of the same coin: that beings "be," whether we take them for granted as merely being "usual," or by thinking of them in their extraordinariness. Wonder is "between" the usual and the unusual insofar as it is in wonder that the usual is unusual, and vice-versa. (Stone, 2006, p. 213)

I have faithfully and genuinely been present with the life stories of my co-researchers and deeply mulled over their distinctions. After listening and re-listening to our many conversations, along with reading and re-reading the transcriptions I am often in awe. Listening *and* truly being present with others is a profound activity. Critically listening to the voices of others who are "different" or the "same" illuminates an understanding of change and their experiences of domination, oppression, and transformation (Olson, 1998). The narratives in this study are full of wonder and the youthful dreams of my co-researchers that were brought into fruition because they were able to attend and graduate from an elite HBCU. Each of them yearned for these places, but their wonder would swiftly transform into a unique state of reality that they would endure, perhaps contest, or even unabashedly absorb. With their wonder brings *mine*—I constantly ponder about the possibilities that can be brought forth.

What is it to wonder? Does one dream? Can it be a state of serendipity? "Wonder" derives from the Old English "wunder" that meant a "marvelous thing, a marvel, the object of astonishment." In extending the etymological definition of *wonder*, Heidegger provides another approach to engage this state of being in the world:

> No one can be caught up in wonder without travelling to the outermost limits of the possible. But no one will ever become the friend of the possible without

remaining open to dialogue with the powers that operate in the whole of human existence. (Heidegger, 1938/1994, p. 178)

I remain open because I must. The extraordinary is all around us; what is wondrous is that being(s) "be" (Stone, 2006). The individuals who are featured in this study lived in wonder—they dwelled in wonder. Would this state be temporary or long-lasting? When would reality set in? Each arrived at Howard and Hampton and experienced what they perceived as the "usual" and "unusual" amongst their own. "[I]n wonder …everything becomes the most unusual … Everything in what is most usual (beings) becomes in wonder the most unusual in this one respect: that it is what it is" (Heidegger, 1938/1994, pp. 166-167). How did the unusual become usual? What was usual and what was unusual?

Being in Awe: Standing On the Precipices of Wonder and Reality

Each of my co-researchers knowingly left what they "knew" for an experience that was "new." "My Perfect 10" would find that they would be enthralled with their alma maters, the people who dwelled within the places, and even themselves as they navigated their experiences and these places. "Wonder opens up a space, a clearing in which beings reveal their being" (Stone, 2006, p. 212). In this open space what would the clearing reveal? What lies on the precipice of wonder and reality? The wonder within this phenomenon permeates each narrative.

Nia was caught up in wonder and vividly recalled her first day at Howard:

> I remember just sitting there and I'm looking up and I see all the cars and all the people, and I just kept thinking that it was gonna get taken away from me. It just seemed like it was just too good to be true. I'm here. I'm moving in. I'm gonna get to the counter and they're gonna say, "We don't have your name." They're gonna say, "We didn't get the check for the money." They're gonna say that. And so it took me about a week to realize that I was in; that they got my money; I

got my housing; like, "I'm here for sure" because I really just didn't believe that it all happened.

Nia was in awe. She arrived at Howard in wonder, but she was also unsettled and in utter disbelief that her dream was becoming reality. She was far away from all that she once knew, and kept waiting for her new reality to come to a sudden halt. Why was she suddenly unnerved? In her state of wonder was also fear of the unknown. Is fear a feeling to negotiate when one is in a state of wonder? She would not find solace until she realized that this existence was a "new normal." The "unusual" would become the "usual." Like my other co-researchers, she had been waiting on this time to come for so long.

<center>I Wonder</center>

<center>
I've been waitin' on this my whole life
These dreams be wakin' me up at night
And I wonder if you know what it means?
What it means?
And I wonder if you know what it means to find your dreams come true?
You ever wonder what it all really means?
You wonder if you'll ever find your dreams…
(West, 2007, Track 4)
</center>

Within this phenomenon, being in wonder comes with the recognition of choices to be made and difference amongst your own. One's wonder is an astute attunement to the world where we find that the usual is not always what it seems (Heidegger, 1938/1994; Stone, 2006). *And I wonder if you know what it means to find your dreams come true?* In wonder comes the awareness that a dream can be realized, but in this phenomenon lies a multifaceted reality. Lessons are learned, engaged, tested, and even questioned. Revealed in wonder are "right" and "wrong," a learning of difference, and the "other" that has been hard to name. "Differences have been misnamed and misused

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in the service of separation and confusion" (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 115). There is power in

naming, but there is also a responsibility to exhibit care in the naming process. "Wonder

now opens up what alone is wondrous in it, namely the whole as the whole, the whole as

beings, that they are what they are, beings as beings" (Heidegger, 1938/1994, pp. 168-

169). What was usual for those in this study was no more. What was once unusual would

become routine. How is this reconciled?

> What seems natural to us is probably just something familiar in a long tradition
> that has forgotten the unfamiliar source from which it arose. And yet this
> unfamiliar source once struck man as strange and caused him to think and to
> wonder. (Heidegger, 1938/1994, pp. 171)

Like Nia, my co-researchers often deemed their new routines as foreign. They

would often search for the familiar. What is fascinating is that within this phenomenon

are traditions, legacies, and expectations that "My Perfect Ten" were to assume were

normal happenstance. These institutional foundations and mores become the everyday

for students who are present at an elite HBCU campus. However, the expectations that

lie in the ordinary forced my co-researchers to reconcile their daily existences constantly.

They found themselves navigating states of wondrous awe and were also imparted with

harsh realities.

It's Subtle, But It's There: The Common is Not Always So Common

Search

I love my people
I walk into rooms
and search
I search for Black faces
for contact
or reassurance
or a sign
that
I

am
not
alone

It's funny
I now have rooms
full of black faces
they gaze upon me
they judge
and like me
they wonder

But
Do they see me?
Really see me?
Or
am I now in a box?

My clothes
my speech
Me
I am different

Once
it was oh so easy to know
Who *my* people were
(Mobley, 2014)

Close your eyes. Come with me and imagine. You are a low-income African-American freshmen student at an elite HBCU. It is fall and you have finally arrived. You are happy—ecstatic even, and so ready for the next phase of your life. It is the first day of the semester and your morning classes just ended. The campus is now bustling and everyone is making their way to "The Caf[29]" for lunch. You follow.

As you walk into your campus dining hall for the first time it is evident that this is one of *the* places to see and be seen. You quickly make your way inside. Boisterous conversation and laughter fill the air. Your peers seem to move with ease through the cafeteria lines. Are you overwhelmed, fascinated, or captivated?

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[29] "The Caf" is a colloquial term often used to refer to the dining hall on an HBCU campus.

You quickly select an entrée and now it is time to find a seat. Where are the

familiar faces? The tray becomes heavy. Thoughts flood your mind. "Is everyone

looking at me?" "They all seem to know each other." There are many other new

students in this same room, but you feel different. You soon spot a small empty table in

the corner of this vast room. You begin to eat alone and quietly watch your peers.

Intense thoughts flood your mind. "Who are they?" "Will I have to eat alone

tomorrow?" This ordeal soon comes to an end. You survived. But, will there be other

times when you feel this way?

The aforementioned experience sheds light and foreshadows. Being the "new

kid" on the first day of school is a "common" experience that many of us have had. I use

it to set a tone. What makes this seemingly common experience different? An awkward

moment on the first day of school may seem ordinary, but this type of encounter is

perceived much differently when one is a low-income African-American student at an

elite HBCU.

Stepping Into the "Ordinary": When All the Cafeteria Tables Are Black.

Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) poses the question: "Why are all the Black kids sitting

together in the cafeteria" (p. 52)? She explores the phenomenon of why Black students

self-segregate in educational environments when they are in the minority. Tatum (1997)

contends that within these particular settings Black students will seek each other out at

cafeteria tables and other school settings to find places of refuge and comfort in their

racial identity. "The developmental need to explore the meaning of one's identity with

others who are engaged in a similar process manifests itself informally in school

corridors and cafeterias across the country" (Tatum, 1997, p. 71).

92% of Hampton University's student body is Black and Howard University's student population is 91% Black (National Center for Education Statistics Website, 2014). When relating Tatum's notions to elite HBCU campuses, what occurs when most if not all of the "cafeteria tables," residence halls, or other educational and social settings are predominately Black? "Within group differences shaped by socioeconomic status, familial background, academic expectations and experiences, and geographic communities of origin (urban, suburban, and rural) have been, at best, trivially considered in the published higher education literature" (Harper & Nichols, 2008, p. 1). How do students in Black environments such as an elite HBCU context self-segregate? Is one's identity internalized and then, in turn, demonstrated and revealed when social class, status, or geographic region are brought to the forefront? "How one's racial identity is experienced will be mediated by other dimensions of one-self: male or female; young or old; wealthy, middle class, or poor…" (Tatum, 1997, p. 71). Low-income African students on elite HBCU campuses navigate myriad factors within these seemingly homogenous environments. Within elite higher education contexts there appears to be an unspoken "core" of the university from which many lower income students feel excluded (Aries & Seider, 2005). What lies at the exclusive "core" where affluent students exist, while lower-income students may sit and look in from the margins?

Many of my co-researchers pervasively felt that they were constantly on the outside and silent observers. An "ordinary" encounter like the cafeteria scenario that I vividly describe is one of many that seemed to happen again and again for those in this study. They come suddenly and swiftly and are clouded with inescapable feelings of difference. "Integrating one's past, present, and future into a cohesive, unified sense of

self is a complex task that begins in adolescence and continues for a lifetime" (Tatum, 1997, p. 20).

Imagine having to navigate your past constantly within the present in order to thrive and flourish so that you can work towards solidifying your future beyond your campus walls. For instance, everyday questions can serve as triggers. In these moments one remembers previous life experiences that may have been upsetting or stressful. They incite emotional reactions and changes in one's mental state and cause one to revisit that distress (Carter, 2007; Foa, 1997).

> Ongoing lifestyles of affluent students require resources that lower income students often do not possess…More often than not, lower income students cannot afford to accompany their friends on trips for spring break, or to go to dinners at high priced restaurants. (Aries & Seider, 2005, p. 429)

These occurrences can cause one to hide, guard, or lash out. "What do your parents do?" "Where are you from?" Even being asked to dinner off-campus can incite shame because you cannot afford to go. Moments like the previous examples occurred when "My Perfect 10" were students. They were amongst individuals whom they believed they should have felt an innate kinship, but initially many did not.

"They All Knew Each Other": The Ties That Bind. Alonzo spoke candidly about how he felt left out and unwelcomed by his peers. He felt that his elite HBCU campus (Howard University) was "not the most welcoming place" and recalls:

> So many people just already knew each other and I feel like they weren't even, like, making new friends at that point…I found out that they knew each other from the prominent schools that they attended together in their hometowns or were in Jack & Jill together or other social clubs that I never even knew about before I came to college…Howard was not a place where you can just, like, put your tray down and sit next to someone in the cafeteria, and they're gonna be like, "So, where you from?" That's not happening at Howard. It's not happening….I mean, if you did not have tough skin – which you do develop quickly at Howard – you're not going to make it. You've gotta be willing to eat lunch alone. You've

gotta be willing to not have plans for the weekend. I did not always feel as if these people were welcoming and inviting...I was not in their clique, I was not like them, and not only did I know this, they made it known…So it's hard. How did that make you feel? It makes you feel…I must say I think that it did motivate me a little bit. It made me want to do more…

Alonzo's recollection sheds light on occasions when African-American low-income students at elite HBCUs recognize their differences. What did Alonzo want? Where did he and those like him fit in *this* world? Alonzo's peers seemed closed to "new" individuals. Were students like him not worthy of acceptance? He also communicates that those who do not "belong" to the already established social existence at an elite HBCU are faced with an uncanny reality. Do I wallow in my difference that can incite feelings of loneliness, or do I engage uncomfortable spaces—those filled with the possibilities of rejection *and* acceptance? What must one do to gain acceptance?

Many of Alonzo's peers already knew each other from their home environments or Black elite social groups that they had been acquainted with prior to their attending college. "The Book" sheds light on how "alliances" or "friendships" may be formed amongst Black upper middle/middle class students even before they step foot on any college campus.

> Each year, the organization [Jack and Jill] publishes an annual yearbook called *Up the Hill*, which features photos and reports from the local chapters as they detail their service, cultural, and social activities of the prior year. The pink-and-blue book is as thick as a big city phone directory and serves as a chronicle of growing up in the Black elite, coast-to-coast. Many think of it as a Black children's version of the *Social Register*. (Graham, 1999, p. 34)

Graham (1999) reveals that *Up the Hill* is an annual registry of each child that is involved in *Jack and Jill* during his/her entire tenure in this organization. Parents and their children voraciously comb through this publication, read the accolades, and tab pages of "those of interest." Who is of interest and why? This occurrence becomes quite intense when *Jack*

and Jill children are heading to college. Parents take note of particular students who are attending the same institution as their child and consider them as possible additions to their social networks. It is almost as if parents and their children are "planning friendships." This is an unusual occurrence that discloses how "forces" are at work within elite HBCU cultures that low-income African-American students are not privy to prior to their enrollments. Elite HBCUs have the power to be bastions of social privilege to which lower income students have little to no access, and provide glimpses into a breeding they have not acquired (Aries & Seider, 2005).

My co-researchers constantly referenced their peers who were in *Jack and Jill* and often referred to them as the "Jack and Jill kids." Every affluent Black student was not a part of this organization, but those within this study saw *Jack and Jill* and the students who were amongst its membership as key stakeholders in their college experiences. It seemed that these individuals served as "social benchmarks," or in some cases, individuals whom they had no interest in befriending.

Beyond Jack & Jill: "Where Do I Stand?" Xavier noticed the close connections and bonds of his peers who were once a part of *Jack and Jill,* but he also observed other ways that his more affluent peers were connected:

> You know, as I got to sophomore, junior, and senior year, I realized a lot more…I understood that people had deeper friendships through Jack & Jill that were established in their region. It's like, "That's how y'all know each other." You know freshman year, you see people, it's like, "Damn." I know I networked. I'm pretty good at meeting people and I met a lot of friends, but for some reason these people knew each other. You can just tell that they knew each other for a longer period of time, and I found out later on it's because they did. So they had some networks that were established prior to them even coming into Hampton. They had a Jack & Jill connection, or they had, um…their parents were educated, or even that their parents went to Hampton.

As a first generation, low-income student Xavier became well aware that many of his peers were able to form bonds in ways that he was not able to. Not only were they involved in similar organizations prior to college, but they were able to connect with each other because their parents were college graduates or had even gone to Hampton too. Nora also discerned similar relationships:

> I felt belittled in a way. Not because of anything no [sic] one did, but it was what they would say. It was nothing to meet someone for the first time and they just had to tell me "Oh yeah, my mom's the mayor of the city I grew up in," or even that their parents, grand-parents, or even great-grandparents had gone to Howard…I would shut down in an instant when it came time for me to tell my story as to why I was there. That didn't seem as promising or as purposeful as other people. I wasn't comfortable.

Low-income students are often acutely made aware of their status in relation to their places within higher education settings (Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003). We must begin to peel back the layers and "understand more thoroughly the complex ways in which people mediate and respond to the interface between their lived experiences and structures of domination and constraint" (Giroux, 1983, p. 108). These are moments in time. How does one reconcile feeling different or that they do not truly belong? Did they all feel this way? "The concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts. Who am I? The answer depends in large part who the world around me says I am" (Tatum, 1997, p. 18). An ordinary occurrence can shed light on other experiences that many of my co-researchers faced throughout their time on their elite HBCU campuses. They often wondered "Who am I?' and "Where do I belong?" Do these feelings ever go away?

Under My Skin

I'm happy
So ready
For the next phase in my life
These days are fulfilling
and I have peace of mind
but every time I get too high
I somehow get knocked backed down
Why can't I have my peace?
(Green & Poyser, 2005, Track 6)

Disentangling the complex forces of how one negotiates difference and social

class privilege amongst their own and even being "othered" or shamed can translate in

myriad manners (Mullen, 2010). The individuals featured within this study experience

extreme highs and lows. *"Every time I get too high…I somehow get knocked backed*

down" Why? Are you truly in control or must you be given over to all that is new?

Inescapable Memories of Class: Freeing The Hidden From The Shadows

The power of place is a remarkable one...it holds its own memories. (Casey, 2009, p. 213)

To survive in this new world of divided classes, this world of where I was also encountering for the first time a Black bourgeois elite, I had to take a stand, to get clear my own class affiliations. This was the most difficult truth to face. Having been taught all my life to believe that Black people were inextricably bound in solidarity by our struggles, I did not know how to respond to elitist Black people... Despite this rude awakening, my disappointment at finding myself estranged from my own that I thought I would understand, I still looked for connections. (hooks, 2000, p. 35)

Class is rarely talked about in the United States; nowhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class differences than in educational settings. (hooks, 1994, p. 177)

Our memories are ever-present and paramount in our daily lives. They force us to

revisit our pasts. Our thoughts appear to us in our present and are "place-oriented or at

least place-supported" (Casey, 2009, p. 187). The memories of class that are bestowed

within this phenomenon are inextricably tied to place. Poignant recollections yearn for the places that live in our existences. Place(s) can revive memories, for it is within these places that we (re)cover critical thoughts that are present within them. The remembrances of class that are (re)called in this study are especially necessary to further *show,* and not *tell,* this phenomenon. But, I am also acutely aware that the places that are at the forefront of this work "will invite certain memories while discouraging others" (Casey, 2009, p. 189).

Bell hooks (2000), a prominent Black feminist scholar poignantly captures her memories of "the human costs of class mobility" for low-income/poor African-Americans within collegiate environments in her book *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (p. 156). She recognizes her journey from a working class background to one of economic privilege due to her ability to access higher education, but also notes the strain and shock she endured as a result of certain realizations about Black intra-racial class differences (Cole & Omari, 2003; hooks, 2000). These memories of class *and* place were pivotal for her. Hooks describes her multi-layered interactions with the Black elite while attending Stanford University, and how these encounters awakened her to class differences amongst Black communities for the first time (Cole & Omari, 2003; hooks, 2000).

She was disturbed that her affluent Black peers made her feel uncomfortable due to her background and how they "held in disdain anyone not as privileged as themselves, regardless of race" (Cole & Omari, 2003, p. 798). These individuals stirred a reality and awareness that all Blacks were not united even though they shared the same skin. Hooks' undergraduate experiences sparked the beginning of her class consciousness—feelings

forever incited due to her belief that she was a "stranger" amongst her own people.

Although hooks' undergraduate experiences with intra-racial class difference are centered

around her time at an elite predominately White institution, her journey and pivotal

"social class awakening" provide a glimpse into how my co-researchers felt as they first

began to recognize class differences amongst Black communities at elite HBCUs.

Similar to many in this study, her affluent Black classmates made her feel as if

she was somehow "wrong" due to her social class background. However, her

experiences have a key distinction from those in this study. Hooks' frustration and

confusion with her affluent African-American peers derived from the fact that they

decided to enforce intra-racial class divisions, instead of participating in a campus and

societal fight against racial oppression within a campus context wrought with interracial

tension—her encounters with social class were navigated inter-racially *and* intra-racially

(Cole & Amari, 2003). For low-income African-American students "the intersection of

high educational achievement and aspirations (class) with the lived realities of being of

African descent in America, of either gender, represents a qualitatively different

experience and understanding of self" (Stewart, 2002, p. 16). On elite HBCU campuses

one's recognition of social class difference is brought to the forefront in an environment

that is "seemingly" homogenous. Where do the differences lie? How is social class

(un)veiled?

<div align="center">**"Are We Not All The Same?"**</div>

In their study "Are They Not All The Same?" Harper and Nichols (2008) assert

that within higher education scholarship and college environments, erroneous

assumptions are often made about Black students. It is assumed that Black students who

are present within higher education contexts "all share common experiences and backgrounds" (p. 247). This is a dangerous myth. There has been a false "safety" in deeming African-American students as *all the same.* "Within-group differences impact experiences, dynamics, relationships, and interactions" (Harper & Nichols, 2008, p. 247).

Heidegger (2002/1969) contends that the danger in deeming any group of individuals as the "same" is that we assume they belong together; these beliefs reveal the very differences we often choose to dismiss. My co-researchers quickly realized that not all Black people are the same. What distinguishes them from each other?

> When I saw Howard during the college tour, it was "Kumbaya". It was fun. I saw Greek life…I saw all these smart people who looked just like me…it is a feeling that is hard to describe. But when I got there eventually life happened. I felt different…I began to question myself. "Do I fit in here?" and "Do I belong?" I had no idea that I would have to deal with "that"…It's like I just wasn't happy. I felt totally out of my comfort zone…(Nora)

Nora visited Howard University on a college tour before she ultimately decided to attend. She felt at "home" and became infatuated with the thought of belonging to a Black community that would embrace all of her. These feelings would soon shift. "We can feel out of place even in the home…the uncanny anxiety of not feeling 'at home,' may afflict us" (Casey, 1993/2009, p. x). During our conversations Nora had difficulty in clearly articulating her feelings of distance from her campus culture *and* her confrontations with social class. She was not the only one. Language has the power to distance.

Nia shared similar sentiments to Nora, but she recognized yet another nuance regarding her place at Howard. There was something more. She arrived at Howard from San Francisco, CA. Before arriving at Howard, she had not come into contact with such a large number of upwardly mobile Blacks. Where were these people who were placed in

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her new life? These individuals awakened her to the fact that she was indeed in a whole new world. Washington, DC *and* Howard University forced her to notice class differences for the first time:

> Sometimes I would look around and I would just think…I just didn't realize that people…like, that Black people, to be very honest, lived that way. I didn't know, 'cause in San Francisco it…I didn't have Black doctors. I didn't have a Black dentist. My teachers…I may have had, like, two Black teachers or something. My principal was Black. But, um, you know, I just didn't see…It wasn't the norm.

She notes a presence. The Washington DC metropolitan area consisting of Washington, DC and parts of Maryland and Virginia is often viewed as an anomaly. It is in stark contrast to Nia's San Francisco home. It is a predominately Black enclave that is home to the nation's capital, the richest Black suburb in the country, and thousands of Black professionals in business, education, government, and the arts (Graham, 1999; Robinson, 2011). Nia also recognized that Washington, DC and Howard University were closely intertwined. "But what if place is not something so easily exchanged or merely manipulated? What if place is not a matter of arbitrary position? Where then will we find ourselves" (Casey, 1993/2009, p. xiii)?

Nia was surprised at the presence of Black professionals in her daily life. The Black middle/upper middle class has an unmistakable relationship with Howard University and Washington, DC (Gatewood, 2000). Howard is placed delicately at the center: "Those Blacks who fall into the elite group of Washington have some tie to, or successes at Howard University" (Graham, 1999, p. 231). Not only was she made aware of class differences on her campus, she noticed these individuals within the community beyond her campus gates. There was little distance between Howard University and the larger Washington, DC Black context. The lines were blurred, but noticeable.

(Un)Covering Moments of "Rememory" in the "This," That," and "It"

It is evident that when present with my co-researchers there were powerful recollections that came to the forefront. Their memories and narratives were quite vivid. Together, we were experiencing the state of being in "rememory." A "rememory" [is] a nod to the African belief that present and past are united not separate. Yet, [it] also demands a rewriting of past historical narratives to include the ever-present traumas" (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 21). Within this state one is called to (re)call. Toni Morrison (1987) coined the term "rememory" and ultimately asserts that when one is in this state of reflection they are existing all at once in their pasts and present. Places, people, and moments in time are ever-present.

> I used to think to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do…Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (Morisson, 1987, p. 43)

The pain, elation, distress, and hope of the past and present all coincide together during this meaning making process. You are called to (re)call and provide critical insight. Place is also equally important in "rememory." "If we are rarely securely in place and ever seemingly out of place, it behooves us to understand what place is all about" (Casey, 1993/2009, p. xvii). Each person who is featured in this study was (pre)sent at their elite HBCU, and their relationship to these places was complex.

Nora and Nia were (re)called to their undergraduate years at Howard and were unguarded as they conveyed their multifaceted undergraduate existences. During our intimate conversations they named the class differences where they experienced "that,"

"this," or "it." What was or is "that," "this," or "it?" The presence of social class within elite HBCU environments was hard to name for myself and my co-researchers, too, as I sought to gather their narratives. Throughout my conversations with my "My Perfect Ten" there was constant mention of these vague words. These loaded terms were ever-present. I was intrigued and would have to pull meaning from the (un)known. Again what is "that," "this," or "it?"

During these discussions of class conflict, the etymology of these words manifested themselves. Circa 1200 "this" meant the representation of a "a specific thing." Conversely, during the same time period "that" was in direct opposition to "this" and conveyed "something farther off." "It" comes from the Old English *hit* and was defined as a "thing spoken about before." In attempting to name what occurs within this phenomenon, even the etymology of the words "this," "that," and "it" convey the tension that is present in this phenomenon and reveals and almost re-veils its intricacies.

As my co-researchers spoke of an *it* that has been spoken before, I noticed that they also attempted to conflate *this* and *that*. How can an experience be specific *and* far off? The "this" and "that" will try and shall evade us if we are not careful. The "it" will attempt to further conceal because *it* has supposedly been "spoken about before." Is there no need for us to repeat instances and events that hold critical meaning because they have already been spoken of? I had to dig deeper. These words held the power to hide, conflate, or dismiss. Together, my co-researchers and I worked tirelessly to figure out these loaded idioms and how they would illustrate what took place within this phenomenon. More is revealed.

In-Difference: "Am I Wrong"

The word "indifference" is defined as a lack of interest or concern. These are not feelings that my co-researchers held towards their respective elite HBCUs. Separating the word more aptly describes many of their undergraduate experiences. In direct opposition to how one may feel indifferent, these students frequently dwelled and existed *in* their *difference*. During their times at Hampton and Howard, there were several of "My Perfect Ten" who reflected on their undergraduate lives and found these times to be unfamiliar, disorienting, and even alienating (Aries & Berman, 2012). They were embodying states of "in-difference."

For my co-researchers who experienced "in-difference" it was apparent that this particular feeling contains their elite HBCU campus environments, the people present on these campuses, and other abundant nuances that rise to the forefront of this phenomenon. This phenomenon encompasses many different facets. We must continue to (re)consider the places, their cultures, the backgrounds of the students, and each of their oppressed identities—all are deeply intertwined. Again what exactly *is* place and *its* place as we delve deeper into how low-income African-American students encounter social class on elite HBCU campuses?

> We should think of culture, ethnicity, gender, class, etc., as furnishing dimensions of a place beyond its exact location its geographic space. These dimensions are not themselves events, but they form part of the event of place itself. They act as indwelling forces that contribute to a place its non-physical and non-geographic dimensions. (Casey, 1993/2009, p. xxv)

Summer bluntly identified her time at Howard as a specific period where she felt an embodied a state of being "in-difference."

Again, I feel like Howard was a time…like, my time at Howard was where I began to learn or be sort of awakened to the fact that, like, I actually lived a very different experience than everybody else…

She was deeply in tune to the reality that she was immersed *in* her *difference*. She often compared herself to her more affluent peers and wondered if she would ever measure up. Many times Summer did not understand these feelings of "in-difference" but was determined to overcome them and fit into her environment, but she would do this on her own terms.

I knew that I did not have the money or the pedigree but deep inside I still knew that I belonged at Howard…I watched and learned what was necessary to fit, but I am proud to say that I did this on my own terms…I did not sacrifice the core of Summer…I was not going to lose her.

For Summer, and others amongst "My Perfect Ten," an intricate interplay of difference is present. There is a recognition of one's difference. The noticeable presence of new places and people are also apparent. Decisions were ultimately made with how they reconciled their past in the present. More layers became apparent. Did she and others embrace their difference *and* become similar to their affluent Black peers? When one is steeped *in-difference* how do they negotiate their divergence from the "norms" that are present? How else would in-difference manifest?

"Culture Shock"

As they compare themselves to their wealthy peers, differences in income, social styles, and even speech patterns cause many first-generation students to feel like outsiders…It takes tremendous self-esteem and determination for them to focus on their ultimate goal of graduation. (Cushman, 2007, p. 45)

Roman was *in-difference* too and was reluctant to accept the social standards that were presented to him at Hampton. "Low-income students are often taken aback by the social and academic climate" (Cushman, 2007, p. 44). He arrived at his elite HBCU after

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surviving many personal obstacles. Many of his friends had been killed or were incarcerated by the time he left Washington, DC to begin a new journey in Hampton, VA. This was an emotional topic for him. He knew that he had worked hard and sacrificed to reach his goal of one day pursuing higher education, but still he often doubted himself. "I used to wonder, what makes me think after all I went through and witnessed that I was gonna be the one savior that came out and, you know, be successful?" He "made it out," but at what costs? He did not know how or why *he* was chosen to be given the opportunity to pursue his dreams.

"It is not uncommon for students entering college to feel intimidated, uncertain of the competition and concerned about how they will adjust to their new circumstances" (Aries & Seider, 2005, p. 421). It is evident that he felt pressure to perform at Hampton due to escaping a past filled with turmoil. Many low-income/first generation students feel tensions as they encounter and experience their higher education environments. "Their fellow college students often seem to be members of a club of insiders to which they do not belong" (Cushman, 2007, p. 44).

During his years at Hampton, Roman felt discomfort in his *in-difference* but was determined to hold on to his core working class DC identity. He believed that it kept him grounded. However, this portion of his identity was in direct conflict with his elite HBCU college culture. He expresses:

> It was a lifestyle change going from DC to Hampton. That was one transition in itself. Then coming from a poor neighborhood versus coming to a school where pretty much people didn't have to worry about, "How am I gonna survive in school?" or "How I'mma get money while I'm in school?" So it was just . . . It was a culture shock…The only thing that made it comfortable was because it was an HBCU. You was around your own kind. But even your own kind became irritating…they judged. I always had to explain myself…Why I dressed or talked a certain way…I would get pissed. Why do I have to explain to anything to you?

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> So to me, I never really fit in the…I never fit in the situation because it was just like that just wasn't home. It wasn't family to me. It was just more of, "I'm coming here to get my education and I'mma be out"…I couldn't adapt to that lifestyle.

What is telling is that although Roman had found solace in being in another majority Black environment, he was still confronted with feelings of frustration and discomfort. He experienced "culture shock" at Hampton. It is not uncommon for Black students to experience "culture shock" in the academy, but it is usually when they are the minority within a majority White environment. The seemingly homogenous elite HBCU context brings this same sort of discomfort for low-income African-American collegians. College can be a shock to working-class students for "college is where the 'great change' begins…One world opens and widens; [but] another shrinks" (Lubrano, 2004, p. 88).

Roman's place at Hampton was questioned because he refused to change and adapt to the elitist social norms that were present. He unabashedly embraced his personal brand that was often at odds with the larger Hampton context. Roman challenged the "great change" and channeled a spirit of courage and found comfort in *his* authentic way of being. He was not going to apologize for the way he dressed or where he came from. These facets of Roman's being reminded him of "home" and he was determined to never forget where he came from.

It is not uncommon for low-income students to rebel by "clinging to exaggerated manners and behaviors clearly marked as outside the accepted bourgeois norm" (hooks, 1994, p. 182). He held on to his working-class sense of self much to the discomfort of his peers and the Hampton culture as a whole. What did they want from him? Conversely, what did he want from them? He wanted "peace of mind"—to simply and authentically be.

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Seeking "Piece Of Mind": Balancing The Authentic And Inauthentic

I Gotta Find Peace Of Mind

I gotta find peace of mind
I gotta find peace of mind
See this what that voice in your head says
When you try to get peace of mind

I gotta find peace of mind, I gotta find peace of mind
It's impossible, but I know it's possible
All my energy, trapped in my memory
Constantly holding me, constantly holding me
I need to tell you all, all the pain
I'm undone
it's impossible, but I know it's possible

It's improbable, but I know it's tangeable
It's not grabbable, but I know it's haveable
Cuz anything's possible, oh anything is possible
Please come free my mind, please come meet my mind

Cuz anything's possible, oh anything is possible
Please come free my mind, please come meet my mind
Can you see my mind
Won't you come free my mind?

Oh I know it's possible
Free, free your mind... free, free your mind
Oh, it's so possible, oh it's so possible
I'm telling you it's possible, I'm telling you it's possible
(Hill, 2002, Track 13)

In seeking peace of mind "My Perfect Ten" were faced with many choices.

Embracing a "new" identity is often contentious for low-income students, and can lead to

feelings of inauthenticity and a desire to retain all or part of their prior working-class

identity (Reay, 1996). Again, as these students (re)negotiate their "being" there is the

sobering realization that they are also navigating both time and place; this, too, is the

delicate balance of *authenticity* and *inauthenticity* (Heidegger, 1962/2008). Heidegger is

quite intentional when differentiating between these two concepts:

Inauthenticity" has the sense of something's not being my own; I am inauthentic when I am not in control, when my values and beliefs are determined by others or by "society."…"Authenticity" is connected to self-awareness: it is the activity unique to Dasein. "In determining itself as an entity, "authenticity" always does so in the light of a possibility which it is itself and which, in its very being, it somehow understands. (p. 43)

Dasein presents itself as a complex reminder of how my co-researchers realized their oppressed identities. Is one ever in control during this formidable process? Yes, they were self-aware and knew that they were *in-difference*, but their presences on these campuses were impacted due to feelings of "authenticity" and "inauthenticity." Must one try to overcome being low-income *and* modify their behavior to the "right" middle-class way?

Among my "My Perfect Ten" are those who may or may not have embraced their new environments and did not accept the norms and mores that were present. What do *their* stories reveal? When met with change they knew they were not always in control. Who would work to dictate their places on these campuses? As they sought to remain faithful to their true essences, they knew that there was also a state of possibility—the possibility to understand these places and maybe even truly "be."

Whom or what was in control of their journeys? How did they negotiate both the "authentic" and "inauthentic?" As these students reconciled their myriad oppressed identities there is a question of "Am I wrong," and how shall one choose to dwell? Would it be perceived by themselves and others as authentic *or* inauthentic? Being working class and then being confronted with the choice to personify the culture of an elite context can many times serve as a barrier to success (Ingram, 2011). Is this always true? Can a state of solace exist for low-income African-American students within elite HBCU contexts? "Feelings of pain, ambivalence, displacement, alienation and shame

may accompany the upward social mobility that higher education offers" (Aries &

Seider, 2005, p. 420). Where would they find peace of mind?

You Are Not Alone

> All the possibilities of your human destiny are asleep in your soul. You are here to realize and honor these possibilities. When you allow others in to your life, unrecognized dimensions of your destiny awaken and blossom and grow. (O'Donohue, 1997, p. 165)

Before any of my co-researchers enrolled at their respective elite HBCUs they

held these institutions in high regard. Did they have realistic expectations of their

schools? Tinto (1993) asserts:

> Even before enrollment, the more accurate and realistic one's expectations are with regard to the collegiate environment, the more likely it is that the resulting choice will lead to an effective match between the individual and the institution. One's final choice depends in large upon the nature of those expectations; especially those pertaining to the social and intellectual character of the college. (p. 62)

Many sought to be challenged academically and also wished to be immersed in African-

American culture. They desired to be amongst their own. While they may have pursued

these schools and even yearned to attain the HBCU experience, I must further question. I

now call into question the social character of these schools and how this facet may

influence the college experience for low-income students. Who critically impacts the

social character of elite HBCU experiences, and how does this, in turn, effect low-income

African-American students who are present on these campuses? Xavier communicates:

> So, you know, that's the part of the story that is important…left out would make it seem like I figured out everything by myself. I didn't. I was able to ask people who were more senior than me who were willing to help me out. And I think some people who either don't have the personality or aren't open enough to reaching out to people…Other people may not have upperclassman looking out for them, you know? There were people who seeded into me as well, you know? Being from D.C., there were a lot of older D.C. guys who looked out for me.   I was blessed in a different way…I was fortunate. I was very fortunate.

He reveals an important part of this phenomenon and makes it known that he could not have survived at Hampton had it not been for his support system. This was a consistent theme amongst my co-researchers. They simply could not have navigated these contexts by themselves. A community had to be forged to sustain them as they navigated the complex nuances of social class and elite HBCU college life as a whole—important aspects that were made quite apparent to them.

<div align="center">

Alone

Lying, thinking
Last night
How to find my soul a home
Where water is not thirsty
And bread loaf is not stone
I came up with one thing
And I don't believe I'm wrong
That nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone
Nobody, but nobody
Can make it out here alone.

There are some millionaires
With money they can't use
Their wives run round like banshees
Their children sing the blues
They've got expensive doctors
To cure their hearts of stone.
But nobody
No, nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone
Nobody, but nobody
Can make it out here alone.
(Angelou, 1994, p. 74)

</div>

Nobody, but nobody, can make it out here alone. Throughout our lives there are instances where individuals will show themselves and shift the very contours of our lives. They may present themselves to you in unknowing manners or make their being and meaning blatantly clear. But why?

Recognizing the Presence of the "Guides"

O God, I thank You for the lanterns in my life
who illumined dark and uncertain paths
calmed and stilled debilitating doubts and fears
with encouraging words, wise lessons, gentle
touches, firm nudges, and faithful actions along my
journey of life.
(Edelman, 1999, p. xiii)

We are all bestowed with "guides." A "guide" is pivotal for low-income African-American students on elite HBCU campuses. Circa the mid 14th century "guide" derived from the Old-French and meant "one who shows the way, or to lead." These individuals may aid in steering your course and even ultimately help you to realize your ultimate purpose and potential. The "guides" that presented themselves to my co-researchers were especially important to them. Some deliberately sought out mentorship. Others had *guides* who would seek them out and take a special interest in their well-being and success. "Real friendship is not manufactured or achieved by an act of will or intention. Friendship is always an act of recognition" (O'Donohue, 1997, p. 93). Again, they were chosen.

It is essential for low-income students to pursue and establish relationships with key constituents so that they are able to navigate higher education contexts successfully (Padilla, Trevino, & Gonzales, 1997). "My Perfect Ten" all maintained that their undergraduate experiences were heavily impacted by a number of individuals. These

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individuals made up the social fabric of their college experiences. Much of their success was attributed to their "campus connections." Where did these *campus connections* lie?

The interactions that my co-researchers had with their faculty members, student affairs administrators, and several close friends and colleagues were diverse in nature and had significant impacts on their undergraduate experiences. Efforts to understand the complexity of the interactions that occur amongst Black student subpopulations and how they engage their campus contexts has been limited (Harper & Nichols, 2008). These interactions must be uncovered to get to the experiences of Black students who inhabit higher education spaces.

Summer notes that Howard University was made up of various social hierarchies and each comprised the "Howard" brand:

> Howard University is comprised of countless social networks. You are judged on what organizations you and your friends are affiliated with and even *their* academic reputations as well. The bigger and more influential your network was, the easier your time was there.

A "brand" is at stake that extends far beyond the gates of either of these elite HBCU campuses. There is complex interplay at work within this phenomenon with regard to the role of institutional place and those who inhabit their hollowed grounds. In this intricate equation, what role does the campus and its culture play? How much influence do the people who dwell in these spaces have so that they may indeed be "desirable," and what does it all equal? What is then produced? What is created centers around the "brands" that are intensely protected at these institutions.

As I mentioned in Chapter Two, a "brand" is especially important to these students and their institutions. It takes on many forms. These "brands" are preserved by the elite institutions themselves, their current students, and alumni. How are the "brands"

maintained? Peers play a pivotal and paramount role. They serve as "guides." The

student peer group is one of the most influential aspects of a college student's growth,

maturity, evolution, and development during their undergraduate years (Astin, 1993).

What makes the "peer group" on elite HBCU campuses important? It is essential to

recognize within-group differences amongst individuals of the same race and how these

features impact their experiences and perceptions of each other (Harper & Nichols,

2008).

Nia was bestowed with a "guide" before she even stepped foot onto Howard's

campus. She came into contact with one of her friends from the "Omega Boys Club" (a

college access program in San Francisco) during her college choice process and he never

left her:

> I was applying to Howard. A lot of the graduates from the Omega Boys Club,
> they would leave and go off to college and would come back and talk to us about
> their experiences. I remember "Jackson" coming home from Howard and he
> would just be talking about college and how happy he was there…When
> "Jackson" came and he spoke, I was kind of more intrigued by Howard.…I don't
> know what the term for it is, but he showed me that Howard was everywhere.

Whether Nia realized it or not she was shown a reflection of herself in "Jackson." He,

too, was a low-income African-American student currently in the place where she desired

to be and modeled success. Friends are a major factor when low-income students are

determining and finalizing their postsecondary plans (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith,

1989). A major draw for African-American students who pursue HBCUs is 'knowing'

someone who attends an HBCU" (Freeman, 2002, p. 356). "Jackson" showed her that

not only going to Howard was a reality, but, she could thrive upon her arrival. He also

provided her comfort while she was away from home. Nia was quite thoughtful when

(re)calling memories of her "guides:"

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> San Francisco is so far away from DC, and there were times when I felt alone, but I am thankful that I found *good* people…they came into my life and opened my eyes to that place in more ways than one.

Though she was far from her physical home, Nia found that she was able to still find a tangible "home" at Howard although it was far away in actual distance. She just needed to solidify *her* place. The community she would establish made her feel a part of a realm that was quite different from where she was raised. This was critical. Your network of relationships may place you in groups that may seem foreign; however, it is possible to ultimately attain and preserve membership within social realms that are distant from your your own (Hogg, 2006).

"Big Brothers" And "Big Sisters"

> With reciprocity all things do not need to be equal in order for acceptance and mutuality to thrive. If equality is evoked as the only standard by which it is deemed acceptable for people to meet across boundaries and create community, then there is little hope. Fortunately, mutuality is a more constructive and positive foundation for the building of ties that allow for differences in status, position, power, and privilege whether determined by race, class, sexuality, religion, or nationality. (hooks, 2009, p. 109)

Hampton University takes the notion of a "guide" very seriously. During my conversations with my co-researchers who attended Hampton, each mentioned a big brother or big sister who aided them their entire time on this campus. These individuals were discussed passionately and were referred to constantly. Class-based differences do not always incite feelings of exclusion and separation; in fact friendships often develop across class lines (Aries & Seider, 2005). These cherished bonds were pivotal amongst my co-researchers who attended Hampton. They found true friends. "A friend is a loved one who awakes your life in order to free the wild possibilities within you" (O'Donohue, 1997, p. 19).

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Among Americans of African descent there are powerful connections that are formed that extend beyond blood familial ties. "Fictive kinships[30]" are often established and used to expand the networks of Black students as they confront life changing events that occur during their development within college contexts (Fordham, 1996). Within Black communities, there is an ideal that there is a presence of brotherhood and sisterhood amongst all African-Americans. This collective identity is evident in the various kinship terms that Black Americans may use to refer to each another, such as "brother," or "sister" (Chatters, Taylor & Jayakody, 1994; Fordham, 1996). "In this light, one might think of a fictive kin group as a tightly bonded group of individuals who have come together for a specific purpose" (Tierney & Venegas, 2006, p. 1691). Within this study, "fictive kinships" amongst peers were established so that my co-researchers could both survive and attain social resilience within the elite HBCU environment.

Fictive kin can be as important as those related by blood (Dillworth-Anderson, 2001). For my co-researchers, these pivotal relationships provided social support and a sense of overall community belonging that was absolutely necessary. It should never be the norm that simply because individuals may occupy an oppressed identity and are separated from their home communities during college that they should have to willingly accept or expect estrangement. Establishing new relationships are key for one to feel as if they belong.

It is evident that the "big brothers" and "big sisters" that are (pre)sent at Hampton are an integral element of its student culture. Many of these Hamptonians would also

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[30] Traditionally, anthropologists have used the term "fictive kinship" to refer to people within a given context to where one not related by birth but share a close relationship (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1991).

later pay it forward and serve as a "big brother" or "big sister" to those who came behind them. What compels upper-class students to take an interest in their younger peers? Is this behavior benevolent or an effort to instill and maintain the "Hampton Brand?" How do upperclassmen choose a particular peer to mentor? Are their specific qualities needed to establish a kinship that makes a mentor/mentee relationship worthwhile?

Call On Me: "Retaining Each Other"

As I processed the narratives that focused on these pivotal relationships, I often wondered about low-income African-American students who found their times within this particular campus context to be socially challenging. Did they find a "big brother" or "big sister" at Hampton? Roman immediately came to mind. He had a difficult time assimilating to the Hampton culture. Before he delved into how he found his "big sister" he made sure to preface his account with: "You have to remember I didn't like Hampton, so I was distrustful of my classmates. The Hampton culture is persistent though…" Hampton has a strong social image. Informally, the "big brothers" and "big sisters" who manifested on this campus are meant to show and model the "Hampton Man" and the "Hampton Woman." They are intended to be positive role models. Though he was not totally "happy" or in congruence with the social aspects of his campus community, he did yield to this aspect of the Hampton culture:

> I didn't like it [Hampton] from a social aspect, but, one thing I can say is the students won't see one person left behind because they always…you always have that helping hand. You always have that "my big sister", or you always have "my big brother" who can help you. It is a bond there. Once you find somebody that you could bond with and you can relate with, you know, it is something positive that comes behind it.

> Roman's narratives are fascinating. He did not feel as if he "fit" at Hampton and

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did not like nor trust his peers for the most part, but, still he was bestowed with

mentorship. Though he viewed his campus as elitist and bourgeois, a "guide" would still

manage to find him:

> I had a big sister when I was there…I met her at pre-college. I remember I was
> taking Algebra in the Summer program and was failing. I walked into the office.
> I think she was, like, a peer- counselor or something. I walked into the office and
> I was like, "Man, where is my advisor? and I just had, like, this attitude. She was
> like, "What's wrong? Can I help you?" I was like, "No, I just need my advisor."
> And she was like, "Well, I can help you." And I was like, "Look, I need to drop
> this class because I'm in pre-college. And I can't afford to fail this class or I'm
> not gonna be coming into Hampton." So I felt totally lost. I felt out of place.
> She took the initiative to be like, "Okay, well let me help you. I'm good at
> math." And, "I'll show you around." And I was just like, "Okay, well, she's
> nice. She's kinda pretty too…" So she helped me out with my math. And
> whenever I needed a ride, she would take me wherever I needed to be.
>
> She went above and beyond to make sure I was more comfortable. I was telling
> her how I didn't like pre-college; I didn't wanna come back. She was like, "No,
> no, no." So that was one person where I was like, "You know what? Maybe I
> could give it a chance," because she just gave me that type of Hamptonian love
> that some people were willing to give. She would tutor me, so I think
> she was probably one of the main reasons why I got into Hampton, you know?
> She was there to, you know, encourage me more. Socially, I just couldn't get it.
> I think by having that big sister, you know, that helped a lot.

His "big sister" found him. Her goal was to help him become acclimated to Hampton.

"Shelby" was selfless and had a sincere interest in his success. Roman's "big sister"

played a pivotal role in showing him that he could and did belong there—even when he

thought he did not fit. "One of the most beautiful gifts in the world is the gift of

encouragement. When someone encourages you, that person helps you over a threshold

you might otherwise never have crossed on your own" (O'Donohue, 2000, p. 28). She

encouraged him and made him feel as though he had a place at Hampton

Within elite HBCU contexts there are "guides" who reveal themselves. Do they

also assist in instilling the middle-class/upper-middle class norms that are present within

elite HBCU campuses, or are they a conduit for retention for all students? "At HBCUs, critical mentoring happens inside and outside of the classroom" (Kynard & Eddy, 2009, p. 36).

> Another less traditional approach of mentoring gaining popularity in higher education among [people] of color, and others is peer mentoring. This form of mentoring fosters a more egalitarian approach to academic relationships and is void of hierarchy…emphasis is placed on mutual empowerment and learning. (Holmes & Rivera, 2004, p. 16)

Within higher education environments "we" truly do retain each on all levels (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005). Spaces of solidarity, safety, and comfort are paramount and necessary amongst low-income African-American students who are (pre)sent within these contexts. Low-income/working class African-American students within elite HBCU contexts are vulnerable to myriad factors; however, the "guides" appeared and ensured that the weight of *these* places did not become too much to bear. "My Perfect Ten" would "call" upon their guides during times of distress, confusion, and even elation. These were individuals who would serve as true friends and confidants. They were there for them.

<center>

Call On Me

When you're lonely
Just call on me
Now you know I don't mind
When you need me
I'll come to you
Any day
Any time

Just call on me
You can call on me
I'll be there you see

Lonely you don't have to be
You just call on me

</center>

You can call on me

Now I want you to know
I will always be there for you
Any place that you go

When you go
I will follow you there
Any time
Any place
Anywhere

Just call on me
I will be there before you need me
Need I say anymore?
(Rushen, Rushen, & Brown, 1979, Track 7)

"My Perfect Ten" were called and they too would call on others. They would be led to further bestow the gift of guidance. What is striking is that while social class divisions are present amongst elite HBCU student bodies, benevolent racial uplift ideology is still present within these campus cultures. "Guides" present themselves to low-income students and impart the norms that are necessary to learn so that one is successful. Why did my co-researchers need guidance? What needed to be shown?

This chapter further illuminates the fine threads that are both visible *and* invisible amongst the tapestry of what it means to be a low-income African-American student within an elite HBCU context. The memories of class that have been (re)called reveal states of awe, the "ordinary," sameness and difference, and even the establishment of kinship as one encounters their difference. Lessons are also evident. Within these distinct higher education contexts there are lessons that were necessary to be learned. It is clear that "My Perfect Ten" were "taught" and "socialized" during their undergraduate years. They were bestowed with a "hidden curriculum." What else shall be revealed?

CHAPTER SIX
STILL WATERS RUN DEEP: (UN)COVERING THE (IN)VISIBLE LIVES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN LOW-INCOME STUDENTS WITHIN ELITE HBCU ENVIRONMENTS

Looking Into And Beyond The Water

> Let's be clear: the working-class student's difference, implicitly constituted as lack, is what college is designed to erase. (Casey, 2005, p. 36)

> In a society that privileges certain voices and bodies based on race, class, and gender, some of society's members feel a heavier weight of multiple oppressions due to having multiple disregarded identities within the frames of race, class, and gender. (Stewart, 2002, p. 16)

A widely held vanguard on contemporary college campuses is the notion of diversity. Today, many universities "seem" to celebrate and commemorate student differences in sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, race and ethnicity through programming efforts and campus interventions (DiMaria, 2006). Is anyone left out? Within numerous higher education environments and the broader American societal context there are students who live "invisible lives," and their voices have been and are often silenced (Squire & Mobley, 2015). There are still hidden narratives that remain amongst the aforementioned diverse populations—including those of African-American low-income/working class students.

> The working-class student is not well served by our current discourses on big-D diversity. Attending to the special circumstances of lower-class students brings to the fore the many ways in which our diversity rhetoric continues to gloss over certain forms of cultural difference, and continues, in an unreflective manner, to advance the middle-class ideology of the academy as the normative one. (Casey, 2005, p. 35)

What would happen if more higher education scholars, administrators, *and* college students began to acknowledge more widely the impact that social class differences have on American college campuses? If this were to occur, together, we

would in essence shake the very contours of our higher educational system. What is the purpose of college access for the low-income student? For whom are its ideals truly meant? Why have we deliberately veiled *this* brand of difference? "A consideration of working class students forces us to acknowledge that we have yet to grapple seriously with those forms of difference that genuinely challenge the limits of our tolerance" (DiMaria, 2006, p. 62). Whether knowingly or unknowingly, the academy is a system that seeks to change the class status of low-income individuals (Casey, 2005). What is revealed in this system of "change?"

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Into and Beyond the Water

Look
Look into the water
Is it deep?

How can I tell?
The water is still
Smooth
Calm and tranquil

But
While calm and tranquil to you
The waters are also strong
and
Deep

Infinite meaning is below the surface
What is invisible shall not be now
Again
Look
Find courage to look beyond the surface
and
find
You will find
What you will find are infinite answers
(Mobley, 2014)

</div>

This study features the moments and experiences that occur within private, elite, HBCU contexts where African-American low-income students are a distinct minority. They have been an "invisible" population. These schools are heavily impacted by past traditions, but now diversity discussions within these environments are particularly urgent. *Find courage to look beyond the surface*. I am hesitant to assert that these schools recognize class difference, but in this reluctance, I still trouble the waters of social class that exist within elite HBCU environments and now ask: Do low-income African-American students who attend elite HBCUs lead invisible lives? *What you will find are infinite answers.*

> I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasm. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me…That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. (Ellison, 1952/2010, p. 3)

It is a powerful notion to think that these students notice difference in their being amongst those who share their ancestry, and simultaneously may be unseen or invisible to their African-American peers from higher socio-economic positions. This is a sobering revelation.

When one exists as "invisible" is there an erasure of one's past? The idea that low-income/working class African-American students who wish to succeed in educational contexts must somehow "overcome" being working class and modify their behavior is often seen as a barrier (Ingram, 2011). Is it? The notion that these students "must somehow modify their identity to compensate for supposed cultural deficiencies is a powerful one that continues to impact educational environments" (Ingram, 2011, p.

288). What shall their encounters reveal and uncover? The faded imprints that lie

beneath the water's surface shall reveal and (un)veil how low-income African-American

students encounter social class within elite HBCU contexts.

Learning the "Ins" and "Outs"

> But just as surely as there is a need and place for each—and for that matter more of these institutions [HBCUs], just so certain is it they also must eventually become the conscious and recognized center of the higher life and cultural aspiration and inspiration of the race. (Miller, 1925/1997, p. 312)

> Social class position differentiates people's experiences and the ways in which they view and experience the world. (Aries & Seider, 2007, p. 138)

Learning the "ins" and "outs" of their elite HBCU contexts was of critical

importance for my co-researchers. As they lived *this* phenomenon it was vital for them to

understand how to navigate their complex campuses. The "ins" and "outs" would truly

(un)cover and reveal many things to them. "In" derives from the 1610 Middle English

and is defined as "holding power; or one who provides influence and access." "Out" is

defined as "away from the inside or center of something; one or something that is

displaced or situated outside; not being in power or considered" (Oxford Dictionaries

Online, 2014). What is "in" or "out" is indeed complicated, especially on elite HBCU

campuses. Again, who is "in" and who is "out?" How is one deemed an "insider" or an

"outsider?" To be "in" or "out" at an elite HBCU has its own definitions. Within these

contexts one must not only know what is "in" or "out" but also learn the "ins and outs."

"Ins and outs" are defined as the intricacies or particulars of a specific situation, thing,

place, or person (Oxford Dictionaries Online, 2014). Learning specific norms and the

intricacies of these environments are a must.

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Successful minority college students are those who become "experts" at being successful at their respective institutions. These collegians often are characterized as students who mastered their required coursework, learned necessary campus protocols, and demonstrated timely and appropriate actions needed to triumph over the obstacles most commonly associated with minority students in higher education contexts (Padilla, Trevino & Gonzales, 1997). Padilla, Trevino, and Gonzales, were some of the first higher education scholars to view minority college students within a frame and outlook of success. They avoided the deficit perspectives that were largely apparent amongst studies underscoring the experiences of students of color who are present on American higher education campuses. Instead of highlighting failure, they sought to place weight on how minority students successfully navigate these complex spaces. This difference is significant because while other scholars emphasized the individual and institutional characteristics that result in minority student departure, their outlook of success highlights the manner in which undergraduates develop the essential tools needed to navigate college environments successfully.

It was paramount for my co-researchers to also learn the "do's and dont's" that were ever present on their elite HBCU campuses. They had to contend with both the academic and social aspects of their college environments so that they would indeed be successful, survive, and ultimately graduate. Lessons would include: when to consult professors during their office hours, what campus organizations were most important to join, knowing when to drop a course, and even how to present themselves daily as they attended classes and socially met and connected with their peers. However, there was more:

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> First generation and minority students usually arrive on college campuses with a lack of basic information needed to successfully matriculate through university systems. Prior to college, students must acquire a certain amount of heuristic, or practical, knowledge that is necessary to function competently on campus. (Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez, &Trevino, 1997, p. 126)

What else would their necessary "heuristic" knowledge include? What is "practical" at an elite HBCU? What did being successful entail? Who was *in* or *out*? Also, what were the "ins and outs" of these unique campus contexts?

Impressions Are Everything: Alonzo's "Screening"

> Even before students have attended their first lecture or attempted their first essay, they will have begun the process of confronting and negotiating the (largely unwritten) 'rules of the game' of university life. (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003, p. 261)

A skill that was learned by many of my co-researchers was the practice of making good impressions on their more affluent peers. We are often taught that "first impressions are lasting impressions." Throughout life we meticulously prepare for job interviews and even first dates in efforts to leave lasting impressions on those we may encounter. "There is an element of truth in the timeworn admonition that it is important 'to make a good first impression.' First encounters carry disproportionate weight in conditioning future social judgments and significantly affect the course of later social interactions" (Charles, Fischer, Mooney & Massey, 2009, p. 120). The initial formal encounters that students experience under the auspices of the institution occur almost immediately when they step foot onto their campuses as new first-year students and come into contact with their peers and other campus entities for the first time (Charles, Fischer, Mooney & Massey, 2009).

"Impression" derives from the Latin *impressionem* meaning "a pressing into." During the 14 century this word also meant "a mark produced by pressure." In many

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instances my co-researchers were indeed *pressing* themselves *into* a culture that was foreign to them. Why is this done? Was there pressure for those amongst "My Perfect Ten" to *impress* their peers with good *impressions*?

There are specific educational scripts that are present in mainstream schooling in the United States that are prescribed for all of its students to follow (Andrews, 2009). Cultural traits and behaviors that are deemed necessary for academic and social success in higher education environments are often-times foreign and hard to grasp for students of color—especially those that come from low-income backgrounds. "In various school contexts these youth experience the irreconcilable conflict between embodying cultural behaviors akin to their past and home communities and those deemed necessary for acquiring academic success" (Andrews, 2009, p. 297). As many Black students navigate higher education environments they often experience a sense of their "otherness" due to their social class positions; these feelings are heightened for low-income Black students (Cole & Omari, 2003).

Alonzo spoke vividly of how he perceived himself and his classmates as he "learned" Howard University. He was very mindful of every aspect of his being and also how he occupied this space due to his social class background. He was extremely conscious of the impression that he was making on his peers and expressed, "You are so conscious and aware of who you are, and what you're doing…what you're wearing. I was even aware of how I was speaking at Howard. You just don't wanna make the wrong move…" What "moves" would he and others have to make?

"If one is not from a privileged class group, adopting a demeanor similar to that of the dominant group could help one to advance. It is still necessary to assimilate

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bourgeois values in order to be deemed acceptable" (hooks, 1994, p. 178). For "My Perfect Ten" it appears that their experiences and encounters resemble that of an intricate game of chess. Alonzo found himself using his past personal strengths to make his presence known to his more affluent peers. During his accounts of his undergraduate years it was apparent that he was intelligent, witty, and funny. He would use these traits to win over his more affluent peers so that he then could learn how to fit into and navigate Howard University:

> For me, it was certainly showing them my intelligence. It was also my humor. Later on I began to gain, like, a fashion sense because I was working at Banana Republic. And so it became…You know, when they're all talking about expensive clothes, this, that and the third, now I have a reference of what a 'Poplin shirt' is and this and that. So I'm able to relate to them at some kind of point; but I also used these instances to soak up their knowledge like a sponge. That was huge…(Alonzo)

Alonzo felt that low-income students had to assert themselves in a particular manner so that they could find a way into the "elite" social circles that were present on their campuses. Status markers and intangible facets of self would be key to circumventing the social hierarchies that were present on elite HBCU campuses. It appears that my co-researchers often had to prove themselves with outward displays and other material adornments. Why did "My Perfect Ten" often give power to aesthetic status markers? Why was there a need for them to participate in capitalistic practices that included acquiring "things" so they could fit and blend?

Class discourses largely focus on arguments that are economic in nature. These conversations also seek to examine the consumption practices of specific groups—especially minority populations. What is often lost amongst these discussions are the societal factors that contribute to why African-Americans perform in certain manners

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within the American marketplace. Black class discourses evade, dismiss, and fetishize their consumption as mere shopping behaviors instead of focusing on how these buying performances also have social meanings (Mullins, 1999). "African-American consumption is evidence of a long-simmering class struggle" (Mullins, 1999, p. 34). Black Americans do not acquire material possessions for naught. In the past "the Negro did not count; he was a commodity…what happens when more and more respectable Negros are taking rank and becoming middle-class" (King, 1875, pp. 773-774)?

"Conspicuous consumption, usually interpreted as lavish spending on cars, clothes, and cultural entertainment, has often been seen as accounting for Blacks' lack of financial assets" (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006, p. 109). Blacks have and still do acquire myriad material possessions. These acts often are seen as wasteful and frivolous; however, their purchasing behaviors have been and are also acts of resistance against racism and used to show that they are more than the stereotypes that are often placed upon them by the majority (Mullins, 1999).

There are deeper meanings for why Americans feel a need to wear "labels;" the choice to for instance wear name brand clothing allows one to associate him or herself with an enterprise that the world judges as successful (Fussell, 1983). "Brand names today possess a power to confer distinction on those who wear them. By donning legible clothing you fuse your private identity with external commercial success…and for a moment assert yourself as somebody" (Fussell, 1983, p. 57). Thus, Blacks often choose to *show* their economic gains—to in essence prove that they are more than what the majority believes them to be. This is quite evident within elite HBCU contexts. These distinct higher education cultures are microcosms of the American societal context where

Blacks have and still do have to demonstrate and show their worth to the majority *and* those who look like them.

Alonzo adopted specific aesthetic behaviors and also used his intellect and humor to find commonality with his peers who were different from him. During his undergraduate years he worked part-time in retail to not only aid with his school expenses, but he used his job to model the dress of his peers. He was determined to fit in and was very deliberate in all of his exchanges. He felt that he had to be quite calculating because he was being "screened" by his classmates:

> I definitely felt that I was being screened. They didn't have to prove themselves. I had to. They didn't have to be funny. They didn't have to have a discount at Banana Republic…I had to have something else. I didn't have their family lineage or their money…I just didn't have that. (Alonzo)

How were Alonzo and others within this study "screened?" During the late 15th century "screen" meant to "examine systematically for suitability; to shield from punishment." Were Alonzo and many of his peers being monitored and "examined" by their more affluent peers? Is it possible that they were also being shielded from the pain associated with the "hidden injuries" of class? It appears that for Alonzo the "screen" that he felt was apparent within his elite HBCU context was used to divide. Yet another veil existed that he and others needed to overcome and lift so that they would eventually be accepted. In lifting this veil what else would be revealed? In learning what was "in" and what was "out," in connection with the "ins and outs," Alonzo and others in my study became well aware that students within elite HBCU contexts needed to speak and look in a particular fashion and be associated with the right individuals. This was an exhausting existence.

As I engaged Alonzo on this aspect, I pushed him to continue to name the "that" that he was alluding to regarding how he felt about learning Howard:

> Mobley: What does that existence feel like when you're constantly…thinking about what you're wearing…what you're saying. You are always aware of the people that are around you. It sounds exhausting almost.

> Alonzo: It's exhausting, but is it?...I guess this is a rhetorical question. But, ummm…Yes, it is exhausting.   Every day you are remembering that you are different. Yes you are. You are thinking and hoping that "I spoke up in class last Wednesday and 'Sydney' noticed that." At that moment you are hoping that means she will remember my name and who I am so when I speak to her on 'The Yard' in front of all her popular and rich friends, she'll say, 'Oh this is Alonzo.' It's very calculated.

As Alonzo reflected on these particular exchanges during his undergraduate years, I could tell that that there was a tension in his experiences. "Is it bad that I say, looking back, I wouldn't change it for the world?" Why would he feel bad about his recollections and the choices he made? Is it due to all that he may have had to sacrifice of himself to gain acceptance? Was sacrifice what it took to learn the "Ins and outs" and fit? Higher education affords infinite opportunity, but for low-income African-American students who dwell within an elite HBCU context, it seems that with what should be deemed as fortuitous chance comes a negotiated cost of one's very essence. Efforts to impress and stand out are deeply intertwined with recollections of self. How they think they should and need to be in order to be accepted is negotiated over and over again as they endure a "screening" process and ultimately decide what type of impression they will leave on others.

"Elite Friends?": Complicated Choices

> In this life we have to make many choices. Some are very important choices. Some are not. The choices we make, however, determine to a large extent our happiness or our unhappiness, because we have to live with the consequences of our choices. Making perfect choices all of the time is not possible. It just doesn't

happen. But it is possible to make good choices we can live with and grow from. (Faust, 2004)

The phenomenon of being a low-income African-American student within an elite HBCU context reveals that these students are often faced with choices in order to secure a specific social standing. Do these choices lead to happiness or unhappiness? Friendship circles are significant at these institutions. Again, there is a belief being reinforced on these campuses that being associated with the "right" people was of great importance. Within elite higher-education settings the social waters may be muddy and the rules of interpersonal behavior unclear for low-income minority students (Charles, Fischer, Mooney & Massey, 2009; Pettigrew, 1998). How does one feel when candidly told how to act or perform in order to be accepted? Can you imagine being explicitly told that you had to befriend and associate with certain individuals in order to be received and acknowledged?

Upon Blair's arrival at Hampton University, like Alonzo she chose to align herself with a particular sect of individuals within her elite HBCU context. But her experience was different. Alonzo was much more cunning and *sought* out his affluent peers for acceptance. Blair was *told* whom she needed to align herself with:

> You really saw different groups amongst Hampton…Of course we all strived to be elite…You have to understand that I was dealing with people who…Or I would say I was dealing with people who were used to money…they had financial means that I did not have. These are people whose parents worked on Wall Street and vacationed in the Hamptons…These people are the ones that came from money and they explained to me that in order to advance, you have to hang with the elite. You have to make sure that you network among those who can be in a position to make things happen versus those who were not.

The blatant messages that Blair received surrounding how she should form friendships were a challenge for her. These encounters were also intense. Did her affluent peers not

know that she was a low-income student? If they did, is this the reason they informed her that it was necessary to social climb?

Though the manner was quite heavy handed in nature, Blair was being bestowed with social capital during her time as an undergraduate student. Within the higher education landscape, HBCUs have proven that they are able to provide a space for key intra-racial relationships to be formed within their campus communities. "Because of their unique constellation of Black intellectuals and professionals among institutional staff and alumni, HBCUs serve as conduits for the production and transmission of social capital to African American students" (Brown & Davis, 2001, p. 41). These schools are uniquely able to bestow African-American students with the means to acquire social rewards, such as status and privilege upon graduation (Brown & Davis, 2001).

"Of the various social institutions in Black communities, historically Black colleges occupy a unique place as a source of social capital for African Americans…In short, a primary role of the Black college is that of social capital purveyor" (Brown & Davis, 2001, pp. 40-41). Blair befriended her more affluent peers, but she also made the deliberate choice to seek kinship with her low-income peers as well. She was well aware that she "needed" to absorb and learn the practice of attaining social capital. "Black colleges have produced a 'privileged class' of African Americans who use their college and community ties that lead to differential advantages in the post-college marketplace" (Brown & Davis, 2001, p. 42). Blair engaged her middle/upper-middle class peers, but would also seek balance. In her own way, she bestowed social capital to others who were like her on her campus:

> I used to see a guy in the "Caf" every day. One day we were in line together, and his meal card didn't go through and he couldn't eat. And I didn't think anything

of it…nothing struck me as odd. But then two weeks had went by and I hadn't seen him in the cafeteria. So as I was walking around campus I just happened to run across him and I asked him what was going on. He told me then that he couldn't eat at the "Caf" because his meal plan had run out…he was trying to figure out how to eat because he hadn't eaten in almost four days…I decided then and there that I would share my meal plan with him to make sure that he was eating….I did this for at least two semesters. He would thank me all time and told me, "You know, if it wasn't for you, I don't know how I would have survived."

Blair wanted to gain acceptance from her peers who were deemed more "desirable" on her campus. But, she also made a concerted effort to challenge the system and remain true to herself. "If Hampton was a family, how could I possibly see one of my brothers struggling and not help him?…Popularity was cool but I could not live with myself and survive if I didn't have a whole community there." Genuine friendship is not false, manufactured, or fabricated, it is an act of authentic will and intent (O'Donohue, 1997). She would experience growth in myriad ways.

Standards of status, wealth, and social standing are made clear and brought to the forefront in a low-income African-American student's daily life at an elite HBCU. Low-income students experience additional dimensions of development as they encounter and acquire new forms of cultural and social capital that their affluent peers already possess (Aries & Seider, 2005). When one attempts and succeeds at moving between classes, this very act challenges their core identities and relationships (Baxter & Britton, 2001). This process "involves changes in judgment, taste, opinions, preferences and practices" (Aries & Seider, 2005, p. 421). It is not uncommon for low-income students gradually to mirror their affluent classmates' speech and manner of dress (Stewart & Ostrove, 1993). When my co-researchers recognized and began to learn the "ins and outs" and realized who was "in" or "out," it appeared that these cultural mores were dictated by specific ideals and benchmarks.

"The experience of a college education brings opportunities for growth and development as students acquire more knowledge and encounter new people, ideas, and values" (Aries & Seider, 2005, p. 421). What do these "opportunities for growth" truly provide? Do feelings of confusion come to the forefront? They would join the "right" organizations and choose to associate with their peers who were located within a specific facet of their institution's social hierarchy. While lower income students do take on aspects of what is often deemed "middle class culture," many would adopt these norms while remaining firmly rooted in their past identities (Aries & Seider, 2005). Were they also embracing a new sense of self that was always there? In considering all of this, where would "My Perfect Ten" stand?

Good Blacks, Bad Blacks, Good Negros and the Bad Negro Too

> A relatively benign group stereotype is likely to be recast or reinterpreted when a dominant group perceives a genuine and immediate threat to its "sense of position." (Fredrickson, 1977, p. 373)

What is a "good" or "bad" Black? Furthermore, what is a "good Negro" or a "bad Negro?" Where do these terms originate? Do they derive from the same place? When I initially began my exploration into what it was like for one to experience the phenomenon of being a low-income African-American student on an elite HBCU campus, I found myself boastfully declaring that I was going to "break down" and problematize the notions of a "good Black" versus a "bad Black" that were inherent within these unique higher education contexts. At that time I did not truly know what either meant. They were just words.

I desired additional "truths" and would seek historical understanding. Another (re)construction of prior texts would be required during my desire to glean what a "good"

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or "bad" Black *was* and *is.* When one desires to understand the historicality and placement of texts that are bestowed, another kinship is formed; the text *and* the interpreter have decided to re-awaken meaning together (Gadamer, 1960/2012).

> Words are not just something left over to be investigated and interpreted, to be investigated as a remnant of the past. What has come down to us by way of verbal tradition is not left over but given to us, told to us—whether through direct retelling, in which myth, legend, and custom have their life…(Gadamer, 1960/2012, p. 391)

As I reflect, I now realize that not only did I have no idea what these tropes truly meant, I also lacked the knowledge of where they came from, and what the power of this naming has had within Black communities for over a century. I was ignorant. "To real understanding…belongs the re-attainment of the concepts of a historical past so that it contains at the same time our own conceiving" (Gadamer, 1960/2012, p. 356).

Within Black communities these words have the power to sting and summon old and contemporary wounds. Why? They are quite provocative. Is there a broader unawareness amongst African-American communities about the meaning of these words? Do other Blacks use these terms without a deeper understanding of the hurt and division that they may cause?

I recognize the ideas of a "good Black" or even a "bad Negro" and bring them to the forefront of this phenomenological exploration. These notions are filled with contempt, scorn, and judgment. Words, customs, and cultures are often bestowed and passed down through generations. They are also hidden in the same manner. What is not readily recognized is that the meaning embedded in past notions, while hidden, can be given power to illuminate the present and become immediately clear to any and everybody who wishes to be enlightened (Gadamer, 1960/2012).

Hermeneutic phenomenology also acknowledges that the texts I have been provided and then tasked to unpack are not perfect. For example, the words that are imparted in genuine conversation, though they may powerfully illustrate and underscore raw and candid experiences, can still create distance from the phenomenon being studied. Why is this so? Ultimately, words may miss the fullness and uniqueness of our private worlds and fall short; I delve deeply and go beyond the surface of mere language to access the experience of others genuinely (van Manen, 2007). My constant state of reflection and the myriad textual sources I have been bestowed aid me so that I *show*, not *tell*, what is deeply embedded within elite HBCU cultures and the experiences of low-income African-American students who dwell on these campuses. Another layer is revealed.

Unearthing Complexity: Unraveling the Wheat From The Chaff

> Whites place all Negroes into two categories: "good Negroes" and "bad Negroes." The former type meticulously observes the rules of deference; the latter type is "slow", "sullen," or "sassy" or "smart" toward Whites. Negroes, however, use the term "good Negro" to refer to a Negro who is more deferential than White society requires. Like the whites, they also employ the term "bad Negro" to mean a Negro who openly violates caste etiquette, but there is usually an implication of social approval in the Negro usage. (Davis, 1945, p. 10)

Today, a sobering yet tactile Black fantasy exists. But from whom? What it is to be Black and embody a "Black" culture that has been dissected and mulled over for decades by Blacks and Whites alike? Every day, Black people contend with societal perceptions that are filled with notions of "good" and "bad Negros." These perceptions are riddled with Black stereotypes that include mammies, Uncle Toms, the Mandigo, Sapphires, and the ever tragic Mullato.

Throughout this phenomenological exploration I know that I am also informed by the complex opinions of Black communities and the lives we lead every day. The aforementioned viewpoints hold power and shape the concepts of a "good" or "bad Black." These problematic notions often lie dormant until times of social unrest.

> Newsflash: On December 2, 2014, A week after the Ferguson grand jury neglected to indict police officer Darren Wilson in the shooting death of unarmed teen Michael Brown, a Staten Island grand jury has chosen not to bring charges in the death of Eric Garner, a New York man who died after being placed in a chokehold by New York officer Daniel Pantaleo.

Watching this newscast on CNN was a peculiar state of deja-vu. I was numb and stared at the same computer screen that I had when I heard the verdicts and null-indictments of the cases involving Trayvon Martin, Jordyn Davis, and Michael Brown. I have consumed numerous opinions from news outlets, friends, and colleagues following the aforementioned cases. The views and sentiments from the Black communities to which I belong have been especially polarizing:

> *If they hadn't been there they would still be alive…*

> *The moment we realize that Black Lives Matter the better our country shall be…*

> *I think we have forgotten that wrong is wrong...Brown was a thug…*

I have noticed how many Blacks have spun these men's lives to fit into the extremes that are inherent within the "good" and "bad Black" spectrum. Conversations regarding these men have been peppered with loaded hyperbole in efforts to either justify or protest their deaths. One Facebook status from a fraternity brother stood out to me amongst the virtual discourse surrounding the aforementioned cases:

> Let me state clearly & unapologetically that the current unrest occurring in this country is sho-nuff [sic] separating the wheat from the chaff—exposing, both, White racism and Black self-hatred. All skin-folk ain't kin-folk.

While America was unravelling before my very eyes, this Facebook status pulled me back into this facet of my phenomenon of pursuit. A separation was noted. Just as the act of threshing ultimately winnows the husk away and leaves a farmer with valuable seeds, I needed to undergo a process to again make meaning of the nuances that are present within Black history (Brimhall-Vargas, 2011). As a phenomenologist I am given the privilege of "[lifting] narratives that would otherwise be lost" (Brimhall-Vargas, 2011, p. 158). What would I find amongst the metaphorical "wheat" and "chaff" that my fraternity brother spoke of?

"All negroes…the ignorant and uneducated, the criminal and law-abiding, the bad and the good, must be measured by different yardsticks" (Crowe, 1920, pp. 172-173). There are African-Americans who consider those within their communities not "good enough" to uplift the race and others who are deemed too accommodating to the majority, not "Black" enough, or perhaps even "too" Black. African-Americans often feel pressure to present themselves in manners to disprove multiple stereotypes that are placed upon them. Do these acts reflect and reinforce the hegemonic values of white America (Patton, 2014)? Furthermore, how do these beliefs manifest on elite HBCU campuses?

Impressions of "good" or "bad" Blacks allow me to further situate those featured within this study and how they perceived themselves and their peers during their times within elite HBCU contexts. The intersections of intra-racial difference play out in nuanced ways that socially locate African-American low-income students who have been and are often placed at the margins. Their experiences (un)veil "deeply rooted systems of domination and power within and beyond the campus environment" (Patton, 2014, p. 725).

The institutional traditions and legacies that are present at elite HBCUs have held

the power to uphold an ideology of respectability, while also excluding those who do not

fit within certain prescribed norms (Patton, 2014). What does this mean? In the midst of

the "wheat" and "chaff" of the various narratives surrounding "good" and "bad" Blacks

are "us" versus "them" perspectives. How are they revealed amongst the views of my co-

researchers?

"Us" And "Them"

> It becomes problematic when we as Black people morally distinguish amongst
> ourselves…There are politics that are involved…A 'us' and 'them' perception if
> you will…'Us' being the 'good Negros' and them being the 'bad Negros'…the
> 'bad Negros' are those who are often poor...the 'good Negros' are middle class
> Blacks…When we make those distinctions there is an air of judgment that has
> created notions of a 'good Black' versus a 'bad Black' in American society that
> divides us, it is now time to talk about this…(Jody David Armour, 2013)

The early part of the 20th century provided a context where affluent African-

Americans believed that their survival hinged on setting themselves apart from their

larger community and proving their worthiness (Mixon, 1997). Where were poorer

Blacks placed? "[The Black] elite took on a collective responsibility for the race, their

objective being the elevation of the entire Black population to levels that Whites might

respect, reward, and invite to help construct a twentieth-century" (Mixon, 1997, p. 597).

Are these practices still valued and made visible within contemporary elite HBCU

contexts?

Nicole was able to locate and candidly affirm that her elite HBCU context was

filled with the tensions surrounding what is or is not a "good" or "bad" Black:

> Mobley: You speak of, um…You speak of, you know, always being told you
> have to be a certain way to make it in the White world…this may be me sounding
> cliché or maybe even kind of crass, but do you think that Hampton is really in the
> business of producing "good Negroes"? That's what it sounds like.

Nicole: That's not crass and that's not anything new. It's something that's been said about Hampton since the 1800s. I am aware of that…I mean if we're gonna be honest…

Mobley: Yes, please be honest…

Nicole: Hampton recognized that we are in the South. It wasn't about . . . It wasn't like Howard: "We're going to produce intellectuals who were going to go change the world." It was, "We're in the South. This is the reality we're dealing with. We still want these people to be successful and have some type of livelihood, and we're going to equip them to function and have a livelihood in this reality," because it is a reality. Now, is there always a revolutionary who comes in and can shake up reality and change it? Yes. Is Hampton the school that creates those revolutionaries? Not so…our culture is not, "Come in, shake things up, go change the world"? That's not anything that you're ever going to hear: "Go change the world. Fight the system." That's not our culture. Our culture is, "You're intelligent. You're smart. You're capable. You're a leader. You have all the talents. We're going to equip you. You have the network. You have a family. You have the supports. We're going to give you all that we can to make sure that you're successful." That's what the message is. It's not, "You're coming to school to find a new you and shake up the world and change the world." It's not . . . It's not Hampton. So if that's what a student is looking for in their college experience, they're most likely not going to find that there…We are not here for that.

Nicole named critical aspects that centered on the ways in which her alma mater has, and in essence still does engrain in its students an ethos of racial uplift, but it is blatantly wrapped in the politics of Black respectability. How was she imparted with these norms and mores? Context and place are critically important. Hampton University is in the South. A conservative context is ever-present. There was and apparently still is a need for protection. From whom or what? At Hampton, students are explicitly and implicitly taught to "toe a line" and learn lessons for survival so that they may thrive in their Black skin in a White world upon graduation. These beliefs are deeply imbedded in the campus culture and imparted from peers, administrators, and faculty. An elitist notion is also present.

An overt message is communicated within elite HBCU environments: "We do not want you to fall prey to the perils of our race like "those" people. Again, there is an "us" and "them" ideal that is made apparent. These spectrums divide Black communities. Within this contentious continuum there are Blacks who are exalted and others who are shamed.

> In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Black elites came to understand racial uplift differently. They defined it not as the collective struggle for equal citizenship rights, but as the individual effort to reform the race, which would prove blacks worthy of equal political status. (Boyd, 2005, p. 274)

Lines have been and are drawn, and as a result, elite HBCU campuses bare the stains of past intra-racial divisions that are still present contemporarily. Historically, racial uplift ideology was implemented within Black and HBCU communities to enact collective struggle against the pejorative racism that is unmistakably present within the broader American societal context. However, a shift has occurred.

> Things that change force themselves on our attention far more than those that remain the same…Hence the perspectives that result from the experience of historical change are always in danger of being exaggerated because they forget what persists unseen. (Gadamer, 1960/2012, p. xxiv)

Gadamer brings forth a dilemma that I have had throughout my phenomenological journey. I have stumbled upon significant historical changes that have forced me to confront specific norms in the present and ask the "hard" questions. However, I am careful not to exaggerate nor sensationalize. When change occurs, especially when historic in nature, how can we both challenge and recognize its significance?

Previous forms of racial uplift were focused on convincing Whites that Blacks deserved civil rights; today, there is a focus on changing their external and internal behaviors (Boyd, 2005; Smith, 1999). "The crucial assumption of 20th century uplift

ideology is that the successes of individual, affluent blacks has a spillover effect, one that

either improves the material conditions of all blacks or 'reflects credit on the race'"

(Boyd, 2005, p. 274). How is this reflected on elite HBCU campuses?

In these spaces it appears that a foremost outcome is for one to be made "good."

Is there a reality that elite HBCU cultures seek to mold and then produce *certain* types of

Black graduates? If you are considered a "bad" Black do these higher education contexts

impart norms to ensure that you will become "good?" Is this a foremost goal?

Addressing The "Problem": Further Troubling The Line That Has Been Drawn

> Class separation among African Americans defined the division between the
> "good and bad Negro." Affluent Blacks considered themselves the "good" and the
> working class was labelled by [Black] elites as "bad" or lacking the capacity for
> right thinking. (Mixon, 1997, p. 620)

The line that has and is drawn amongst Black communities with regard to what is

perceived as upwardly mobile, or even having the capacity to be palatable to Whites, is

blatant and filled with contrasts that bleed into elite HBCU contexts. Emmanuel

expressed that Howard made it known to him and his peers that there were two "Black

worlds"—the "good" and the "bad:"

> Even though "Truth and Service" is our motto, I don't think that today we
> celebrate people who are social activists. I'm pretty sure there are a lot of
> Howard students…Howard alums doing those kinds of things. So in a way, it's
> not as bad as Hampton…In my experiences at Howard, I wasn't really taught . . . I
> was taught to serve my community in a different way; not with them, but more so
> on them…Howard tried to make me believe that I should be a leader of the Black
> community not in the Black community…a hierarchy was clear…

During his time as an undergraduate student Emmanuel felt that Howard's culture

communicated to him that their goal was to lead and reform Black communities.

Because of this he often deemed specific aspects of his undergraduate experience as

lacking and feels guilty for not giving back to the Washington, DC community and those

who were similar to him. "Being in academia can create a duality of privilege and oppression. For underrepresented groups there is often a struggle between voice and silence, invisibility and visibility, tokenism and inclusion" (Bacon, 2014, p. 5). He made it known that because he was so enamored with "fitting in" and climbing the Howard social hierarchy, he simply did not make the time to immerse himself fully in the local community outside of his university walls. He felt a duality, and parts of him were and still are negotiated:

> A major part of my experience that still impacts me today is the experiences I did not have…I had an opportunity to volunteer with the "U.S. Dream Academy" and I did not. I had the chance to mentor kids who have incarcerated parents…I feel guilt because of that, because some kid could have benefitted from me mentoring them, and I didn't do it because I just didn't make time because I was too busy with Howard…

Today, Emmanuel gives back to his community through his professional social justice work as an educator. But, his time at Howard still haunts him. He encounters colleagues who are Washington, DC natives who inform him that they never stepped onto Howard's grounds until they were well into their adulthoods. For him this is problematic:

> It's about action. Are we actively living out what we say, you know? We have to uplift one another. I'm not better than my students. They are me and I am them. That's the challenge I'm living… I now contribute even though I know it challenges what I was taught at Howard…How can a Black school be in a Black city and have Black people who walk past the college campus hundreds of times and never visit because they don't feel welcomed? That's a problem.

W. E. B. Du Bois (1903/2003) once posed the question "How does it feel to be a problem" (p. 10)? His "problem" concept is often interpreted within a Black/White paradigm where Blacks are viewed by the majority as a "problem" to be fixed.

> Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately…To the real question, How

does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. (Du Bois, 1903/2003, pp. 9-10)

"Problem" derives from the Greek *problema* meaning "anything projecting, a question" and also "a thing put forward." When relating his concept to the present, Du Bois' notion can be re-appropriated and used to challenge and confront elite HBCU cultures. His notion of a "problem" must now again be *questioned* and put *forward*. How does it feel to be a "problem" amongst your own? What is the reaction when your own race "approaches you in a half-hesitant sort of way" (Du Bois, 1903/2003)?

The notion of "The Negro Problem" calls many things into contemporary inquiry, especially within Black communities. Where do we stand? How do we view one another?

> Though we ordinarily speak of the Negro problem as though it were one unchanged question, students must recognize the obvious fact that this problem, like others, has had a long historical development, has changed with the growth and evolution of the nation; moreover, that it is not one problem, but rather a plexus of social problems, some new, some old, some simple, some complex…(Du Bois, 1898/2000, p. 14)

Where did the "problem(s)" lie in Emmanuel's college experience? How can Howard University, which is an unabashedly Black space be situated in an urban Black setting and be seen as "untouchable" or uncomfortable to the Black community and the people who surround it? Have they indeed drawn a line between their students who are deemed "good" and local poorer Black residents who are often deemed "bad" and seen as the "problem" that needs and should be fixed? There is an internal conflict present—both within the institution and its students. These challenges did not occur overnight.

While Emmanuel did not engage Black social justice issues actively as a student, he feels that had he not attended and graduated from Howard he would not have

eventually been awakened to come to action and become an educator who champions the

issues that face underrepresented students in K-12 educational contexts.

What is also interesting is that Nicole and Emmanuel both juxtaposed and

compared their elite HBCU contexts to each other. Each mentioned the other institution

as a model of who may be deemed "good" or "bad" within Black communities, how these

ideals manifested, or were instituted within their respective HBCU cultures. Nicole

deemed Howard a "radical place" where one sought to "shake up a system," and

Emmanuel felt that Hampton was far too conservative to even entertain Black social

justice issues. Much of the same Black stereotyping that occurs within American societal

contexts appeared at both elite HBCUs, but were adopted in different overt and covert

manners.

Wading Through *Solicitude* And Peeling Back The Layers Of "Strange Fruit"

Black Americans once were lynched for challenging the status quo and hung from

trees as "strange fruit."[31] Our communities have relied upon respectability politics to

enforce norms that should somehow shield us from the systemic racism that runs rampant

within American society. Today, we are shot down in broad daylight or in the dead of

night in states of surrender. These are not new occurrences. Many eminent Black figures

that we hold in high regard have suffered the same fate.

> Medgar Evers was wearing a pair of nice slacks and a tight belt the night he was
> gunned down in his driveway. Dr. King earned a PhD and a Nobel Peace Prize
> before James Earl Ray shot him in the head with a Remington…We must also be

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[31] "Strange Fruit" is a song performed most famously by Billie Holiday, who first sang
and recorded it in 1939. It protested American racism, particularly the lynching of
African Americans. The lyrics never mention lynching but the metaphors are clear and
analogize lynched Blacks who were hung with fruit that hang from trees in the same
manner (Margolick, 2013).

reminded that Black women were lynched in their Sunday church stockings…These facts are knowable to those who want to know. (Taylor, 2014)

I now must ask, how long shall we rely on our respectability politics to shield and save us? If those before us were dressed appropriately and earned the *right* degrees, then why weren't they spared? Are elite HBCU students made to believe that they may and can be immune to the aforementioned if they become "good?" Is an underlying mission of these elite campus contexts to intervene and rescue? If so, what are the costs to low-income African-American students? What does an institutional culture that is embedded with notions of classist reformation produce?

> In other words, the politics of respectability allow African Americans to revise themselves in ways to ensure that they are constructed in a positive light and deemed worthy amidst a cadre of images and discourses that counter their humanity. However, this same ideology re-inscribes oppression by adhering to hegemonic standards of what it means to be respectable. (Patton, 2014, p. 731)

On elite HBCU campuses, racial uplift ideology still remains a considerable factor today and manifests in the modeling of behaviors and adoption of beliefs that are often associated with the Black middle/upper-middle class (Patton, 2014). What lies in the *respectable* and the behaviors that are *revised*? Within elite HBCU environments Black respectability is often enforced under the guise of *care*. But, how is this form of care shown to students?

As I mention in Chapter Two, the concept of *care* is quite apparent, but complex, throughout this phenomenological exploration. Heidegger (1962/2008) contends that as we live and dwell in the world with others care takes on many forms. When we *care*, and share this part of our being with others, this state also takes on the appearance of *solicitude:*

With regard to its positive modes, solicitude has two extreme possibilities. It can, as it were, take away 'care' from the Other and put itself in his position in concern: it can leap in for him. This kind of solicitude takes over for the other that with which he is to concern himself. The Other is thus thrown out of his own position…(Heidgger, 1962/2008, p. 122)

Previous forms of racial uplift focused on convincing Whites that Blacks deserved citizenship rights. Contemporary racial uplift emphasizes a concerted need to change internal and external behaviors that are often associated with negative Black stereotypes (Smith, 1999). Is it possible that as these schools enact this form of *care* that they are actually taking something away from their students? When we care for others in attempts to protect, do we also cause hurt? "This kind of solicitude, which leaps in and takes away 'care,' is to a large extent determinative for Being with one another" (Heidegger, 1962/2008, p. 122).

My co-researcher Nora spoke of facets of Howard's culture that "leaped" into her experience and how her alma mater's distinct form of care informed her undergraduate experiences:

You don't have a choice in a sense…Howard will humble you…You either act one way or another…be this or that…Imagine feeling as if you are always holding your breath…When do you get release?…You wanna [sic] be perceived well, and cool, and liked and all these things…I was always conscious that I was on a border…It's awkward…

She felt that there were overt norms present on her campus that dictated the behavior of herself and her classmates—to be "this" or "that." I believe that the 'this' or "that" in these instances was "good" or "bad." At each of the elite HBCUs that are featured within this study rules and standards are placed upon their student bodies—*they leap in to save.* Within these places why must their students change or reinvent themselves? To be good?

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Is what is often deemed White transformed into a creation or model of what should then be considered "Black?"

Unlike previous forms of racial uplift, it appears that "modern uplift emphasizes the Black middle class' responsibility to use its resources to advance the material status and mental mindset of all African Americans" (Boyd, 2005, p. 274). Is the ultimate purpose of elite HBCUs to produce "good Blacks?" Are they in the "business" of creating Black individuals who wish, yearn, and seek to thrive and exist as acceptable and "good" enough for the majority? A "hidden curriculum" is present on these campuses. It bestows "right" and "wrong" and is shown in overt and covert manners. What shall its lessons reveal?

A Hidden Curriculum

> No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption. (Freire, 1970/2008, p. 54)

Pursuing higher education is often viewed as a means to both obtain and retain upward social mobility and economic survival (Margolis, Soldatenko, Acker, & Gair, 2001). American colleges and universities "have sold themselves and their degrees as tickets to the middle-class" (Berrett, 2014). Higher education has the power to transition one from working class to middle/upper middle class status, thus reinforcing the idea held by many low-income Blacks that education is the primary vehicle for upward mobility (Cole & Omari, 2003). Do low-income African-American students who choose to attend elite HBCUs perceive their opportunities to acquire a degree from *these* schools as a "ticket" to class-jump?

Elite HBCUs are complicated structures where more than a degree is earned. There is a "hidden curriculum" present at these schools that is imparted to their students. "Everything an educational setting *does* to people belongs to its hidden curriculum…it is always everywhere and tied to a specific type of learning" (Martin, 1976, p. 136). What is the purpose of the "hidden curriculum" within an elite HBCU context? Is its purpose to simply reinforce the "right" social class norms? Are these lessons made available so that those who are poor may in essence be rescued and made anew? "Many kinds of socialization are indeed covert, will not work if made visible, and in fact will produce resistance if revealed" (Margolis, Soldatenko, Acker, & Gair, 2001, p. 3).

Phillip Jackson (1968/1990) has been acknowledged widely as one of the originators of the "hidden curriculum" concept in his work *Life in Classrooms.* During his observations of elementary school students he found that there were social and behavioral rewards that were given to students who effectively learned specific norms including: how to work quietly, being neat or presentable, and even being courteous to one's teachers and classmates (Jackson, 1968/1990). Jackson's (1968/1990) findings highlight the ways that K-12 school environments reward conformity, and he believed that these learned behaviors had little to do with concrete "educational" goals, but, as essential for satisfactory progression through school. "Although no one ever directly stated the rules that would govern our conduct, it was taught by example and reinforced by a system of rewards" (hooks, 1994, p. 178). Are there particular types of norms and mores present within the hidden curriculum at elite HBCUs? If so, what are their purposes?

While contemplating the concept of the "hidden curriculum" that is present at

elite HBCUs, I was reminded of a conversation that I had with a professor during my

doctoral coursework. He attended Howard University in the early 1960s and was

extremely candid in summing up his undergraduate experience:

> I was poor and from the backwoods of North Carolina and came to my HBCU
> very naïve to the ways of the world…my HBCU was a finishing school…I realize
> now that I was being trained to become a 'middle-class Black person.'

How was he taught to be "middle class?" Do these ideals still reign true? Is this the

purpose of the "hidden curriculum" that exists on these campuses? "A hidden curriculum

can be found yet remain hidden, for finding is one thing and telling is another" (Martin,

1976, p. 143). I have no doubt that a hidden curriculum *is* present at these schools and

my co-researchers echoed this reflection:

> Students are not simply passive receptacles but active players in the systems that
> attempt to socialize them. Students negotiate, accommodate, reject, and often
> divert socialization agendas. Hidden curricula occur at multiple places and times
> during schooling. Nonetheless, we can trace how both the form and the content of
> the curriculum reproduces structures of power and oppression. (Martin, 1976, p.
> 136)

"My Perfect Ten" were active participants within their campus contexts—either

purposefully or passively. Some immediately took note of the hidden curricula on their

campuses; others would not notice the effects until after graduation. Nonetheless, the

presence of the morals and experiences that were imparted to them are key facets of these

unique campus cultures. My co-researchers either consciously or subconsciously

received the social and cultural capital that was being given to them in overt and covert

manners. There were others who would challenge the norms that were deemed necessary

for survival. Present in the tension of the hidden curriculum for my co-researchers are

what was openly intended for them to learn, what was not intended, and what they did in

fact take away from lessons that were veiled and unseen (Martin, 1976).

Complex Messages

In seeking to explore further what it is for low-income African-American students

to encounter social class on an elite HBCU campus, I now delve even deeper into their

campus cultures. Again, more must be unveiled and revealed. Before Hampton

University students arrive at their new campus home for freshmen orientation, they

receive covert messages of what shall be expected of them. The "hidden curriculum" is

at times subtle and at other intervals quite obvious. Their *New Student Packet* is telling:

> Joining the Hampton Family is an honor. During the orientation period, you will
> participate in many exciting activities and programs that have been planned to
> orientate you to the University. Your participation and attendance are required.
> Please note that there will be a daily program requiring proper attire (i.e. skirts,
> dress slacks, dress shirts, and ties). The New Student Orientation Week will
> culminate with a memorable "New Student Induction Ceremony." Young ladies
> will be required to wear white dresses or suits and young men must have dark
> suits with a dress shirt and dress shoes. Please read and pack according to the
> Hampton University Dress Code…(Hampton University New Student Orientation
> Website, 2014)

What struck me in the aforementioned passage taken directly from the *New Student*

Packet was the emphasis placed on "required" attire. Upon further review of Hampton's

"suggested" packing lists there are specific types of clothing that new students are

informed that they *need* to bring. For female students items include: a white blouse,

pumps, a white dress, a black suit, and a ball gown; for men clothing items include: a

black suit, tuxedo, black and brown leather dress shoes, and casual slacks (Hampton

University New Student Orientation Website, 2014). I challenge and wonder why must

students within an elite HBCU context have these particular types of clothing? What if

one cannot afford these garments? Will they feel out of place if they cannot acquire

them?

The internal tensions of my co-researchers are quite evident and manifest in their

choices of whether or not they would alter themselves to "fit," or if they chose to

challenge the deeply embedded systems and practices that were present and faced them

as they lived this experience. Black bodies have been, and are judged outwardly and

misunderstood each day. Is this why appearance is so important to this phenomenon?

Again, what is being taught at these schools? What is the goal? Are they being instilled

with a "New Industrial Education?"

Looking Within And Beyond The Horizon: The Du Bois And Washington Debate

> Negro men and women who have received their training in most cases in schools in the South, such as Hampton, Tuskegee, Howard, Fisk, Atlanta, Morehouse, [and] Wiley… these Negros will and shall be found in the professions, in business, in social work, helping their people to take advantage of new opportunities and adjust themselves to new and sometimes hostile conditions. (Moton, 1925/1997, p. 331)

Locating Hampton University historically and contemporarily also situates

Howard University and other elite HBCU contexts amongst the discourse that now needs

to occur when discussing intra-racial class differences inherent in their student

populations.

> In the push toward middle-class respectability, we wanted tongue depressors sticking from every Black man's coat pocket and briefcases swinging from every Black hand….the old verities that made being Black and alive in this country the most dynamite existence imaginable—so much of what was satisfying, challenging and simply more interesting—were being driven underground—by Blacks. In trying to cure the cancer of slavery and its consequences, some healthy as well as malignant cells were destroyed. (Morrison, 1974, p. 220)

Morrison (1974) contends that many Blacks of her generation, the one that preceded her,

and those that would ultimately follow would strive to become middle-class so that they

would be accepted by the majority (Hogue, 1986). In this quest, was anything lost amongst Black communities? Conversely, was anything gained? HBCUs have served Black communities for over a century as conduits to the American middle-class, and in essence, also acted as chief stakeholders in creating a Black middle-class (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Williams & Ashley, 2004). Because of this, there is a debate that also existed during this time period that has focused on the education that Blacks receive who attend these institutions, the purposes if these schools for all Black communities, and the responsibility of HBCU graduates once they leave their hallowed grounds. There were and are several opposing arguments and emphatic positions.

W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington were brought to the forefront of this discussion and would become the faces of the discourse that surrounded an "industrial education" versus a "classical education." Interesting to note is that both were graduates of HBCUs. W.E.B. Du Bois was an alumnus of Fisk University and Booker T. Washington was an alumnus of Hampton Institute (now Hampton University). In the early 20th century, Du Bois and Washington held divergent views on the strategies that Blacks in America should utilize so that they could ensure their social progress (Bieze & Gasman, 2012; Robinson, 2011). Within this debate is an inherent conflict surrounding the notions of the *proper* education of Black Americans (Buchanan & Hutcheson, 1999). Elite HBCUs have been and still are impacted by each of these formidable leaders' views of the role of Black leadership and how it should be enacted.

Washington urged Blacks to elevate themselves through hard work and material prosperity. He promoted industrial education in the form of artisan crafts, farming skills and the cultivation of moral virtues that included patience, enterprise and Christian faith

(Bieze & Gasman, 2012; Moore, 2003). These, he believed would win the respect of Whites and lead to full acceptance into all spectrums of American society. Du Bois asserted that Washington's beliefs were degrading, debasing, and humiliating to those who would be educated in our nation's HBCUs (Du Bois, 1903/2003). To him they perpetuated White oppression. He advocated for liberal arts training to elevate the stature of Blacks in America. He yearned for Blacks to be equal and one day surpass racist White thought by using their *minds* and not their *hands* to attain such stature (Du Bois, 1903/2003).

The distinction between Du Bois and Washington's stances came from their addressing different Black constituencies who lived in very different economic and social circumstances (Buchanan & Hutcheson, 1999). Was Du Bois focusing on and mobilizing elite Blacks? Did Washington seek to rally working class Black communities in their educational plights and fights against societal oppression? The industrial versus classical education debate emphasizes class differences amongst Black communities and an attempt by affluent Blacks and White philanthropists to reform and manage the behavior of the Black masses (Gaines, 1996).

The underpinning moral foundations that were set over a century ago seem to hinge on the persistent importance of cultivating and promoting a pristine "Black image" that all Blacks should seek to emulate, especially those granted with the opportunity to attain higher education. These foundations are also "heavily laden with references to inculcating values and morals in students" (Gasman & McMickens, 2010, p. 298). Blair recalled her dating encounters and how these experiences reflected the moral and classist constraints placed upon students due to the *Industrial Education* present on her campus:

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Hampton was interesting…I was dating a military man while I was there and that was a big no-no! My older girlfriends warned me that 'We don't do *this* here!'…To this day I do not know if they were sincere or if they simply wanted me to be yield to the image of a Hamptonian…That place will intervene and try to teach you at every step…but there comes a time when you have to make your own choices…

Even dating at her elite HBCU was grounds for judgment from her peers. Hampton University is located near several military bases. As a result, female students are warned. Blair was explicitly advised from her friends that becoming involved with a young soldier who did not have a college degree nor who was enrolled in a collegiate ROTC program was not a viable option for her. Hampton women were told that this "choice" would not yield the social cache' and values associated with the Black elite. Particular military men were deemed subversive. *"You better be careful girl, those men on the base will leave you pregnant and heartbroken…You came here for more than that."* These beliefs are laden with puritanical classist notions that can be rather confining. In this instance class is again brought to the forefront. Hampton women are taught that you come to college to attain a degree and *if* you date there also are "rules" in that arena. Her contemporary experience was definitely impacted by the historical.

As I interpret and make meaning of the elite HBCU context there is a *historical horizon* present that illuminates the experiences of low-income African-American students who choose to attend these institutions. The idea of a *horizon* is widely used in phenomenological philosophy and has its origin in metaphor (Garrett, 1978). Gadamer (1960/2012) extends the metaphor:

Every finite present has its limits. We define the concept of the situation precisely in that it presents a perspective (Standort) which limits the possibilities of vision (Sehen)—thus to the concept of the situation, the concept of the horizon is essentially related. The horizon is the sphere of vision (Gesichtskreis) which embraces and includes everything which is visible from a point. (p. 286)

We cannot reconstruct the questions that we seek answers to without both engaging and going beyond the historical horizons that exist within our questions (Gadamer, 1960/2012). Morrison, Du Bois, and Washington are all present within the *historical horizon* that lies in the distance of this phenomenological exploration. Their perspectives yield staunch values that also reveal the limits of their perspectives. Do these notions divide? Are they inclusive? I use their stances to situate and place contemporary views. I also use their ideologies to question further. The "Industrial Education" debate can be used in the present to further complicate and problematize their purposes then, and how they are put into place now.

Were these rules and mores put into place to keep us "safe" in racially charged contexts so that we could indeed thrive and attain the "American Dream?" Then and today, "the persistence of racial stereotypes and prejudice fuels the perception among many Blacks that racist attitudes must be countered by positive images and exemplary behavior by all Blacks" (Gaines, 1996). We were once taught to sew and lay bricks to appease the majority so that we could attain a rightful place in American society. What lessons are imparted today? Does a "new industrial education" exist?

Enforcing Legacy: Does A New Industrial Education Exist Today?

> People strive to reduce subjective uncertainty about their social world and their place within it—they like to know who they are and how to behave and who others are and how they might behave. (Hogg, 2006, p. 120)

Summer believed that she was extremely privileged to attend Howard University, but also constantly felt that she was being taught to "perform" in a specific manner to truly fit into its student culture:

> I often thought, why am I being taught to behave? Howard was a process…I feel like you just learn very early on that, it's less about you and more about Howard…Howard was always at the forefront…It is made evident over and over again…it's bigger than you; and if you wanna be a part of it, you'll do what you have to.

Howard's brand and legacy are paramount within its institutional culture, and it seems that the *hidden curriculum* is imparted in a covert manner. This institutional culture appears to extend beyond the "present" and strongly alludes to the "future" of its students. Kelly Miller (1925/1997) wrote an essay titled: "Howard: The National Negro University.*"* In this work he emphasizes how Howard University regarded its place amongst HBCU communities, and echoes Summer's sentiments:

> The chief aim of the founders of Howard University as of other Negro institutions was to develop a body of Negro men and women with disciplined faculties and liberalized powers with the hope and expectation that they would quickly assume their place as leaders of the life of the masses by virtue of the rightful claim and authority of the higher culture. (Miller, 1925/1997, p. 316)

> Miller (1925/1997) emphasizes the "beyond" that exists outside of Howard's

gates. Summer also acknowledges this placement. Throughout our conversations she constantly noted that her experiences were infused with "etiquette" and "rules" to be followed. These, however, were not meant to be the end result. Summer was often conflicted, but ultimately came to a realization that was profound for her:

> Once I realized that Howard's expectations for me went beyond acting proper for the Howard community but in life I began to get it…Let's be clear, they want you to be a certain way so that you may one day carry on the Howard Legacy but I don't know…this was also about life right?...The etiquette and rules went beyond student life and were supposed to translate into real life right?...I don't know Steve…

As much as I questioned Summer, she, too, questioned me. *This was also about life right?* Was this about life? As these institutions work to make African-American low-income students into viable candidates for both the American and Black middle-

classes, what are they truly preparing these students for? Despite the fact that many middle class Blacks have advanced into white-collar and professional occupations, they continue to confront frustrations and challenges including tokenism, residential segregation, subtle and overt discrimination, and a glass ceiling that may limit their professional advancement. These frustrations result in deep dissatisfaction and cynicism (Cose, 1993; Feagin & Sikes, 1994).

Harsh realities exist when one is Black and lives in America—even when a degree is attained. Are the lessons that are being bestowed at these elite institutions underscoring a deeper societal conflict for which these students need to be prepared? As low-income African-Americans seek to follow the ascending path to a particular social class, they should be equipped with not only the "hidden curriculum" that these schools view as viable to attaining a specific status, but more. HBCU communities, and especially elite HBCUs, need to be much more deliberate in imparting the message that a prevalent consciousness of belonging to the working class and the middle/upper class persists even among those who have achieved success in the educational and occupational arenas.

Conforming to the ideals and standards of the majority whomever they may be is surely complex. It is not always "surface behavioral compliance but a deeper process whereby people's behavior is transformed to correspond to the appropriate self-defining group prototype" (Hogg, 2006, p. 124). What occurs in this conformity? It appears that Howard suggests their norms covertly and in a clandestine manner. Hampton University is another story.

Covert Messages: "The Hampton Man" and "The Hampton Woman"

Hampton University is a conservative HBCU. Unlike Howard University,

Hampton imparts their social norms in a precise and fastidious manner. Students are

expected to adhere to a dress code, curfew, and strict student code of conduct:

> Learning to use socially acceptable manners and selecting attire appropriate to
> specific occasions and activities are critical factors in the total educational
> process. Understanding and employing these behaviors not only improves the
> quality of one's life, but also contributes to optimum morale, as well as
> embellishes the overall campus image. They also play a major role in instilling a
> sense of integrity and an appreciation for values and ethics. (Hampton University
> New Student Orientation Website, 2014)

What is the campus image that Hampton University wants their students to embody?

When new students first arrive on campus they are provided with profiles of what a

"Hampton Man" and a "Hampton Woman" are supposed to embody (also see Appendix

H):

> The Hampton Woman Is a Woman Who Is...of good character...displays
> dignity… is conscious of the importance of being on time… does not permit men
> to wear hats in her presence…is courteous, cooperative, self-disciplined…respects
> authority and the rights of others…does not display intimacy in public…(Long,
> 1989)

> The Hampton Man Is A Man Who Is...aware of his historical heritage… is of
> strong personal integrity and good character… a compassionate man on a
> mission…is courteous, reserved, cooperative and self-disciplined… opens and
> holds door for Hampton Women… He is a gentleman!...(Hopewell, 1989)

These profiles are unpublished, not featured on the campus website, or any widespread

public university communications. I had to travel to Hampton University to attain these

profiles. During my visit I was accompanied by a Hampton alumna. I told her "I must

have these profiles." She secured them for me during our visit and told me that when she

encountered the Dean of Women she was told, "I am not shocked you are now requesting

these…You all do not understand these lessons when you are here, but you appreciate them when you leave." Do they?

Each of my Hampton co-researchers felt that a great deal of their enculturation process took place during their first year while enrolled in a course titled: "Freshman Studies / University 101." Though the primary goal of the course is to aid new students in the transition from high-school into the university environment, it is also made clear that this course also includes "a deliberate accent on Hampton's values and traditions so that all new students will embrace Hampton's rich heritage and perpetuate its legacy" (Hampton University Department of Freshmen Studies Website, 2014). Again, there is a mention of a legacy that should enacted by elite HBCU students during their undergraduate years and even upon graduation. Kodi spoke of "University 101" as being "heavy-handed" in its approach:

> We had to take 'University 101' and some of the things that we learned were, "To be early is to be on time; to be on time is to be late; to be late is unacceptable." And that's one of the things that is drilled into your head over, and over, and over again.

Though the lessons he was imparted were quite deliberate and calculated, during our conversations Kodi mentioned that this course was pivotal in his life. During his time as an undergraduate he complained about being required to attend art exhibits, concerts, and Chapel services. However, he also acknowledged that it was not until he graduated that he realized that these lessons were meant to make him into a "well-rounded person." He grew a respect for the arts and was able to use the cultural capital he gained at Hampton to navigate professional and social contexts after he graduated.

Moving between classes directly confronts and challenges self-identities and many times signals changes in tastes, opinions, preferences, and life practices (Stewart &

Ostrove, 1993). While Kodi acknowledged the not so "hidden curriculum" that was

present inside the classroom, Nicole noted the messages and social cues she received

from her peers, administrators, and friends during her time at Hampton:

> I remember when I first got to Hampton I would hear the word 'Hamptonized.'
> Like, we would hear it and we could see it. We could see that the upperclassmen
> were different from us. And it was not even just a money thing. Like, they even
> looked different just because that was Hampton. Like, whether you came from
> money or not, Hampton had its own thing and you started to embody that…It kind
> of just happens…

Nicole was not alone in her naming of the transformation that occurred within the

Hampton context. How powerful is it that my co-researchers from Hampton were able to

name the transformative process that occurred at their alma mater? What did being

"Hamptonized" mean? It is important to recognize that becoming "Hamptonized" for my

co-researchers was not a process meant solely for them; it was a set of expectations that

was put into place for all of their classmates yielded to. However, *my* co-researchers

internalized, and felt the growing pains of becoming "Hamptonized" differently.

Mentioned previously, Booker T. Washington was an alumnus of Hampton and the

lessons he learned over a century ago are still present. The practices of instilling

Christian morality and rigid ethical character, in conjunction with demonstrating for the

majority that Blacks can be civilized and not a menace to society, are still ever-present

(Gasman & McMickens, 2010).

Like other minority communities who seek to appease and gain acceptance from

the majority, Black communities have and still do often crave states of "normalcy;" this

is a limitation that stems from a will to appeal to those systems which have and

continually oppress us (White, 2001). We monitor each other and often thwart "radical

behaviors." Within elite HBCU contexts it seems that what should be embodied as

"Black" derives from the "respectable" and "appropriate." These standards promote a "policing" of anyone who does not conform (Patton, 2014; White, 2001). Do these "culture police" speak in terms of unity and a common good that is deeply embedded in "Black respectability?"

Pursuing a college education and being given the opportunity to be imparted with invaluable social and cultural capital *should* be a beneficial endeavor. This is not always so. If these institutions continue to deny and strip their students of their differences, then we shall doom them to a false unity that shall suppress as much as it may liberate (White, 2001). Within these unique higher education contexts, conformity is not always mere behavioral compliance, but a deeper process where one's behavior is transformed to often-times temporarily match or perpetually correspond with that of the majority, whomever they may be. What does this mean for low-income African-American students who are present at an elite HBCU? Do they begin to "class-pass" or simply indulge in the practices of "class-performance?"

An Attempt To Peel Back The Masks

We Wear The Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile
And mouth with myriad subtleties.
We wear the mask!
(Dunbar, 1993, p. 88)

In his poem, *We Wear the Mask*, Paul Laurence Dunbar tells the world that Black people often adorn a mask that hides and conceals simply as a means of survival. Within elite HBCU settings African-American low-income students are often compelled to wear

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a "mask" as a means to survive their present contexts, but beneath these "masks" are complex identities. Are these masks willingly adorned? What is the alternative? In their efforts to fit in and belong on these campuses, masks manifest in the students in their newly acquired social and cultural norms, aesthetic features, and even in their speech. These masks that "grin and lie" hide prior histories that may not fit into what these campuses view as acceptable. Do students who yield to the "mask" have to neglect essences of their pasts?

The construction of the mask cannot be solely attributed to classism, because it is also "willingly" perpetuated by many of these students who experience this phenomenon. Do these "masks" perfectly accessorize and enable social mobility within the elite HBCU context (Brown, 2005)? This illusion maintains a tenuous hierarchy of identities that are constantly being reconciled (Brown, 2005; Stewart, 2008). Do these masks also produce an internal tension with oneself? When low-income students choose to adorn a "mask" are they also choosing to class-pass?

"My Perfect Ten" all reconciled the intra-racial class differences they experienced in myriad manners. The notion that they may have had to choose to don a "mask" in order to cope further underscores the myriad tensions that they had to negotiate regarding their oppressed identities. When one chooses to blend or *pass*, issues of "marginality and cultural dualism come to the forefront" (Wall, 1986, p. 97). In order to peel back the masks that many of my co-researchers adorned, I must go into spaces that are quite controversial within Black communities. These spaces are filled with historical occurrences, as well as the pain and shame often associated with the act of racial passing.

Within Black communities the act of "passing" has been viewed as the ultimate border crossing. Several of my co-researchers chose to "pass" to avoid rejection and being viewed as subversive within their campus environments. To be deemed "visible" they would elect to consent to the ideals, customs and traditions that were a part of their elite HBCU campus cultures. These mores contained invisible rules for them to follow and abide by. In their choices to engage and immerse themselves amongst the social hierarchies that are apparent on elite HBCU campuses, many of "My Perfect Ten" would elect to "pass." When someone chooses to mask any aspect of self it is a complicated process. What would these existences reveal?

Revealing The "Other" And (Un)Veiling A New Form of "Passing"

Part of the price the Negro pays for his position in this society is that he is almost always acting. A Negro learns to gauge precisely what reaction the alien person facing him desires, and he produces it with disarming artlessness. (Baldwin, 1955, p. 68)

While the other may be different from me, this difference is not bad; it is human. (Milofsky-Mojto, 2009, p. 2)

During the Harlem Renaissance Nella Larsen (1929) wrote *Passing.* Her book focuses on the friendship between "Clare Kendry" and "Irene Redfield" and their intrigue with each other's lives. The title and central theme of her work underscores the practice of "racial passing." Within this novella Larsen makes it blatantly clear that everything is not always as it seems in the friendship that is at the center of the work:

The truth was she was curious…Clare Kendry wished to find out about this hazardous business of "passing," this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly. What, for example, one did about background, how one accounted for oneself. And how one felt when one came into contact with other Negroes. (Larsen, 1929/2002, p. 30)

Kendry passes for White, while Redfield chooses to maintain her Black identity and navigate Harlem, New York's Black elite. Larsen's (1929) *Passing* was informed by the racial discussion that was occurring in the United States during the 1920s, and its discourse still remains relevant today. But what is "passing?" How does it appear amongst Black communities?

African-Americans who choose to pass racially endure a life of secrecy. When one chooses to "racially pass" it must be noted that this choice is the act of adopting a new identity while rejecting a given identity (Kroeger, 2003, p. 8). There is a departing from one world and entering into another and knowing that they can never return. *Passing* is about the visible, the invisible, the seen and the unseen (Ginsberg, 1996). When African-Americans "racially pass" they make the ultimate choice, to leave one racial identity and belong to another. "Passers" create a new existence for themselves. "Passing is the act of ultimate creation" (Kroeger, 2003, p. 8).

"Historically, in the African-American community, 'passing' meant appropriating the body of the "other" (i.e., the mulatto would pretend to be white and essentially assume a White body)" (Fordham, 1993, p. 25). The concept of *passing* is a complex state where one adopts the persona of the "other" to take away the possibilities of being *othered* within society as a whole. Within the broader societal context individuals are often *othered* due to their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. This process involves a majority exercising their societal privilege to create distance and advantage (Lorde, 1996; Milofsky-Mojto, 2009; Tatum, 2000). "How does the experience of being an other resonate in future interactions with people who have social power that the 'othered' does not" (Milofsky-Mojto, 2009, p. 2)?

Today "passing" manifests in a different manner than it once did in the past. In a post-civil rights and supposedly post-racial America there are few people of African ancestry who feel the need to assume *both* an aesthetic and socially acceptable White persona to escape their oppressed racial identity (Fordham, 1993). However, there is *still* a societal stigma attached with living and existing in Black skin in America. Blacks continue to endure frequent social and cultural degradations. But, the act of "passing" or altering oneself manifests today in a figurative rather than literal sense (Fordham, 1993; Kroeger, 2003). Contemporarily, "there is gender passing, class passing, and age passing…Wherever there is prejudice and preconception there is passing…"(Kroeger, 2003, pp. 4-5). Women have passed as men, Jews pass as Gentiles, gay men and women pass as straight, and the poor pass as rich (Hobbs, 2014). In preconception and prejudice, what is the relationship between the *other* and the act of *othering* when one chooses to pass?

Many of "My Perfect Ten" were compelled to assume and fabricate alternate personas. Or were they simply trying to survive? "In one way or another they all 'passed'" (Wall, 1986, p. 98).

> They passed to avoid conflict or personal rejection or to fulfill serious professional aspirations. They passed full-time or part-time, or only on occasion, and all of them coped in different ways with the moral and ethical compromises passing so often exacts. (Kroeger, 2003, p. 7)

In pushing past the historical "racial-passing" narratives that are dominant within the American societal context, it is now essential for me to introduce the act of "class-passing" into contemporary intra-racial Black class discourses. This phenomenological exploration reveals that within higher education settings there are low-income African-American students who are forced or perhaps seduced into "passing." "Class-passing is a

messy affair, and race and ethnicity of course complicates it further" (Wall, 1986, p. 108). They leave one identity and embody that of a dominant *other* in order to fulfill their desires to achieve academic and social success (Fordham, 1993).

Levinas (1969/1961) depicts those who are and have been *othered* in a significantly different manner. He presents them outside of a negative paradigm. "The relation between the same and the other, the welcoming of the other, is the ultimate fact, and in it the things figure not as what one builds but as what one gives" (p. 77). He reveals that we should look to those who are *othered* to see the face of who we are and may be. Oppression and privilege are called into question. Levinas expresses that we should also be concerned for the welfare for those who embody oppressed identities. This phenomenological exploration also holds the same belief. What can we learn from those who are *othered*? How do their experiences unveil humanity?

In this study "passing" is more than a fleeing from a predetermined racial border (Fordham, 2010). "Class-passing" is not a deliberate disruption of racial boundaries. It encompasses an often dismissed notion that social class can indeed be fluid, and like race can be manipulated to serve those who are often oppressed. As "My Perfect Ten" decided to "class-pass" it must be noted that these experiences reveal the "fragile and fleeting nature of social categorization in contemporary America" (Fordham, 2010, p. 10).

In this work, it is important to show the myriad sides of "class-passing." There are considerable sacrifices and choices that my co-researchers made during their times at their respective elite HBCUs. Though there are distinctions, there are also similarities between my co-researchers and African-Americans who chose to "racially-pass" in the

early 20th century. In Alysson Hobbs' (2014) work *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* she documents the sacrifices that Blacks have made throughout history when they chose to make the ultimate sacrifice and cross and live beyond their racial color line. Their choices to *pass* disrupted their family lives, and called into question their identities and those of their families, friends, and other loved ones (Hobbs, 2014). Their sacrifices resulted in a life-long hiding. Was the same true for those in my study? Like "racial-passing," *class-passing* calls into question broader and more nuanced meanings of how Blacks in America negotiate their social standings, racial identities, and sense of belonging amongst those who share their ancestry. How is the act of "class-passing" exhibited and revealed on an elite HBCU campus?

Facing The Pressures of the Past Within The Present

> In this country, we speak grandly of class metamorphosis, never stopping to consider that for many working-class class travelers, this trip is nothing but a bridge burning. (Lubrano, 2004, p. 48)

In order to "class-pass" my co-researchers found that they had to distance themselves from their home communities. Is this a first step? Emmanuel expressed that he had to "un-plug" himself from his family in order to be fully present and immerse himself in his elite HBCU culture:

> I think that if you're from a low-income community and you're one of the first people in your family to go to college, like, there is a certain amount of that you have to leave behind. I don't mean you know, forget where you come from and are and like, hey, "F where I'm from." Like not in that way. In a way you kind of plug out of that world and plug into your new world to be fully present and in order to be successful, I think…If I was not really plugged in at Howard and not really focused on what I was doing, I wouldn't have been as successful.

Tinto (1988) contends that in order for college students to integrate successfully into higher education contexts that a "separation" must occur:

Separation entails some form of parting from past habits and patterns of affiliation…the adoption of the behaviors and norms appropriate to the college almost always require some degree of transformation and perhaps rejection of those past communities…in a very real sense, one's staying in college depends on their becoming leavers from their former communities. (p. 443)

Tinto's assertions are highly regarded within higher-education scholarship; however, they place minority low-income students in a precarious position. Yes, an evolution does occur within a student's identity during his/her college years that involves an adoption of new behaviors and beliefs; however, it is unreasonable to expect low-income minority students to leave their formidable foundations totally in order to create a new existence for themselves. Is it possible for these students to leave their home communities and then in essence "cut-off" their familial support systems? Is it fair to expect these students to depart from what has been familiar in order to navigate educational contexts that are in many cases alienating and unfamiliar?

It was hard for Emmanuel to create a distance from his home community totally. He was called on for financial support and also had to manage familial crises that would arise from afar throughout his college career. His experiences also disclose that not only did students like him face unique barriers at school, they also encountered social burdens at home that their affluent peers likely did not experience (Lee & Kramer, 2013).

Low-income minority students who attend elite colleges and universities are often pressured to not only acclimate to their new campus cultures, but also encounter challenges during their attempts to maintain relationships with friends and family from their home communities (Charles, Fischer, Mooney, & Massey, 2009; Lee & Kramer, 2013). These relationships shift and "ties to hometown family and friends may become attenuated or cut off entirely" (Lee & Kramer, 2013, p. 19). Choices must be made with

regard to how these students ultimately decide to engage their home communities *and* how they forge new existences within an elite higher education environment.

To be successful, low-income college students need to learn how to adjust to their new physical environment, learn to become more independent away from their family, and also how to adjust to the new academic demands of the curriculum (Padilla, Trevino, & Gonzales, 1997). Nia decided to "class-pass" in order to adjust and become more independent from her familial context. She desired more than being working-class. "I wanted to kind of distance myself from my upbringing and what had happened in my past; and then instead, build a new future for myself." In her choice to distance herself from her upbringing, Nia would choose to keep aspects of herself secret. There would be no discussion of her alcoholic mother or the urban blight she endured and overcame during her youth. She chose to blend and immerse herself in her campus environment so that she could acquire a new life—that which she believed would propel her beyond a past that she felt often weighed her down. Coexisting in two worlds makes one question and think, "How can I possibly fit in college and at home?" My co-researchers wanted "distance," but this negotiation of identity would involve secrecy and silence as well.

Secrecy and Silence: Playing The Class Game

> When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. They will be interested in his general socioeconomic status, his conception of self, his attitude, his competence, his trustworthiness, etc. Although some of this information seems to be sought almost as an end in itself, there are usually quite practical reasons for acquiring it. (Goffman, 1959, p. 1)

> The phenomenon of passing also sets up an encounter with several larger philosophical questions. Must communities put so many onuses on us? Why does authenticity matter? How much information does one person owe another? When is nondisclosure lying? (Kroeger, 2003, p. 9)

Unlike "racial-passing" where for instance Black individuals elect to leave and abandon their past existence and ethnic identity totally, my co-researchers selectively chose when they would "class-pass." Their choice was not "all or nothing." There are extremes that are present. Some chose to pass more often than others. "They passed full-time or part-time, or only on occasion, and all of them coped in different ways with the moral and ethical compromises passing so often enacts" (Kroeger, 2003, p. 7). Their decisions to "pass" are being emphasized within this study not to place any blame on elite HBCUs, but to reveal and highlight the pressures that low-income students face within these campus cultures.

When I gathered my co-researchers together it was a powerful occasion. I assumed that they would be guarded as we engaged the sensitive topics surrounding their encounters with intra-racial class differences during their undergraduate years. However, they more than rose to the occasion. In the company of others whom they presumed were similar to them, "My Perfect Ten" were able to unlock rich memories about their college experiences. More importantly, as we gathered together to make meaning of their lived experiences they removed their "masks." Together we stood vulnerable, were candid, and quite frank in the midst of discussing my phenomenon of pursuit. During our individual conversations they felt free to hint at the acts of "class-passing," but during our gathering, this notion was released even more so into the open, it was no longer a secret. This release was freeing.

Freedom in the Commune

We were there together
We shared
And became free…

There we were safe
Treasured aspects of our lives were recollected
There was no judgment

Each telling
and
Each recollection
Brought freedom

The Lord told us
Long ago
That
Where two or three are gathered together…

That's all it takes

And together we were free
And were there
With each other
(Mobley, 2015)

The act of "class-passing" for my co-researchers held secrecy and silence about

their pasts. In college they shared *just* enough about their backgrounds as they engaged

their affluent peers. "My Perfect Ten" learned the art of manipulating everyday

situations. Nia shared:

> People assumed things about where I was from. Everyone thinks that San
> Francisco is such a great place. If I said I was from Compton, then you would
> just…You would get it. But since I say I'm from San Francisco, they're like, "Oh
> okay! You're from the Bay Area…Alright, San Francisco is nice. People have
> money there." So I could kind of just get by on that and not really have to kind of
> explain my background.

These types of encounters were difficult for Nia. But, she found a sort of safety in

allowing her peers to assume that she was of a certain background, rather than being

judged or bombarded with questions. She used the connotations associated with her

hometown to shield her from the biases or rejection she may have faced had she divulged

her true social status. "I did not want people to get too close because then I would have

to explain and I just was not ready to deal with those types of questions." Was she being

deceptive or simply ensuring her survival? "Deception can make passing much harder on

the passer than on the people the passer has to dupe" (Kroeger, 2003, p. 75).

Summer informed me that during her college years "My past was off-limits in my

present." Like Nia, she also chose what parts of herself she would divulge to her peers.

It took longer for Summer to "class-pass." She decided to indulge her campus

culture further during her junior year and pursue a coveted rung that was present on the

social ladder of Howard University. She felt that it was necessary for her to seek out

specific campus organizations and social circles so that she, too, could be a part of what

she deemed the ultimate "Howard Experience." However, she was still protective of her

past during her pursuit of a newfound social acceptance amongst her affluent peers who

resided within a certain place at Howard:

> My coping mechanism was not to not talk…I rarely talked about my family…I
> didn't talk about my previous experiences. Like, I really didn't share. Some of
> my best friends do not know, you know, my personal background; truly where I
> come from….And that's just easier for me, because you know, who wants all
> those questions?

Again, Summer conveys that questions from peers have the power to unleash

years of pain or strife that a low-income student is uncomfortable with or ill-equipped to

face. None of my co-researchers totally left their pasts like a "racial passer." They

repeatedly had to answer to their pasts within their present. It appears that the avoidance

and subsequent coping with the pervasive questions that confronted them manifested in a

hiding practice. "The repression of the discussion of class is itself a subject that should

make us pause, because the repressed will always return and cause us to lurch and

gasp…" (Foster, 2005, p. 1). My co-researchers' states of secrecy would appear in other

manners as well.

Adopting a Second Skin

Consumer culture does the cultural work of silencing discussion about class. (Foster, 2005, p. 38)

Class status, like racial status, is a performance or fiction that must be maintained through social rehearsals and iterations; and second, class functions according to visible and invisible boundaries of institutions and spaces that have to be trespassed. (Williams, 2006, p. 139)

Everyone puts on a mask or adopts different personas from time to time, often short term, to achieve a variety of reasonable aims. (Kroeger, 2003, p. 78)

The elusive art of class passing ultimately revolves around the *seen* and the

unseen. Class is more than wealth or status, but also about everyday performed behavior

(Foster, 2005). "How one does everything from eating to speaking to any kind of

behavior is classed or troped by class" (Foster, 2005, p. 8). A moral anxiety is also ever-

present. This state can truly be a tiring existence. The angst that "My Perfect Ten"

endured as they endeavored to "class-pass" was often filled with uneasiness. This

shrewdly manufactured state is "about authenticity, about the deception of presenting

yourself as other than who you understand yourself to be" (Appiah, 2010, p. 75). It takes

on many forms. "Class is an 'identity kit' equipped with the proper mask and costume,

along with instructions on how to act" (Gee, 1991, p. 53).

In secret, Blair "performed" class every day that she dwelled on Hampton

University's campus. She would summon her "class tool kit" and perform for her

affluent peers—those she deliberately chose to engage. Did it ever become too much?

How did she navigate this tenuous existence? She eventually found that in order for her

to secure some sort of reconciliation in her acts of "class-passing," that she had to enact a

demanding daily ritual:

> Each day I came back to my dorm room and took a shower. I would wash the day
> from my body. I was also cleansing myself of that same day's performance...I was
> attempting to remove the stench of pretending to be who I really was not...I know
> now I was not only pretending but passing.

Each day as she passed, her "performance" also took a toll on her. She felt she

needed to rid herself of its uncomfortable stench. "Passing never feels natural. It is a

second skin that never adheres" (Kroeger, 2003, p. 8). While passing does not "feel

natural," those featured within this study would willingly submerge themselves or choose

to tread the intense waters of social class that were ever-present within elite HBCU

environments.

> The tough thing in talking about class as a performative act is that real class
> differences, real consequences, real hardships, and real privileges that come with
> class certainly exist, just as real privileges and hardships exist with regard to real
> race-passing. (Foster, 2005, p. 7)

Blair observed the influence and power of how her elite HBCU was impacted by

certain aesthetic and materialistic standards. She noticed these facets almost

immediately, and as a result, made concerted efforts to "class-pass." Her peers were able

to engage in a particular college lifestyle and also presented themselves in a certain

manner, and she felt forced to mirror them. She did not want to be perceived as poor:

> It [Hampton] was a fashion show. Oh, and this is the time I also got introduced to
> debt as well. I just remember saying, "Oh my gosh. I am not fashionable enough
> to go to school…I began to buy into this mess because I did not want to be seen as
> poor. I was not going to be seen as poor, but, I knew that I could not afford
> Versace or Louis Vuitton as well. So I had to…I stepped my game up and got
> introduced to a credit card: Discover, MasterCard, Visa–all three–and ran those
> up buying clothes, traveling, and going out–all to keep up with my friends…It
> was, yeah, very interesting, um, dealing with that whole dynamic.

I highlight clothing choice and aesthetic transformation quite a bit as I explore

and show this phenomenon, but this lived experience is more than mere fashion. While a

noteworthy facet, there is so much more. I may often begin and start "there" but more is

always unveiled. It is a piece that blurs the lines of status and wealth within Black

communities and also communicates how one may be judged as one navigates these

unique campus environments. I use myriad discourses around clothing, in essence to

undress my phenomenon of pursuit. Material and outward changes reveal the external

control that is exerted by an elite HBCUs administration, one's peers, and the campus

culture as a whole.

Specific status markers are needed to fit within elite HBCU college environments.

Students must prove that they have the ability to *show* that they are worthy of acceptance.

Blair bought into the aesthetic cultural aspects of her elite HBCU context. Should one

have to go into debt to become socially acceptable? The pressure to attain specific

"things" and "show off" was critical if one decided to "class-pass." Nicole expressed to

me that "Hampton was a show…each and every day we showed off for each other…"

"Unbridled materialism in our culture is a form of class-passing in a way" (Foster, 2005,

p. 22).

Some of my co-researchers chose to indulge and "show off" so that they would be

accepted. These choices would have to be reconciled later. Alonzo realized that the

choices he made as an undergraduate would ultimately come back to haunt him beyond

the gates of Howard University:

> I went into debt for the aesthetics to fit in at Howard; DEBT! I'm talking to the
> point where…Do you know they run a credit check on you when you pass the
> Bar? I had to make arrangements with credit companies. Howard
> damn near caused me to not pass the Bar because I raked up so much credit card

debt trying to look like a Howard student.

Alonzo not only chose to look the part, but he also decided to acquire an off-campus apartment as an upperclassman, and purchased a car so that he could exist and fit among his more affluent peers. He would have to reconcile his "class-passing" upon leaving Howard as he attempted to solidify a middle/upper-middle class future.

The materialistic and consumerist cultures that are present within Black communities communicate that you may be poor but you do not have to look or live that way. These supposed inherently Black beliefs then become standards that are imparted at elite HBCUs. "What are we to make of class passing, and how are we to underscore enough that, indeed, class matters" (Kroeger, 2003, p. 116)? The choice to "class-pass" may be in many cases necessary to endure difference, but also has the potential to become problematic once low-income African-American students leave their elite HBCU campus.

What also became apparent in this phenomenon was that my co-researchers, especially the males noticed that they were not the only ones who were *class-passing* during their times at their respective elite HBCUs. My male co-researchers noticed that their affluent male peers were also adopting alternate personas. Their affluent classmates were assuming façades associated with urban environments. Were they *class-passing* in an opposite manner? Roman expressed:

> I just felt like everybody was so fake…I felt like a lot of people was pretending…
> Growing up I saw people getting killed and selling drugs…So when
> I got Hampton I saw these guys trying to be "hard core."…They were
> pretending…They were from rich suburbs and acting like they were from the
> "hood."…I couldn't believe it…You had to have a certain GPA to get in here.
> You had to have a certain SAT score…So why are you pretending like you're
> this macho-type person and you're not?

> I would ask them, "Why do you want to be 'hood' so bad?"…I would have traded to be in their position, but, they wanted to be where I came from…. So I envisioned everybody as fake and phony because that wasn't the lifestyle that they had.

Roman's experiences with his affluent male counterparts reveal an interesting dynamic. While many of the low-income African-American males in this study chose to model what they perceived as middle-class norms and behaviors, they found that their affluent peers were doing the exact opposite. They sought to gain credibility within these environments by in essence down-playing their middle/upper-middle class backgrounds. Why was this so?

These acts were often unsettling for the males who comprised "My Perfect Ten." They felt that there more affluent peers were presenting themselves in an inauthentic manner. Xavier expressed, "They had money and lived in the suburbs… their families owned businesses and were in politics. Why are you coming to college and acting in this manner?" This is an interesting dynamic. It further troubles the waters of not only what it is to be Black within these contexts, but, a cis-gender presumably Black heterosexual male. Where does this manifestation of Black male masculinity derive? There are numerous factors that contribute to both spectrums. These acts of gender performance are driven by both race and class. They also manifest in direct opposition to the racism that is inherent within society. As a result Black men feel the need to either assimilate or confront these norms. A double-bind has been created for Black men due to poverty, racism, and societal norms and as a result they feel the need to attain certain aspects of mainstream masculinity that derive from White ideals (Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011).

Higher education environments exude *classed* values and unspoken *classed* rules. These norms are also racially motivated. These mores and standards are often foreign to

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low-income students. Black low- income/working-class collegians who attend elite

HBCUs find themselves in positions where they alter or change what they may deem

their most important facets to fit in (Lubrano, 2004). Why are they the ones who must

change? Amongst change does one also have the opportunity to also capture these spaces

as their own in some fashion?

<p align="center">**Conquering the Social Tides: Acts Of Resilience**</p>

Because this phenomenon encompasses so many intricate facets, I constantly have

questioned myself during the meaning making process. I have wrestled with the

narratives that I underscore in this study because my wish is not to portray "My Perfect

Ten" as victims of their complex alma maters nor their diverse pasts. As I have

mentioned before, my co-researchers are *real* people and their narratives and truths are

multifaceted—these are not simple accounts. A holistic narrative is needed and

especially critical. This work is heavy and carries their diverse stories.

Elite HBCUs consist of both poor and affluent Blacks. These campus contexts

also provide a distinct space where those of varying socioeconomic circumstances are

able to come together and begin to understand a wider range of human nature (Willie,

Reddick, & Brown, 2005). Many of "My Perfect Ten" immersed themselves in their

campus cultures. They engaged their classmates, forged pivotal relationships, and sought

to make these places their own in their own way. I respect and admire each of them.

Low-income students who are present at selective schools enter an exclusive

environment and are naturally prone to encounter social undercurrents (Charles, Fischer,

Mooney & Massey, 2009). Amongst the waters of social class lie tumultuous tides and

vague undercurrents that ebb and flow. Where do these undercurrents and tides lead? A

foremost detail is that "My Perfect Ten" endured, survived, and graduated from these

schools. During their journeys class mattered. "Navigating the social currents of campus

life is no easy task" (Charles, Fischer, Mooney & Massey, 2009, pp. 72-73). Yes, many

times they did encounter the *injuries of class* and felt different, but their resilience is also

ever-present. My co-researchers were forced to inhabit and negotiate their different

worlds and existences; but, they also made these spaces places of comfort while

creatively claiming and crossing the borders of social class (hooks, 1994).

"You Are Enough"

A resounding affirmation that was made apparent throughout the many

conversations that I had with my co-researchers were their declarations of self-

determination. Though they each had to face the strong "social undercurrents" of social

class within their elite HBCU contexts, what kept many of them centered was that they

truly believed that they belonged in these places. While they recognized that they were

confronted with situations of change, several would draw strength and communicate to

their peers that "you will deal" and "take all of me" too. These acts would be forms of

self-preservation and resistance. From where did their strength derive? "My Perfect

Ten" did not want to "forget" themselves.

> No one wants to be forced out of communion with who and what they believe
> they really are. It seems that everyone wants to be themselves, but no one wants
> to be without some group basis for sustaining identity and moral self-esteem.
> Successful navigation of the world thus requires all the attentiveness and
> emotional control one can muster. (Allen, 1997, p. 123)

Allen (1997) alludes to a conundrum that was faced by my co-researchers. We as

human beings yearn to be ourselves, yet, there are societal forces that often force us to

conform so that we are not seen as subversive or left on the outside. Do we not know that

perhaps we *are* enough? In Nora's letter to her 18 year old self she made it clear that

knowing her worth would be of extreme importance during her journey:

> Please understand that YOU are enough, just as you are right now. You have
> never been told otherwise and have always been supported and fiercely confident
> but entering this next phase of life into adulthood—you will start to question your
> brilliance. You will feel simply overwhelmed. You will feel a bit inadequate.
> You will second-guess yourself more than you ever have before. You will learn
> the lesson of rejection. However, it will all make you stronger and allow you to
> become your best self.

Nora sheds light on many of the struggles that low-income students experience

during their journeys on elite HBCU campuses. Internal questions often linger.

However, knowing that "you are enough" is a foremost thought that has power to

circumvent the pressures, attacks on self-esteem, and other myriad challenges that these

students encountered on their elite HBCU campuses. Nora made sure to communicate to

her past self that she was worthy of Howard, and though she would endure challenges,

she would know *she was enough.*

<div align="center">

Take Me As I Am

So take me as I am
or have nothing at all
Just take me as I am
or have nothing at all

Don't you know I can only be me?

So take me as I am
Just take me as I am
or have nothing at all
This is me
Take me as I am

</div>

(Jordan, S., Smith, L L., Lewis, E., Nelson, C., Hilson, K., & Fair, R., 2006, Track 7)

Amidst the internal questions that African-American low-income students often

have is also a negotiation of both self and place. Does one conform, challenge the

system, or work to accomplish both goals? While Nora sought affirmation from her chosen place and even those who dwelled with her at Howard, Kodi was very clear of where he chose to stand and who he was during his time at Hampton. He knew that early on that he was *enough*. "I mean, I feel like through everything, I've always been me. You accept me for who I am or you don't, and that's just pretty much it." He channeled an eminent and ever-present spirit of self-worth. Kodi also embodied and evoked tenacity. This attitude would serve him well:

> It's funny because I was…I was Mr. Hampton University, too, my senior year, and I remember one of my friends saying to me, "You know Kodi, I'm glad…I'm glad you didn't let this go to your head." You know, "I'm glad that through everything, you know, you were still just Kodi. You're just still down to earth."

Although he encountered challenges on his campus, it was evident that he was extremely self-confident. He expresses, "College is a time where you can re-invent yourself, and for some that's fine. If you're not comfortable with who you are, then maybe you do need to go 'head and reinvent yourself. But I was good with me." This self-awareness would serve him well. Hampton provided him with life-lessons, growth, and myriad influential experiences. Kodi was one of the first to be voted "Mr. Hampton University" in the history of his school. However, this accolade did not change him. He also showed himself and his affluent classmates that he belonged there as much as they did. Kodi reveled in the fact that when so many of his peers (both the affluent and low-income) were gaining popularity and "changing," sometimes for what he saw as the worse, that he was able to remain true to himself.   "You know, people become Greek and find popularity in other ways, and it was like they became completely different people...that was not going to be me." How was he able to preserve *his* essence?

Kodi admits that he did evolve during his time at Hampton, but he was not willing

to be given over totally to what he deemed the "shallow aspects" of his campus culture.

To him "conformity" did not mean total abandonment of his working class roots, nor

being forced to indulge exclusively in what he deemed as "superficial." Like Kodi,

others amongst "My Perfect Ten" would force their peers to take them as they were.

Above all they desired for those within their elite HBCU campuses to see them "deep

inside."

Deep Inside

So I made the choice to be
Good to those who were good to me
Don't judge me or think I'm bitter

I Wish
I Wish
I Wish

Deep inside I wish that you could see
I wish they could see
That I am just plain old me
I can't help it

Love the person inside and stop looking outside

If I could give you something else
But I can't give you nothing but me
(Blige, M. J., Geter, T., Deane, K., John, E., & Taupin, B., 1999, Track 3)

What is it to see "deep inside" of a person? "My Perfect Ten" simply wanted the

"others" who were present with them to look beyond their exteriors and backgrounds.

Unlike the act of *class-passing*, in these instances my co-researchers would divulge

extremely personal aspects of themselves and allow their peers into their whole existence.

Xavier was popular and a highly involved student leader at Hampton, and due to this

status, instead of hiding aspects of his background, he felt it necessary to inform his peers

of the struggles he was enduring. For him these were freeing experiences. "Everyone

knew one semester, I might not be able to get back in school."

Xavier successfully climbed Hampton's social ladder, but also chose to be

transparent with his friends and classmates and openly communicate that he constantly

faced financial stress. He felt that his transparency was a teachable moment. "I had to let

people at Hampton know that tuition did not appear out thin air for everyone…We all did

not have parents who simply wrote a check each year." He would not hide amongst the

dank, convoluted, and murky social waters of social class. Somehow he, too, was secure

in himself and would assert his presence in a raw and deeply authentic manner. Kodi

made himself vulnerable and silenced the negative internal voices of self-doubt. Would

others claim their places and demand to be recognized?

"I Go Here Too"

Journal Entry: It is 11:33 PM on August 7, 2014. Tonight "Summer" one of my co-researchers called me. It was quite the pleasant surprise. Of course she inquired about my progress on my dissertation. I am always thankful when one of "My Perfect Ten" reaches out to me via text, on social media, and of course the "old fashioned" phone call. I began to vent. "I have been frustrated with my writing lately…How am I ever going to get through this section?…This is hard…." She listens, but, then responds in her own special way and makes a statement that makes everything so much clearer. Her fortitude is commanding:

'We don't always get the opportunity to be in these spaces…but when we do we have to truly be in these spaces, take up these spaces and we have to own them…'

She was dead-on. I made her repeat this phrase again. I had to hear it again. In that moment I needed to be (pre)sent so I could truly receive her words.

Low-income African-American students do not always have the opportunity nor

the privilege to be in certain educational spaces—especially those that are considered

elite. But, when they are, there are many who assert themselves and make these places

their own. They choose to overcome their feelings of difference and insecurity. My co-researchers would seek to make their way and truly "be."

"My Perfect Ten" would seize and claim the opportunities that were presented to them. Many studies have contended that low-income students who attend elite predominately White institutions participate in co-curricular activities at lower rates than their peers from more affluent backgrounds (Martin, 2012; Stuber, 2009; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001; Walpole, 2003). Stuber (2009) also argues that the reason for poorer students' low participation in "out of class-room" activities is that due to their social class backgrounds they have personal worldviews that keep them from fully immersing themselves in higher education contexts. Furthermore, Martin (2012) claims that poorer students are not as committed to forging a social life or relationships on their campuses. However, these assertions were untrue for my co-researchers. My phenomenological exploration directly confronts and challenges these notions.

Therefore, unlike predominately White elite higher education contexts, elite HBCU environments provided "My Perfect Ten" with myriad spaces to be highly involved students *and* student leaders. While my co-researchers were forced to straddle both sides of the class lines that were apparent on their campuses, they found success and were able to ascend various social hierarchies. A delicate balance was present. My co-researchers did have to straddle both sides of the class lines that were present on their campuses, but found that they were to climb the rungs of the class ladders many times that were present on their campuses. They would not only become involved on their campuses and join co-curricular organizations, but they also took on leadership positions as well.

Emmanuel was a highly regarded student leader during his time at Howard. He decided early that he was going to stand out:

> I couldn't see myself just going away to school and just kind of being, you know, just one in a million, you know? So I just…I needed to get involved, for my sanity and to meet people. That's why, you know…one of the reasons why I was in school.

He made a choice to engage his campus community and also formed pivotal relationships. Emmanuel would get elected to a highly regarded student government position. It was quite the upset. "People were pissed that I was elected that year…I made it clear that I was not going to be like those who came before me…Howard needed a change at that time." As a low-income student, Emmanuel felt that it was important for his peers to see that someone from his background could get such a coveted position. Summer also noticed that there was a "standard" present if one wished to be taken seriously and become involved in campus politics:

> You have to be in the right places and look the part. If you do not have money you are hindered and can't *be* successful because there is an unspoken "standard." This is sad because we focus so much on superficial things that those without the means to participate and who have great ideas are left out...our campus suffers as a result.

"My Perfect Ten" would find themselves in places of social power on their campus. They sought these positions and would become members of the nation's oldest Black sororities, featured columnists of their campus newspapers, and even lead their student government associations. "Elite universities have long celebrated the 'collegiate scholar' subculture and a student lifestyle that balances academic achievement with an active social life (Ellis & Manderscheid, 1974; Ellis, Parelius, & Parelius, 1971). The unique feature of my co-researchers' experiences is that even though they encountered formidable challenges surrounding their social class standings, their elite HBCU contexts

still reflected the ideals that HBCUs have been praised for. In stark contrast to low-income minority students who attend elite PWI contexts, they were able to find and assert themselves in critical manners.

There Is Still *More* Amongst The Waters

Throughout this study, Black social class differences have been made apparent to me in myriad manners. The historical and contemporary "texts" that I have been bestowed show that intra-racial differences often stem from one's social class standing. The pain and feelings of difference one may endure amongst one's own, the critical choices that are often made to ensure success, and even intense life remembrances *all* revolve around social class within this study. For the individuals who are featured within this phenomenological exploration, it was quite apparent that their elite HBCU environments were "fountains of opportunity and highly stratified bastions of privilege" (Carnevale, 2012).

African-Americans are often uneasy to admit that within our communities social class not only matters but should be questioned and brought to light.

> By omitting class from the discussion about race, gender, sexuality, age, and other issues, we have obfuscated all the ways in which class enters into the identity equation. In fact we need to rethink identity politics with class and class-passing in mind. We must rethink traditional notions of class and their hierarchies. We must ask the tough questions. (Foster, 2005, p. 116)

Tough questions and realizations have been asserted as I have constantly sought to reconcile and uncover this phenomenon. I have delved deeply to disclose the identity politics that is present amongst Black communities. African-Americans also often wear "masks" in their everyday lives to ensure survival—and this may even manifest in a

choice to "class-pass." It has also been disclosed that "lessons" are imparted on elite

HBCU campuses within a "hidden curriculum."

There are also intra-racial tensions that are present. The "us" versus "them"

stance has divided Black communities and has been and still must be troubled. This

chapter discloses that my phenomenological exploration also unveils a spirit of resilience

that my co-researchers would summon to remain true to themselves and show that they,

indeed, deserved their places at their schools. But, *still* there is more. How do the

experiences of "My Perfect Ten" call us to action so that we may summon others to the

waters of social class. These *waters* hold infinite possibility and meaning for all.

Ultimately, there is still more that can be learned amongst the waters of Black intra-racial

social difference. This chapter brings forward many things and signals that there is still

more that must be uncovered. Pedagogical insights must be brought forward to make

sense of the "what" and "why" that is inherent within this phenomenological exploration.

CHAPTER SEVEN
REJOICING IN THE TIDES OF WHAT WAS ONCE (UN)FAMILIAR

> Let our rejoicing rise…High as the listening skies…Let it resound loud as the rolling sea…(Johnson, 1933, p. 154)

> We will rejoice and be glad in it. (Psalms 118:24)

As I approached the end of this phenomenological journey I encountered many restless nights and was awakened from deep sleeps. The dream I was repeatedly awakened from was always the same. I am no more than eight years old and I am sitting in church. I felt and remembered the people, vivid images, and the sounds that surrounded me. There is music, there is color, and there is life.

It is a Sunday afternoon and my grandmother stands and begins to speak. A striking woman with butterscotch skin, she stands and commands attention. Her hat is bold and her peach suit is flecked in the light of the bold colors from the ornate stain-glassed window beside her. She begins to sing in testimony: "This is the day…*This* is the day…That the Lord has made….That the Lord has made…*I* will be glad and rejoice in *it*…" I smell the summer air and the food being prepared for after service. I even see my Black suit and can almost touch my crisp white shirt.

Grandma is right next to me. Now, she speaks: "*First* giving honor to a *most* glorious God…*I* am thankful…I am *thankful* today because this is *the* day that the Lord has made…and *I* shall be glad *and* rejoice in it!" All eyes are on her. She continues:

> I am thankful church…My grandson has made the honor roll again, he is a smart boy…I am thankful because I know that I pray for him every day that you send and he will do great things…

She then grabs my face and whispers to me: "Little Steve, that testimony was just for you…I pray and rejoice for you…" Like she rejoiced then, I rejoice now. She spoke power into my life. There is power in rejoicing. There is also power in memory:

> One must have memories…and still it is not yet enough to have memories. One must be able to forget them when they are many and one must have great patience to wait until they come again. For it is not yet the memories themselves. Not till they have turned to blood within us, to glance and gesture, nameless and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves—not till then it can happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a verse arises in their midst and goes forth from them. (Mood, 1975, p. 94)

Memories are woven throughout this study. They are tightly intertwined into the fabric of the experiences that have been presented in this phenomenological exploration. My memories and those of "My Perfect Ten" are called upon again and again. "The mansions of memory are many" (Casey, 1987/2009, p. x). They are key entry points into the lived experiences that are featured throughout this study. They flow through the bloodlines of what it is to embody and feel what it is to be an African-American low-income student within an elite HBCU context. When persons engage in research they often ignore the very thing they are supposed to study in the first place (van Manen, 2007). This memory called to me for a reason. It reminds me that it is critical to pause and take notice. As I move forward in this phenomenological study to impart pedagogical insights so that I may call others to action, I cannot afford to ignore any signs that spark from the flames of everyday life that surround me.

Pausing In The Present

> Human life needs knowledge, reflection, and thought to make itself knowable to itself, including its complex and ultimately mysterious nature. (van Manen, 2007, p. 17)

Now that I am at the "end" of my phenomenological journey, I pause in the present simply to rejoice. Rejoice derives from the Old French *rejoiss* meaning "to enjoy the possession of" and to "have the fruition of." I am in the possession of myriad stories that convey the experience of being a low-income African-American at an elite HBCU. I also feel immense gladness. I rejoice. Why?

Rejoice

If the things you do are not pleasing you
It's time to take another hard point of view
You take the things you've learned
All that you know are real
And what you feel is your first concern
Make the sacrifice and make it right
Rejoice

Rejoice in the things you know are right
You better rejoice
Make you feel real good inside

There may be times oh when you're in doubt
About the way, and just how to work it all out
You'll find the things you seek are within your reach
Your mind conceives it, your heart believes it
Now that you've sacrificed and you've paid the price to make a better way in your life
today
Rejoice
You can see the light, yes you can
Rejoice
(Hutchinson, Henderson, & Evans, 1977, Track 9)

One of the main reasons that I rejoice in this portion of my journey is that I know that while here the story may "end" it also begins again. "One is not meant to find finality in hermeneutic phenomenological understanding" (Monahan-Kreishman, 2012, p. 361). Together with "My Perfect Ten," we waded through the dense and intense undercurrents that lie amongst the waters of social class that are present within elite

HBCU contexts. As we waded we had genuine conversations that revealed who we are today and who we were in college.

Now I am faced with presenting pedagogical insights—to bring into fruition the "what" and "why" of my study. Some would perceive this as an intimidating task—but, again I rejoice. I am glad as I ask: What does it all *mean*? How shall this study impact higher education? Will the meaning that I hope to bestow impact others to be called to action, to think, and to wonder? I sought phenomenology to convey a particular experience. Now, in my state of rejoicing I use this chapter to impart infinite possibilities. *Now that you've sacrificed and you've paid the price to make a better way...Rejoice!*

Seeking Direction In The "End"

While doing the work of hermeneutic phenomenology I have had to be in tune constantly with those intimate spaces and places that lie in my being. I am always "on." This relentless state of reflection pulls me in myriad directions. When we decide to engage hermeneutic phenomenology we are gifted with countless sources of scholarly inspiration that lie in our everyday existence. Phenomenologists are well aware that their phenomena live and breathe in the very world where we all exist. "Throughout every book, article or poem read, every movie, documentary or television show viewed, every song, statement or conversation listened to, I wondered…" (Gamble, 2014, p. 248). Gamble aptly describes key aspects of the phenomenological process. I have combed through articles, watched movies, listened to music, and wondered what it all means—all the while deeply engaging the lives of my co-researchers. These research acts have brought me here to a fortuitous "closing."

As in poetry, it is inappropriate to ask for a conclusion or a summary of a phenomenological study. To summarize a poem in order to present the result would destroy the result because the poem itself is the result. The poem is the thing. So phenomenology, not unlike poetry, is a poetizing project…. Poetizing is thinking on original experience and is thus speaking in a more primal sense. Language that authentically speaks the world rather than abstractly speaking of it is a language that reverberates the world. (p. 13)

Van Manen (1997) expresses that the "closing" of a phenomenological exploration is not an "end;" rather, it is an opening. An attempt to simply "sum it up" is futile. That is not the purpose. "In the closing there are openings, and from those openings, further openings. This is the crux of hermeneutic phenomenology" (Monahan-Kreishman, 2012, p. 363).

At this point I still wonder. From whence have I come? What was learned along the way? Though I am critical, does my love for HBCUs shine in this work? Have I done justice to the stories of "My Perfect Ten?" Will others seek and wonder about elite HBCUs and the students who are chosen to inhabit their sacred and hollowed grounds? Phenomenology has the unique ability as a methodology to call the reader into the chosen texts and draw them to then feel and experience the phenomenon of pursuit firsthand (van Manen, 2007).

I pursued this study because I knew that there was a need for the layers of Black skin to be peeled back to reveal the raw nerves of resilience and pain that exist within higher education contexts. While this chapter signals a "closing," it is also meant to call others to action so that that they not only reflect, but think, and continue to question.

Moving Beyond Self: (Re)Addressing The Power Of Phenomenology

This process has forever changed me. My scholarly identity has endured many

alterations. Van Manen (2007) contends that during the hermeneutic phenomenological

writing process the researcher experiences a deeply personal transformation:

> Phenomenological projects and their methods often have a transformative effect
> on the researcher himself or herself. Indeed, phenomenological research is often
> itself a form of deep learning, leading to transformation of consciousness,
> heightened perceptiveness, increased thoughtfulness and tact, and so on. (p. 163)

Prior to engaging in this study I was a "selfish" and "unfeeling" researcher. I

would go into projects and "take" from my participants. These self-centered acts were

most often displayed when I completed interviews. During interviews I would have lists

of questions and was determined to get through each and every one of them—without

deviation. If those who I was engaging would stray from my "script," I would become

frustrated. I also became irritated when my participants would challenge me or ask

questions. I would think, "Why are they asking me questions? That is my job." I had a

very limited scope of what it was to engage others in the research process. I now realize

that for some reason I was unable to see the humanity in the people I believed I cared so

deeply for. I also was unaware of the potential for research experiences to be mutually

beneficial in nature. Why?

I now recognize that I deemed the oppressed individuals that I often chose to

study as mere "data points." Their only use was to provide useful information so that I

could quickly move on to the next research act. How can one can gain trust or fully

engage with oppressed communities if the research process is defiled by power

dynamics? I now see the research process as a platform of immense privilege. In my

previous efforts to give voice to those who have been suppressed, repressed, and

oppressed, I was replicating these very acts in my attempts to "free" their stories. This was an empty existence.

I am forever thankful for phenomenology as a method. I have reached new understandings. This methodology has shown me that research acts can be care(ful) and used to explore the humanness of being in the world. Engaging in critical qualitative research is to "uncover meanings in everyday practice in such a way that they are not destroyed, distorted, decontextualized, trivialized, or sentimentalized" (Benner, 1985, p. 6). I am now fully aware that scholarly inquiry can be a reciprocal relationship between both the *researcher* and the *researched* (Bergum, 1991). When we seek to understand and make meaning of the lived experiences for those whom we care about we no longer take for granted how we live our daily lives. This chapter also shows how my phenomenological exploration has provided me with additional substantive understandings

As I reflect on those aspects of my life that brought me to pose the question: **What are the lived experiences of class for low-income African-American students at elite HBCUs?**, I am aware now more than ever that I have changed.

<div align="center">

I am Changing

Look at me
Look at me

I am Changing

I'm trying
To find a way
to understand

I am changing
Seeing everything so clear

</div>

Who said I could do it all alone?
How many dark nights have I known?

Walking down that long road
There was nothing I could find
All these years of darkness
Can make a person blind
But now I can see
(Eyen & Krieger, 1982, Track 13)

"I Am Changing" is a song that is performed in the second act of the famous Broadway

musical "Dreamgirls." It is sung by the character Effie White. This song and its

powerful lyrics reveal a story of change, clarity, and a yearning for a new start. I have

felt these same emotions throughout my phenomenological journey. During my scholarly

transformation I, too, have questioned and sought clarity. I still do.

> I have learned that to continue to "live" the questions we seek answers to means keeping up the search for understanding, constantly questioning what is taken as secure, accepting the fact that there is still more to learn, and searching for another view of the complex reality of living, which may open further depths of questioning and understanding. (Bergum, 1991, p. 69)

I continue to "live" the questions that I have and shall raise in the future about

HBCU communities. I am claimed by my research trajectory that focuses on the

contemporary placement of historically Black colleges and universities. My work

underscores and highlights the understudied facets of HBCU communities, including

issues surrounding not only social class, but race, and student sexuality. As an HBCU

alum and advocate for minority serving institutions (MSIs) I am now able both to care

about and critique these institutions. My engagement with phenomenology gave me the

courage to awaken and summon the strength to continue pursuing these "untouched"

topics.

My identity as an HBCU researcher will undoubtedly continue to evolve. I now have the courage to continue to question and confront how higher education and the larger society views HBCUs and the students who choose to attend these schools: Why must Black students defend their choices to attend an HBCU to the majority and their own communities? How can HBCU communities best serve their students? What truly lies beneath the surface of these historic institutions? I am excited to unveil even more untold stories. Completing this study has also influenced my professional endeavors. As a higher education professional at an elite institution, I now make decisions about the welfare of students who have oppressed identities. I make it my foremost goal to make sure that these students are not overlooked.

In Chapter Two I made it known that I found solace in phenomenology because it was a conduit for me to become *dangerously close* to the phenomenon that I chose to pursue. Bergum (1991) offers additional insight into what this entails:

> This kind of involvement does not allow detachment. That is, I, as researcher, cannot place myself outside the problem I formulate. For me, the posing of the question was not something I had to search out. It came from my life. (p. 57)

I do not have to apologize for or note as a limitation the fact I once lived the experience that I have chosen to study. This critical piece is not a crutch, but has given me a sense of scholarly freedom. It has been empowering. I find it rather ironic that before I began this journey that I truly believed that I was alone—that I was the only one who had encountered such intense social class interactions during their years spent at an elite HBCU.

Phenomenological research often begins as a project of *self*, but the range of this work extends to others. I made the bold choice to explore and (un)cover the stories of

African-American low-income students who chose to attend elite HBCUs. My deliberate decision drew me to each and every individual who comprises "My Perfect Ten." During my conversations with those who were "like" me, together we entered into a collective. I truly believe that now we have new self-awareness and perhaps know even more where we stood and now stand in our lives and place(s)—as Black people who have and perhaps still dwell in "elite" spaces. Because of this, I rejoice more than ever. This is the power of phenomenology.

Moving forward I am eager to once again call upon the experiences of "My Perfect Ten" to address the insights their experiences call forth. I use their narratives to show more deeply what it is like to be an African-American low-income student at an elite HBCU. These experiences should these institutions to consider changes that would enrich the experiences of these students during their times at elite HBCUs.

"Going There"

You know with my generation and the elders of our generation people didn't talk about the experiences that haunted them or that were disturbing…They were left unsaid. So there are a lot of mysteries within African-American society…We don't know a lot of the stories that have happened because of the fact that people don't talk about everything…(Williams, 2014)

I open this section with a quote from Vanessa Williams. It is taken from an appearance she made on the television show *Oprah's Master Class*. I was in awe as I watched her recount her life. She spoke of becoming the first African-American woman to be crowned Miss America. Her reign was marred by controversy, yet she was resilient and able to overcome these challenges and eventually rose to superstardom in music, film, television, and even grace the stages of Broadway. She owned and told her story

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with an unapologetic boldness: *"If I do not tell my story…if we do not tell our stories then who else will do it?"*

Vanessa Williams felt that her voice should be heard because so many before her had chosen, or were forced, to silence theirs. In this instance she owned her privileged platform. In essence she removed her veneer—a mask that she could have used to conceal and hide behind. She sought to rise above and show what laid beneath a "tarnished" crown and myriad accolades. Why is it that my community chooses to keep *some* stories of our past hidden? Williams' story struck a chord with me because she went "there." Where or what is "there?"

"There" is a metaphor that has been placed before me many times during this phenomenological exploration. I mentioned in Chapter Two that I have been warned about doing this work. *Oh Steve, don't go there…Steve, are you sure you wanna go there?* These warnings once caused anxiety, but I pushed forward. I went "there" not only for "My Perfect Ten" but for myself. In one of the final sentences of her book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston (1937/2000) writes, "You have to go there to know there" (p. 193). Phenomenology freed me so that I was able to go "there." In the "there" of this phenomenon, I now call others to go those spaces that may cause anxiety or discomfort, for it is in *those* places that narratives that are often "othered' are uncovered and brought to light.

During the 15th century *there* meant "about that place." I have and still dwell in the "there" of this study. I have sought to gain meaning *about that place*—and those spaces. I went *there* by choice. In going *there* I have visited both the uncomfortable and joyous spaces that live and breathe in this work. I needed to do this to create yet another

place for future scholarly inquiry exploring social class and how it impacts African-American students and HBCUs.

> Class is a very uncomfortable topic for all Americans and it's especially uncomfortable for Black Americans. It's offensive to some people to think that there is a class structure in Black America. I think that's probably rooted in the fact that minorities who have been oppressed in America do not ever want to be perceived as oppressive. (Alvarez & Kolker, 2001)

Black social class issues have remained untouched by many higher education scholars. I still wonder why. A one sided master-narrative *is* present, but another view *must* continue to be asserted to paint a holistic picture of contemporary HBCU student experiences. Who else could benefit from exposure to the experiences of low-income African-American students who are present in elite HBCU environments? How can the field of higher education be impacted by these narratives? Further insight was necessary to expose the untold stories of these distinct higher education contexts and the hidden stories of those who have and still do dwell in these places. Again, *you have to go there to know there.* The following "theres" continue to call for our attention as Black social class issues are addressed, particularly in elite HBCU contexts. I have sought inspiration from the past and present to make it known that what has been silenced and hidden due to fear and shame can be made free to impart new directions for the academy.

Beyond "The Book"

In Chapter One, I revealed that one of the reasons I *turned* and became enthralled with Black intra-racial class differences on elite HBCU campuses was due to my intrigue with Lawrence Otis Graham's work *Our Kind Of People*—"The Book." He contributed to what is now over a century of discussion and discourse that has focused on issues of

race and class within Black communities. What is ironic is that there was mention of

"The Book" from one of my co-researchers Alonzo. He expresses:

> Pick up a copy of *Our Kind of People* ASAP! It is required reading. So much
> will be uncovered. If you can digest this information during your first semester at
> Howard, you will see things in a new light.

While I and others were called by "The Book," I had to go beyond Graham's work to

further extend this discourse. I have drawn from several seminal pieces that focus on

Black social class, including Du Bois' (1899) *The Philadelphia Negro* and Fraziers'

(1957) *Black Bourgeoisie*. This scholarship has aided me greatly in providing context for

my phenomenon, but this body of work focuses on elite African-American communities.

Important voices were missing, those that resembled my co-researchers.

I have gone beyond "The Book" to convey that the scholarship that addresses

African-American experiences in higher education has been limited because these

students are often depicted as a monolithic group (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Shields,

2008). As a result, portrayals of a universal Black student experience now dominate the

discourse and present imbalanced accounts of how African-American students navigate

higher education environments as a whole (Celious & Oyserman, 2001; Harper &

Nichols, 2008). Research on HBCU undergraduate experiences has also been deficient

due to the aforementioned; however, contemporary scholarship has begun to confront

how intersecting social identities such as gender, religious, and sexual identities affect

student collegiate experiences (Harper & Gasman, 2008; Patton, 2011; Patton &

Simmons, 2008). Yes, there are emerging views within HBCU studies that highlight

intra-racial differences within African-American communities (Harper & Gasman, 2008;

Patton, 2011; Patton & Simmons, 2008; Strayhorn, 2010), but this literature is scant.

These studies also have not explored the influence that social class difference has on HBCU students.

"Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being Black...This meaning is not without interest to you, gentle reader" (Du Bois, 1903/2003, p. 5). When Du Bois wrote "gentle reader" he was being more than rhetorical. For *Du Bois' reader* there was once a presumption that Whites held a lack of interest in Black existence; he alerts, challenges and calls them forth to engage (in Gordon, 2000). "The Black subject to interpretation becomes a designation that could be held by different groups at different times" (Gordon, 2000, p. 63). Who are *my* "gentle readers?" I have many—they include several facets of African-American communities, the field of higher education, and the broader societal context.

I have provided my "gentle readers" with some unspoken understandings and given voice to those who have been previously silenced. This study shows that Black intra-racial social class interactions have myriad manifestations. Class identity within Black communities is complex and can also be confusing. Black social class identities lie on a spectrum that is highly subjective and nuanced. These class differences are made apparent in speech, dress, behavior, and how my people view and treat each other. These mores that are apparent in the broader societal context bleed over into elite HBCU environments. "My Perfect Ten" felt their differences amongst their own. Their identities were constantly challenged and they were forced to make hard choices during their crucial developmental years within a collegiate context—to conform, challenge the system, or both.

This study shows that Black social class is a complex interplay between status and economic standing. Neither are mutually exclusive.

> Despite the wealth of new research on Black colleges, there are topics that remain *untouched*...Some of these topics have remained off-limits because of their sensitivity and potential for controversy within the African-American and majority communities. (Gasman & Tudico, 2008, p. 5)

My humble aspiration is that this work will broaden the scope of conversations that researchers and practitioners will have these surrounding these topics. A considerable challenge when discussing Black social class issues is that there is no consensus that has been reached in either scholarly or popular literature on where Blacks in America lie on social class indices (Landry, 1987). This study takes on this challenge, and it also summons educational communities to engage the topics presented in this work. What are some of the conversations that can be had as a result of this work?

Elite HBCU communities must introduce discourse surrounding their cultures to students, faculty, and staff that promote inclusion for all. Hard questions must be asked: What is the mission of elite HBCUs today? What do the stories of "My Perfect Ten" suggest? What standards do our dress codes promote? Can all students afford the opulent lifestyles that are promoted in these contexts? How can we bring all of our students together so that no one is alienated due to their backgrounds? These are starting points not only for HBCU communities but higher education as a whole.

This phenomenological exploration opens a door that was once closed. It provides exposure to the (un)known and allows us to question prior notions of Black identity. This work makes bold declarations and releases what has been deemed taboo within Black communities. I truly open "Pandora's Box" and unleash the notions of Class-passing, complex Black identities, and other secrets that have been hidden away in

history. Though I was scared, I had to go "*there.*" "There" is a place of perpetual

(re)turn.

"It's Just Like Water": Perpetual (Re)Turn

Water

Moving down the streams of my lifetime
Pulls the fascination in my sleeve
Cooling off the fire of my longing
Boiling off my cold in the heat
Melting down the walls of inhibition
Evaporating all of my fears
Baptizing me into complete submission
Dissolving my condition

It's just like the water
I ain't felt this way in years
It's just like the water
I ain't felt this way in years

Cleaning me
It's purging me
And moving me around
It's bathing me
And it's claiming me
And moving me around
Around and around and around
And around
Watching me, claiming me
Moving me around
It's purging me
It's been cleaning me
And moving me around
And around
(Hill, 2002, Track 10)

The tides and undercurrents that lie among the *waters* of social class at elite

HBCUs are many. These waters reveal intense interactions with identity, class-passing,

feelings of alienation, and even strained familial relationships. The waters of social class

also expose that identities and structural inequalities that include race and class are far

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from absolute; they shift, are socially and historically constructed, and are enacted across time and myriad contexts in different manners for different individuals (Archer, 2005). The narratives and experiences presented in this phenomenological exploration are dense and intense, but have allowed me to bring forth the lived experiences of low-income African-Americans who have experienced difference amongst their own within unique higher education environments. In a song titled "Water," Lauryn Hill describes her intense relationship with the *waters* that were present within her life. These "waters" cleansed, purged, watched, and claimed her as she continually faced her present and her past. The same is true for "My Perfect Ten." *"Moving down the streams of my lifetime…pulls the fascination in my sleeve…"*

While my co-researchers have all departed from their elite HBCU contexts, it must be noted that they *still* face the multifaceted issues that lie in the waters of social class even after graduation. *"It's purging me…"*

> What's funny is that I had already begun the work that you wanted before you approached me. I had to talk through my past with a professional…It was a lot. There is no way that I would have been able to participate in this project if I had not dealt with my past....After Howard I found that I was still overcompensating. I feel like I'm at a place now where it doesn't…it doesn't affect me like it used to. There comes a time when you have to acknowledge your insecurities, your background and how those things affect how you view everything else…(Nia)

The waters of social class continuously magnify, reveal and sometimes (re)veil what once was and is often hidden and forbidden. Like Nia, my other co-researchers made it clear that they all continue to grapple with their social class differences in the present. Their feelings of difference did not cease once they graduated and attained their "tickets to the middle-class." Again, the journeys that I have presented do not have a definitive ending. "My Perfect Ten" are individuals who still process and seek to understand who they are.

They find that they (re)turn to social class again and again—they always wonder where they stand:

> I remember when I graduated from Law school and I thought, how did I make it here? I know that I am very blessed but, these feelings become intense each time I move further and further away from what I once was. I never want to forget where I came from. I always remember my past. It is always with me. (Summer)

> I have made hard choices…I do not regret them, but, I am reminded of them daily. Sometimes, I wish I could lean on my family but they now look to me for support. I was the smart one and they always let me know that. I just wish…I just wish that they knew how hard it is for me in life now..I have accomplished a lot but I am also reminded of where I came from over and over again…(Alonzo)

Summer and Alonzo's quotes further convey what it is to *perpetually return* to social class. With each professional milestone or even interactions with family, my co-researchers are reminded that they are now different. They are well aware that they belong to two worlds—their old and their new. Can these existences ever be reconciled? Each of my co-researchers encountered transformative experiences during their times at their elite HBCUs. Their professional and personal lives after graduation also reflect these changes and how they make meaning of their "new" lives.

<div align="center">

In The Present

In the present I am *new*
Where I came from *should* be in the past
But
It is not

I am *always* reminded
I remember
Urban blight
Friends who were killed
Rural poverty
Immense struggle

But
I was told I was *different*

</div>

Was I?
Am I?

Now
I am an attorney, a doctor, I may even have a PhD
I have high tea in Kensington Park
I am a now a Jack and Jill mother

Am I now one of *them*?
Am I now *good*?
Is all the "bad" now gone?
No

I *still* remember
Everyday
I remember
(Mobley, 2014)

"How often must we…confront ourselves in our past" (Angelou, 1994, p. 116).

Like Maya Angelou I, too, wonder the same. In our lives we may often have to confront

our pasts in our present so that we can continue to grow. These incessant confrontations

may be embedded with fear. This fear must be recognized and acknowledged. Many of

"My Perfect Ten" still wonder who am I *now*? They question themselves and everyone

around them. Society's mirror is ever-present and contributes to how low-income

students choose to engage the two worlds in which they live even after graduation. Their

present and pasts collide again and again.

How do we reconcile the fact that we are a result of everything that we have

endured and all we have persevered through? The waters still reveal. "*It's claiming

me…And moving me around…*" What can we learn from these students? Nicole and Nia

make it known that there is a *perpetual* (re)turn to the past for those like them. Perpetual

arrives in the English language from the mid-14th century "perpetual" meaning "without

end." The Medieval Latin *perpetuus* means "continuous." Finally, the Old Latin *perpes*

a root of the word *petere* means "lasting; to seek." These perpetual (re)turns are

moments for my co-researchers that reveal a continuous seeking and reconciling of self.

These instances are incessant, unyielding, and seem to be without an *end*. Why? Casey

(1987/2009) underscores this revelation:

> It is an inescapable fact about human existence that we are what we remember
> ourselves to be. We cannot dissociate the remembering of our personal past from
> our present self-identity. (p. 290)

Casey advises that continual (re)turn brings the reality that one *shall* and *will*

always view aspects of themselves in the magnified lenses of their oppressed identities.

One's reality is a constant knowing of historicality. "My Perfect Ten" always question

where they have stood and now stand on the Black class spectrum—these feelings are

alive and well in their memories. Indeed, all of these ways of knowing inform who they

are now.

Evoking A *"New"* Counter-story

> The use of a master narrative to represent a group is bound to provide a very
> narrow depiction of what it means to be Mexican-American, African-American,
> White...A master narrative essentializes and wipes out the complexities and
> richness of a group's cultural life...A monovocal account will engender not only
> stereotyping but also curricular choices that result in representations in which
> fellow members of a group represented cannot recognize themselves.
> (Montecinos, 1995, pp. 293-294)

Counter-storytelling has been enacted within educational research as a method to

free the voices of people of color to enact change within K-12 and higher education

spaces. Derrick Bell (1987; 1992) and Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define this

qualitative entry as a method to convey the stories of people of color who are often

overlooked and dismissed within scholarly inquiry. It is also "a means by which to

examine, critique, and counter majoritarian stories (or master narratives) composed about

people of color" (Harper, 2009, p. 701). There is immense utility in this method, but I am now forced to take the notion of a Critical Race Theory (CRT) counter-story to another level—a phenomenological level.

It appears that CRT counter-stories are *sought* out as a means to unravel the *master narrative* and to "expose deficit-informed research that silences and distorts [the] epistemologies of people of color" (Harper, 2009, p. 702). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) contend that researchers often frame their scholarship under the façade of "objective" research, and as a result actually *still* objectify and uphold the oppressive notions that are held about those who they choose to study. In seeking deeper understanding of what it means to deliver a counter-story, I wonder if critical theorists and previous researchers have played out the same acts that they so adamantly stand against. This manner of scholarly entry has placed theory *before* and *on* the lives they sought to (un)cover. Harper (2009) expresses:

> Data collected from persons of color are juxtaposed with research published about them by others to identify contradistinctions and offer insights into overlooked experiential realities. Additionally, to qualify as a counter-narrative, various elements of critical race theory must be incorporated. (p. 702)

In CRT counter-stories, conversations are referred to as "data" and then "voices" are "qualified" within theory. Do these research acts truly *free* oppressed voices that have already been restricted in a world where they are constantly "judged," even though this research is done with good intentions? Free from the "standards" that derive from an objectivist paradigm, phenomenological stories are brought forth that are not bound by the theories that sanction rules and certain benchmarks to qualify a story as "correct."

The powerful narratives of "My Perfect Ten" show that elite college contexts, social class, and HBCU communities are all formidable forces within higher education.

Previous definitions about the "isms" that plague our everyday, are featured within this study and include classism and racism. Their presence is not for me to even *try* to define further. Rather, I include these notions and acknowledge them as integral conduits that lead to the voices. Previous definitions are not *the* standard.

I do not dismiss the work that has been completed prior to my scholarly engagement, but what I must reveal is that in this phenomenological endeavor I was led and able to achieve a similar goal of my phenomenological predecessors. I fought the lure of "defintionsim." Eddy (2008) expresses:

> What do I mean by definitionism? Definitionism is the antithesis of ontological freedom. To be defined is to be confined. Escaping definitionism is [a] knowing not externally defined by others. It is to move toward an authentic self...(pp. 204-205)

Free from the convoluted and dense definitions that were and are placed upon Black communities, the counter-stories of "My Perfect Ten" materialized in a phenomenological space free from what has already been defined. How do counter-stories empower others?

Roman's story emerged in this space. In his letter writing activity he had a critical remembrance that was rather telling and provided tremendous insight into what "graduation day" may mean for a low-income student:

> Graduation Day will be a meaningful day at Hampton, it is always held on Mother's Day. During your senior year your Mom's health will begin to deteriorate quickly. She will be on dialysis three days a week and have extensive stays in the hospital. You will visit her the week before graduation and remind her that she has to be strong and get better for graduation. She will be released from the hospital two days before graduation and your mentor ("John") will get a driver to escort her there.

> Graduation day will be emotional. As you march through the campus and into the stadium, you will see your Mom in her wheelchair and begin to cry. Your best friend will say: "Man, you're crying and we haven't started yet". If only he knew

> the emotion you will feel seeing our mother's BIGGEST dream come true. When you walk across the stage as President of the Sports Management department and also having the highest GPA in your major, you will be greeted by your freshman English professor (Ms. Banks). She will hug you tightly and say "You made it and I knew you had so much potential – there was a reason I was so hard on you." You will give her our diploma, hat, and honors cords. Remember to tell her "I love you and Happy Mother's Day."

Is Roman's story a counter-story? Did he not communicate an alternate truth? It may not be tied to CRT, but it does stand in the face of the scholarly work that has previously relegated Black low-income families to places in the margins that have portrayed them as unsupportive and subversive. What does his story show to elite HBCU communities? How would Roman's affluent peers be impacted by his recollection?

HBCUs have been deemed as supportive and inclusive spaces for Black students, but, more can be done at elite HBCU environments. Roman's story is one of hope and is complex. There is power in his story, those of "My Perfect Ten," and many other low-income African-American students who dwell at elite HBCUs. These students often choose to blend into the dominant cultures of their schools, and with these choices come sacrifices. I truly believe that if the more affluent HBCU students became aware of the stories of their peers who are different from them then a mutual understanding could be reached. Perhaps the affluent students on these campuses would not be active players of change if they knew the effects. This exposure would be crucial to the shift that should be reached on elite HBCU campuses for contemporary change to occur. Low-income students could be freed from the shame of their social class status if their peers were much more aware of their hidden stories.

This particular account further uncovers the "ordinary." It marked a beginning of a *new* existence that Roman often challenged while still acknowledging his formidable

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past. His graduation marked a new beginning for himself and his mother. What does this mean? A dream was realized for both of them. When low-income students attain degrees from elite Black institutions a statement is made. It is communicated to themselves and their families in myriad manners.

Here, in this study, Roman's "truth" is not exclusively embedded in a previous theory or alarming statistic. His counter-story like those of my other co-researchers is a leading and *not* a telling of what *could* be found. What does this mean for educational research as a whole? There are stories that live within us that do not have to be qualified by "definitionism" or absolute truths. These narratives can lead us to impact our fields further by enacting the scholarly freedom we all seek. Counter-stories are needed within educational research to confront dominant narratives that are privileged and accepted as the norm. The counter-stories that are inherent in this scholarship disclose the ways in which low-income African-American elite HBCU students respond to, resist, and challenge the obstacles that were inherent in their undergraduate experiences. "My Perfect Ten" are not theorized as passive victims of their social class positions, instead, I highlight how they navigated and negotiated various aspects of their elite HBCU cultures and were able to create "in-between" spaces amongst several competing dominant forces (Archer, 2005).

Opening the Doors That Lie Beyond The Campus Gates

> Identity is socially and culturally located in time and space and inflected by rejection, displacement and desire. [Student] choices are bound up with the expression and suppression of identities. (Ball, Macrae, & Maguire, 2013, p. 24)

The idea of extracting "the things themselves" from our everyday lives to point out experiences that are subtle, nuanced, or peculiar is a significant goal within

phenomenological research. A particular commitment is present. "I celebrate the notion that knowledge is legitimately located in the particular, even if the voice of the particular is often drowned out by the steady drumbeat of the many" (Brimhall-Vargas, 2011, p. 150). I have had to make it quite clear that this study features a specific experience that has been understudied in higher education scholarship. "It appears that scholars and higher education practitioners face an important but seldom asked question about naming higher education institutions (and experiences) and the consequences of (boldly) carrying out this act" (Hutcheson, 2008, p. 43). I was forced to *label* the students and the institutions that are featured in this study in a deliberate manner. Sensitive topics have been freed from the shadows so that I could open the door to new knowledge.

Any exploration of social class inequalities and educational environments must take into consideration that our social class identities are shaped by educational institutions and their pivotal roles in creating and perpetuating inequality (Archer, 2005). These inequalities are not stationary, nor are they easily revealed, but (re)created across time and place.

> Howard showed me a new world…what I wish I knew then was that I would have to face that world when I left…Use my story—our stories so that more people can learn and be exposed so people like us can be helped and encouraged. (Summer)

Towards the end of the final conversation that Summer and I engaged in, she was very candid in telling me that a responsibility came with being gifted with the stories of my co-researchers. I believe that she and others amongst "My Perfect Ten" gave me permission to use their stories to evoke a new understanding of Black intra-racial social class division from a perspective that has been silenced within the academy.

The "new" that is brought forth in this study brings the duty to impart insights and a different understanding that can be attained for all. I am very deliberate in the manner in which I show that social class identity, especially in Black communities, is reconstituted and asserted in complex manners within numerous structures that are deeply embedded within Black social division. We deem members of our community as "good" or "bad" and it appears that elite HBCU environments have made it a goal to rescue the "bad," individuals and save them. It is also shown that there is no universal Black "low-income identity," and as such, this work reveals a multitude of manners that my co-researchers actively resisted and embraced their elite HBCU contexts (Archer & Leathwood, 2005). Some were active participants in their change; others were passive participants, and others audaciously rejected the elitist norms that were present at these schools.

This study is timely because HBCU communities and their students are historically minority and carry traditions that are rich and proud, but they have been deemed as "less than" or unimportant in the broader societal context (Hutcheson, 2008). I feel and embody this complex tension; and again, I have been *called.*

<div align="center">

Hear My Call

Here I am again asking questions
Waiting to be moved
I am so unsure of my perception
What I thought I knew I don't seem to
Where is the turn so I can get back
(Scott & Hutson, 2011, Track 7)

</div>

What I find surprising is that as I dwell in the tension of my phenomenon I am still able to *hear my call*. Yes, I am often "unsure of my perception" and seek the "turn so I can get back." To get back where? Exactly, where has this phenomenon led me? I now

arrive beyond the gates of the elite HBCU campuses that are prominently featured in this

work to open another door that has been shut to what was once unfamiliar.

(Re)Opening The "Black Box"

> Stereotypes, which are often based on interactions with family, friends, and the media, allow individuals to quickly guide their interactions with others by both creating expectancies for a group member's behavior and giving them a basis for their interactions. (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 511)

On September 24, 2014 America was introduced to a *new* Black family: *The*

Johnsons. The television series *Black-ish* premiered to majority and Black audiences,

and similar to years past when Black television series that featured Black families

debuted, this sitcom was debated, heralded, and admonished. This is not a new

occurrence. Fictional depictions of Black life are put on display for consumption,

critique, and solace within television, music, cinema, and mass media. In 1974 there was

Good Times. In 1984 there was *The Cosby Show*[32], and in 2014 there was *Black-ish.*

During each of these ten year intervals Black communities were divided. Blacks deemed

Good Times too urban and poor. *The Cosby Show* was viewed as unrealistic and

bourgeois because the Black family portrayed was upper-middle class, and ironically

Black-ish has sparked contemporary debate and uproar because our society now

juxtaposes and attempts to compare it with the latter examples. Tracee Ellis-Ross, one of

the stars of *Black-ish* imparts:

> [Black identity] means a lot of things…basically, we are expanding the idea of what it means to be Black. It is not a monolithic experience…and it has to do more with cultural identity and the legacy of identity and things of that nature, as opposed to an identity based on just your skin color…(Ellis-Ross, 2015)

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[32] While there is controversy that now surrounds the creator of *The Cosby Show (Bill Cosby)* due to claims of alleged rape allegations it in no way takes away from the legacy that the show has established in television history and within the broader American societal context.

The central questions that accompany these fictional Black models is that both

Black and majority communities have and continue to debate "what is Black," or rather

"what *should* be deemed as *Black"* within the American societal context. These same

questions are pervasive within previous educational scholarship. Researchers have

constantly attempted to define and (re)define Black communities. These individuals who

thrive, dwell, and exist within their oppressed identities are often placed into a "Black

Box." Why is there a need to pinpoint and demarcate Black people?

The "Black Box" has been used to relegate Blacks and has pushed many Black

communities to the margins of society and educational research. The "Black Box" is

wrapped tightly in judgments and stereotypes from both Black *and* White communities.

It is also re-opened again and again and *again.* I now do the same. "The Black Box"

must now be re-opened within this study. *This* phenomenological exploration confronts

the mainstream notions of heterogeneity that are held by both Black communities and

those within the majority.

> There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives. Indigenous identities, much like other identities, simply cannot be separated out in this simplistic way. (Lorde, 1987/2007, p. 138)

During my attempts to "unpack" Black identity and social class, I have often had

to reach back into history to call upon remnants of the past to inform the present. The

historical and contemporary depictions that are prominently underscored in this work

show that identity, *especially* Black identity, is deeply rooted in the light and the dark of a

tumultuous past, but it has also evolved. *Still,* what can be learned?

Monolithic depictions of any oppressed community must be confronted and

challenged to shed light on the nuances and complexities that lie within their members.

To not acknowledge their extraordinary distinctions is disrespectful of the past, negligent in the present, and an injustice for the future. As educational researchers who study marginalized populations in myriad spaces we should seek to dismantle and disrupt prior narratives to bestow new insight. A foremost goal of mine in this work is exposure.

With my revelations, I have needed to reiterate that there *are* elite Black contexts that lie on the HBCU higher education spectrum. There are also both affluent and poor students at *these* schools, and they interact in myriad manners. In order to release the tensions that are inherent in our differences we must first acknowledge them. There is not one Black community, rather, there are communities. We embody rich differences and each personifies intricate details of race and class. This study shows that there is a Black intra-racial hierarchy and unfortunately we "other" those who share our skin. This has been key to confess. Are there other confessions in this work?

What happens when we confess the hurt and scorn that has occurred in the past within higher education environments? Who has been forced to change? Who has been pushed out? *This* questioning emancipates and delivers, because far too many college students have and continue to suffer in silence.

> Before we can begin to study the Negro intelligently, we must realize definitely that not is he affected by all the varying social forces that act on any nation at his stage of advancement, but that in addition to these there is reacting upon him the mighty power of a peculiar and unusual social environment which affects to some extent every other social force. In the second place we should seek to know and measure carefully all the forces and conditions that go to make up these different problems, to trace the historical development of these conditions, and discover as far as possible the probable trend of further development. Without doubt this would be difficult work...(Du Bois, 1898, p. 7)

Du Bois' essay (1898), *The Study of the Negro Problems*, makes it known that Blacks encounter myriad social forces. What are these forces? He expresses that

there are myriad social problems that confront Black communities within the American

societal context and that they must be unpacked and called out so that changes can occur

within both Black communities and the majority. He also notes "reaction." What is this

reaction? Who reacts to whom? Intense power dynamics are at play on elite HBCU

campuses that stem from racial and class identities—these factors permeate Black

existence. I bring these "peculiar" and "unusual" musings to the forefront of this work.

Black communities are forced constantly to negotiate how they respond to their

"difference" from their own communities and the majority. Thus, I have raised many

questions in this study. What lies beneath Black intra-racial differences? How do we

confront our complexities? I have attempted to answer these questions. Answers are

provided, but, still there is more. And again, I must go there!

Unpacking "The Search" Through Conversation

Searching
Looking round for the warmth of the light
There was fog
So I guess no one saw me arriving

I was tired for some time
Then my light hit a welcoming sign
And said if you're alone
You can make this your home
If you want to

I haven't got a lot
But play the part
Like a child couldn't quite understand
What was I doing there?
Far away from nowhere, on my own

I was searching
Searching
For so long
Searching

Searching, searching
I just can't believe it
I'm dreaming
(Malavasi & Slade, 1980, Track 5)

In a song titled "Searching," Luther Vandross explains that he was in search for a different home. He would not be ready for the new place he eventually found—or did it find him? He was insecure. *"I haven't got a lot…But play the part"* Though he did not understand this new place, he knew that he had sought it out and was still full of wonder. *"Searching, searching...I just can't believe it…I'm dreaming."* My co-researchers felt these same feelings once they arrived at their respective elite HBCU campuses. I now wonder if "My Perfect Ten" could have been given some preliminary guidance as they searched for their new elite homes. Would they have been better served? Could their feelings of "culture-shock" somehow been avoided?

When students engage in the college choice process they encounter a critical stage of their higher education journeys. As high-school students "search" for colleges, they are usually advised to accumulate a vast amount of information so that they are then able to compose a list of schools to which they wish to apply (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). Previous studies state that community involvement has been noted to be a significant piece of the college search process for Black students. The literature highlighting how Black students participate in college choice processes reveals that extended familial structures, friends, and community members play large roles in the lives of Black students, and their presences are felt as these students begin to engage the thought of attending college (Bergerson, 2009; Squire & Mobley, 2015). "Involvement from community members and organizations, in addition to parents, was particularly salient for

African American students who decided to pursue higher education at an HBCU" (Squire & Mobley, 2015, p. 3).

The collective community involvement that is enacted when Black students decide to attend HBCUs, especially elite HBCU contexts, needs to involve deliberate and focused conversations about intra-racial social class differences prior to attendance. Recently, I spoke with a friend of mine who has been a college counselor for ten years. I wanted to know how she engages low-income students who seek to attend elite HBCUs. "Taraji" explains:

> When I first started in this profession I was scared to have "real" conversations with my students about what they would face at "those" places…But, then I grew tired of seeing so many of my kids come home…The students that I have sent to elite HBCUs do not come home because of money, they come back because they do not feel comfortable…These kids need to know that going to a Hampton or a Morehouse they will encounter a whole 'nother [sic] level of Black folk…Now, I get everything out on the table. You can't just throw these kids into the fire and they not know the fire…This goes beyond their choice, I need them to stay…This is why I have the hard conversations before they leave home.

Taraji makes it known that genuine conversations with low-income students allows us to delve into the unknown. She also communicates that these interactions force students and educators to address their anxieties that make them uncomfortable. There is a reciprocity inherent in community conversations surrounding class. Both students and educators are allowed to reveal their concerns, vulnerabilities, and fears about embarking on a journey that involves matriculation at an elite HBCU. The reciprocal nature of this dialogue should not be ignored because concerns of the community itself are often met through collaboration (Hall & Brown-Thirston, 2011). We cannot keep critical conversations in the theoretical domain; critical conversations allow us to delve into the complexity of difference and enter the dark and murky waters of Black class differences

where experiences are uncertain and may be painful for all parties involved (Gamble, 2014*).*

The discourse that needs to occur surrounding Black intra-racial social class issues must begin once African-American low-income students decide to attend an elite HBCU. Should these conversations serve as warnings? A failure to receive adequate pre-college guidance can have several collateral consequences for low-income students. African-American low-income students should not be scared away from elite HBCU contexts, but they do need to be prepared. There is also a delicate balance that must be reached. The informant communities that are present in these students lives are not meant to be "dream-crushers" or "nay-sayers," but voices of reason are critical.

Topics surrounding the rules that are present at these schools, elite norms that are deemed as the standard, and even the hurt that low-income African-American students may experience should be brought into the open. Low-income students trust and depend on their school counselors, mentors, and families during the college choice process. A collective effort is made to ensure that the "right" college choice is made. Therefore, because these students depend heavily on their "fictive kin" it is unfair and negligent for their "families" to send them away to educational spaces that may be foreign to them and not have real and candid discussions surrounding what they will face during their undergraduate years at an elite HBCU. I still wonder, can these students ever be ready for what they will face?

The inherent issue of why conversations surrounding intra-racial social class differences are not often had with high-school students is due to fear of the problem. Who holds these fears? Is it the student, the families, or college counselors? Gadamer

(1960/2012) contends that beginning with the "problem" is often the issue itself. No longer can we ignore the issues that may arise on these campuses until after low-income African-American students arrive at their elite HBCU campuses. Instead, we must bring voice to these sensitive topics much earlier. "Internalizing inferiority, marginalization and invisibility is not something that can be solved overnight" (Gamble, 2014, p. 104). When we own and bring light to our issues, such recognition reveals that these problems do matter and must be addressed.

Facing Newfound Privilege: Can I Go Home Again?

> No one leaves his or her world without being transfixed by its roots, or with a vacuum for a soul. We carry with us the memory of many fabrics, self-soaked in our history, our culture; the reminiscence of something distant that suddenly stands out before us…lost in time and misunderstanding...(Freire, 1970/2008, p. 204)

Each of "My Perfect Ten" made the choice to leave his/her home communities and families to attend an elite HBCU. This is a decision that many face upon choosing to pursue higher education. However, for my co-researchers their "leaving" revealed more. While I have underscored significant moments that my co-researchers had with their loved ones during their undergraduate years, I now step back and look at the totality of this phenomenon. I am *still* reminded of each of their familial ties. Could they ever truly *be* with their families? Can they go "home" again? Just as each of them decided how they would engage their affluent peers, they made the *same* choices with their families— those that "knew" them before college.

Like myself, my co-researchers were not totally able to cease relationships with their families, nor did they want to. Familial units are formidable presences in the lives of African-American low-income students. African-American low-income students who

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attend elite HBCUs do not live their lives in vacuums. Kinship connections are considered, for some, points of refuge. For others, these familial ties cause anxiety and stress during their college years. What is quite telling is that in the present, there are strained relationships that are still being repaired. The transformation that low-income students endure and feel is also felt within their families.

Educators, researchers, and higher education communities must also realize that the families of low-income students who attend elite HBCUs also encounter change. They, too, are forced to adapt and know that the family member who *chose* to go beyond and achieve "The American Dream" is still their kin, but do they *know* them anymore? How do *they* feel? What are *their* responses? Mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers recognize the once familiar essences of their "chosen ones" but react in different manners:

Oh, you think you are better now?

I am glad you got out…

I do not understand you anymore…but, I love you…

This study shows that low-income African-American students who choose elite HBCU higher education environments encounter significant changes to their senses of self. As a result, their interactions with friends *and* family who still inhabit their "old" worlds are also forever altered (Baxter & Britton, 2001). The thorny issues that surround their oppressed social class identities confront these students the entire time they make their way towards graduation. These questions of self even linger as they face newfound educational privilege upon graduation. These conversations with themselves and their

families never end. Family members also question, and seek to reconcile the changes that

their college educated family members have undergone. Nicole expresses:

> I have recently had talks with my mother…her basically telling me that she
> developed an inferiority complex with me as her daughter. Yes, she wanted me to
> go to school but we were not ready for the changes… I had to really, really just
> think about myself and ways that I'd changed; things that I was given the fortune
> to experience and be exposed to in the exercises these conversations and the
> reflection activity that you gave us. I'm so thankful for that because it has put me
> in a better place…

Nicole went *there*. She reveals that the phenomenological meaning making

process reached *beyond* herself. Within this phenomenon, there is an unmistakable

connection between one's self and one's family. Families, institutions of higher

education, and home communities are formidable overlapping spheres of influence

(Epstein, 1995; 2001). Gadamer (1960/2012) further explains:

> Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we
> understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in
> which we live…. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the
> closed circuits of historical life. (p. 278)

During the early part of my professional career I worked extensively at non-profits that

were geared toward ensuring that first-generation minority students had the chance to

attend college. I found myself engaging in intense conversations with families who were

afraid to send their children away. I would often state, "If you allow your child to attain a

college degree they will break a cycle and your lives will forever change." I have not

fully understood those words until now. Will others?

What becomes of the family? How are they to react when they see significant

changes in their loved ones when they (re)turn and are different? There are mixed

messages that are apparent. Families are full of pride with knowing that their loved ones

will excel, but there is also fear that they will change into someone that they will no

longer recognize. These kinds of mixed messages from home and friends are challenging for low-income students.

Can elite HBCUs stand in this fortuitous gap and somehow circumvent the fear held by families who encounter considerable shifts that impact their familial dynamics? What should be done? Concerted programming should be put into place on elite HBCU campuses that include the families of low-income students. Yes, orientations are held for all, but focused spaces that are geared toward positioning low-income families to face these new environments and also welcome them into these spaces could serve to demystify elite contexts. The fear of the elite must be addressed. These initiatives should occur not only during first-year orientations but throughout the time that low-income students are away from their families and present on these campuses.

Bell hooks (1994) asserts that when low-income students "come home" that their awareness of class is reinforced over and over again in their efforts to remain close to their loved ones "who remain in materially underprivileged class positions" (p. 185). Upwardly mobile low-income individuals grapple with alienation and insecurities that stem from their pasts (Lubrano, 2004; Wentworth & Peterson, 2001). The families of these students also endure these struggles. Like my co-researchers their identities were also confronted, challenged, and brought to light.

Going Back Into The Dark: Confronting And Challenging Hegemony And Power

> Places teach us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy. Further, places make us: As occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped. (Gruenwald, 2003, p. 621)

> A dominant ideology is a controlling set of representations, beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions that are conveyed through a cultures intellectual

heritage, its popular culture, and its "common sense" understandings of the world represented in various forms...(Kreisberg, 1992, p. 16)

"Elite" is defined as "those who are the chosen ones of society." "Elitism" is the "advocacy of or reliance on the leadership and dominance of an elite." Where do "elitists" lie within these definitions? An "elitist" is a person who considers oneself a part of the elite and believes that society should be ruled or dominated by an elite. This is problematic.

This work questions and attempts to reconcile and reveal what is often deemed as "elite" within Black communities and specific HBCU contexts. The root of all of my questions stems from ideals and notions surrounding not "the elites" but their enactment of "elitism." What comes forth first, the "elites" or their elitist practices? The highly debated issues that surround Black social class differences are not that specific groups and entities have and are deemed elite; rather, the elitist practices that are used to divide are the troubling nuances that should be questioned. The intra-racial division is palpable. On *these* campuses, they manifest in expensive events (that one must attend), peer interactions, and the politics of respectability that are enacted on these campuses. No longer should these schools be left to endorse cultures and activities that perpetuate hegemonic power.

Elite colleges and universities are highly sought after by students and families due to their perceived long-lasting "benefits." The allure of attending an elite institution does not stem solely from the quality of their academic programs. "Social ties, extra-curricular opportunities, connections to alumni, and other experiences outside the classroom are invaluable aspects of the elite college" (Lee, 2013, p. 790). Many of my co-researchers were drawn to their respective elite HBCUs due to the aforementioned

facets; however, few were aware of the hidden "power" dynamics that come with being bestowed with these institutional "privileges." I do not question any of my co-researchers' choices to attend *these* schools. However, I do have a responsibility to confront and challenge the *power dynamics* that are deeply embedded in elite HBCU cultures—they touch *all* of the students who choose to attend these exclusive higher education environments. "Issues of identity are central to the differential ways in which middle-class and working-class people (are able to) negotiate educational systems" (Archer & Leathwood, 2005, p. 175). Education is a major vehicle of socialization—thus, it is a pivotal arena where dominant societal standards are introduced and re-enforced. "It is because of this central social function that schools have historically been contested sites for competing visions of the democratic and just society" (Kreisberg, 1992, p. xxii).

Considerable national attention has been given to the issues facing African-American students at PWIs, but the quality of life for students who are present within HBCU communities has virtually gone unnoticed (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006). The elite HBCU student experiences that are featured in this study, while distinct, provide a rare glimpse into the remainder of the schools that make up this sector of higher education. HBCUs are frequently characterized as highly conservative in nature, have often-times avoided challenges to the status quo, and are known to suppress student expression, sexual orientation, gender identity, freedom of speech, and life choices (Harper & Gasman, 2008; Patton, 2014). Have these acts been performed under the guise of these institutions highly touted ethos' of racial uplift? Do HBCUs enact the

same practices that we often criticize PWIs for? What exactly *are* the power dynamics

that come into play?

 *"*We often overlook our personal and pleasurable participation in power relations

that give form to the class character of higher education" (Slaughter, 1997, p. 18). Power

manifests in different ways on elite HBCU campuses. "Elite" standards are

communicated in overt and covert manners. Students are implicitly and explicitly told

who they should aspire to be and how they should act to achieve social acceptance. As I

highlight in Chapter Six, apparently there is a "right" and "wrong" way to be an

"acceptable" Black person, and these hidden and blatant lessons are imparted to the low-

income African-American students who are present within elite HBCU contexts. My co-

researchers were told:

> *You must speak to this person…*
>
> *Be sure to join this organization…*
>
> *Learn this…*
>
> *Know me…I am important…*

What is achieved? How should these students feel? What do these messages truly

communicate—especially when they come from your own?

 Power derives from the Latin *posse* meaning "to be able." The etymology of

power reveals a derivation that discloses "ability." Its roots divulge that "to be able to

fulfill one's desires does not necessarily imply that effectiveness can only occur as a

result of controlling or dominating others" (Kreisberg, 1992, p. 56). "Power" does not

have to strip or take away, and result in a "power-over" relationship.

 Throughout this study I have wondered: Is it the schools or the students who

uphold their complicated cultures? I do not think the answer is an either/or, but I do

contend that both facets play their power(ful) parts. The influences that are present on

elite HBCU campuses derive from historical hegemony that spans over a century. I fear

that if these institutions continue to remain resistant to change and many of the antiquated

vestiges of their pasts that they will become obsolete. It is very hard to write these words,

 but this *is* a fear I hold.

> Schools exist in a churning cauldron of interrelated institutions and social forces.
> The manifestations of power in schools reflect these larger forces and the
> interconnections of our institutions. (Kreisberg, 1992, pp. xxi-xxii)

Every time elite HBCU environments participate in acts that maintain hierarchy, uphold

narrow concepts of Black excellence, or endorse social acts that may label or reject their

students they, in essence, replicate social oppression that is present in the broader societal

context (Slaughter, 1997). This must change.

The prevailing hegemonic cultures that are pervasive at these institutions supply

an array of symbolism, skewed Black representations, and customs that frame and

constrain their students in troubling manners. Again, *who is included? Who is left*

behind? Why are some forced to change? "Specific relationships of domination are

situated within a web of supporting ideological forces that form a pattern so pervasive

that many, if not most, believe that relationships of domination are inevitable,

unchangeable, appropriate, and natural" (Kreisberg, 1992, pp. 14-15). I also now ponder,

what roles do low-income students play in upholding specific norms that are embedded in

power and hegemony?

My co-researchers were faced with choices—to yield to their domination or

challenge these omnipresent forces. Why are these choices present? How can they be

circumvented? We can develop HBCU students without the dated mores of yester-year.

A new agenda should and *must* be enacted so that HBCU communities can continue to

thrive and maintain their rightful places. Elitist norms must be questioned and

confronted. Why are affluent entities and cultures given so much power?

In 2013, the student run Howard University Homecoming Steering Committee

released the prices for their signature events. The events were priced considerably higher

than previous years, and the more popular events including the concert, step-show, and

fashion show were priced starting at $50. What message did these prices send to a low-

income student?   During this time period there was considerable critique from Howard

alumni regarding the price-hikes, but surprisingly little student reaction. Why were

current students silent? Did they see this as a norm that could not or should not be

challenged? Since then prices have been lowered. No student should be priced out of

university sponsored events. Institutional policies should be re-evaluated so that they are

more inclusive of low-income students. For example, if there is an expectation for

students to own business suits, tuxedos, and ball gowns then additional resources should

be provided to low-income students for them to acquire these items.

HBCUs and their students would be served well if they enacted cultures of *power-

with*, rather than *power-over* if they wish to remain true to their roots of educating those

who have been repressed, oppressed, and unaddressed. Somewhere we lost our way.

Power-with is not a zero-sum proposition where one person gains the capacity to achieve

his or her desires at the expense of others. Rather, *power-with* is a developing capacity of

people to act and do together (Kreisberg, 1992). A culture shift needs to occur.

Hollins (1996) contends that "schools are shaped by cultural practices and values and reflect the norms of the society for which they have been developed" (p. 31). Elite HBCU cultures exist on several levels. They manifest when African-American low-income students interact with their peers, faculty, and the larger community where the schools are located. These institutional cultures become a guide for the behavior that is expected of all of their students. "It is a self-repeating cycle. To introduce change would necessitate an interruption of this cycle" (Hinde, 2004, p. 2).

What changes should occur? A major step to introducing significant cultural change at these schools is to bring low-income students out of the shadows. The intra-racial diversity that is present on these campuses cannot continue to be overlooked. When elite HBCU faculty members, administrators, and students begin to recognize the socio-economic diversity that is present on their campuses then significant cultural shifts can begin to occur. The forum will be re-opened to revisit the rules, events, and overt and covert practices that are occurring within these institutions.

The manner in which power is used "over" students is what makes elite HBCU campuses complicated structures for low-income students to navigate. However, there is potential that lies in the complexity. What are the possibilities for elite HBCU experiences and their cultures if students, administrators, and alumni choose to adopt *this* conception of power? How can HBCUs and higher education as a whole transform their views of hegemony and dominance into "a project of possibility" (McLaren, 1988, p. 177)? Difficult conversations must occur, and removing the silence and shame from students who are "othered" within these environments are major steps to create the critical changes that need to occur. "Colleges and universities cannot change their past

histories of exclusion, nor should they deny that they exist. However, they can take steps to insure that [all forms of] diversity become a central value of their educational enterprises" (Milem, Clayton-Pederson, Hurtado, & Allen, 1998, p. 284).

Looking Beyond "My Perfect Ten"

This scholarly endeavor gave me the privilege to explore and uncover topics that are often not discussed openly within educational research. While this phenomenological exploration focuses on Black intra-racial social class differences, the narratives of "My Perfect Ten" also reveal that there are others who may be suffering in silence on these campuses. Emmanuel expresses:

> I have a little cousin that went to Howard. He left after a semester, and I know that it's…It's not for everybody…He was not willing to accept the culture…He just wanted to go to school…I'm still trying…I still grapple with this.

Emmanuel reveals that there are other elite HBCU students who have a hard time adjusting to the institutional cultural pressures that I have highlighted in this study. As graduates, the men and women in this study do not represent individuals who dropped out, who may have been pushed out (because of their incongruence with decorum codes, rules, and the campus cultures), or those students who left because of other personal difficulties (Grundy, 2012). I fear that upon departure there are key student voices that may be lost forever. There are still more stories that must be told to help future generations cope within elite HBCU communities.

In order to gain additional insight into these distinct higher education cultures, there must be more research and deep exploration to uncover even more issues that are hard to bring to light. There are other communities who are impacted by social-class and the prevailing cultures that are present at these schools. They should be explored, and

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their narratives should be underscored prominently in future research and campus interventions. My goal is to continue to explore the understudied facets of HBCU communities that include issues surrounding race and sexuality. The stories of contemporary HBCU students and their intra-racial differences should and need to be reflected in higher education scholarship.

I have also been inspired by my professional endeavors. I currently work at an elite university. Though it is a PWI, the manner in which I have observed Black students negotiate race, social class, gender, gender identity, and sexuality has been intriguing. I find myself asking them questions: "Why didn't you choose an HBCU?" "Are you happy here?" "How does social class manifest on this campus?" In further expanding my research trajectory I plan to include the voices of minority students who are present at elite PWI institutions as well. Elite higher education spaces fascinate me, and I am certain there are many more voices that must be brought to the surface so that their cultures, too, can be confronted and challenged.

> During my final conversations with Summer and Nicole they revealed:
>
> Hampton was not the gay-friendly campus, so you definitely had people who were upset about that. I remember they tried to start some type of student group…They tried to start every year that I was there…I remember every single year that I was there, they put in an application and were always denied…(Tiffany)
>
> When I was at Howard homosexuality was not something that was really welcomed…I love and respect so many of my LGBT campus classmates who now have the courage to live in their truth, but, it is sad that they could not do that in college…(Summer)

These previous narratives underscore prior scholarship that has revealed that HBCU contexts are not the most welcoming spaces for LGBT students (Harper & Gasman, 2008; Means & Jaegar, 2013; Mobley & Johnson, 2015; Patton, 2008; Patton,

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2011; Patton, 2014). They also further highlight the extreme importance for these institutions to be more inclusive of all of their students. In order to create inclusive HBCU environments, these higher education communities must understand better how their students' multiple oppressed identities interact during their time in college. "In reality, individual lives involve multiple and dynamic overlapping identities" (Borrego, 2008, p. 1). HBCUs are consistently heralded for their nurturing environments; however, if they wish to remain in a position to continue to achieve their historic missions, they must adequately serve all of their students (Patterson, Dunston & Daniels, 2013).

HBCU communities can no longer disregard the connections that exist between student identity, student sense of belonging, and college persistence. Now is the time for faculty and HBCU administrators begin the transformative dialogues that confront stereotypes and challenge HBCU students, faculty, and administrators to extend conversations surrounding issues of race, class, and sexuality. Due to the conservative campus cultures that are present within many HBCU communities, meaningful dialogues surrounding topics that are deemed as controversial within Black communities are routinely avoided (Mobley & Johnson, forthcoming). Elite HBCU campuses would benefit greatly if they introduced intergroup dialogues to their faculty, students, and administrators. Intergroup dialogues are face-to-face facilitated conversations between members of two or more social identity groups where the goal is to establish new levels of mutual understanding (Zúñiga, 2003). "These conversations would provide a forum for students to talk with one another across boundaries, dispel stereotypes, and move the campus toward an environment where all students could become positively engaged in the HBCU context" (Mobley & Johnson, 2015, p. 85). Facilitating these challenging

conversations would be a complex and challenging endeavor, but they would be effective

forums to confront the problematic facets that are inherent within their institutional

cultures.

My hope is that this work will call HBCU communities, higher education

scholars, and scholar-practitioners to action so that these schools can begin the necessary

work to become welcoming places for all. This phenomenological exploration calls for

HBCU communities, higher educational researchers, and Black communities to go

"there" so that we may reach mutual understanding about those sensitive topics that have

been hidden in the shadows. I started this scholarly inquiry with many questions. Some

have been provided answers, while others still allude me. What I am most thankful for,

though, is that my questions have opened the door to more conversations and more

questioning that should occur though this project has reached an "end.

One Last Hidden Story: "Final" Words From Stokely Carmichael

Stokely Carmichael is a celebrated figure in Black history. He is widely heralded

due to his leadership of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) during

the Civil Rights Movement. Before he was a highly respected activist, Carmichael was a

low-income first generation student at Howard University. It was there that the flame of

social justice was sparked within him. In 1961, during his freshmen year at Howard he

participated in the freedom rides that were led throughout the south by the Congress of

Racial Equality (CORE).

I recently came across his autobiography *Ready For Revolution: The Life and

Struggles of Stokely Carmichael*. In this work there is a chapter titled *Howard

University: Everything and its Opposite.* His narratives about his time as an

undergraduate during the early 1960s is raw, honest, and candid. His story affirmed my

collegiate experiences, those of "My Perfect Ten," and this phenomenological

exploration as a whole. In the following passage he provides a glimpse into how his elite

HBCU context is perceived and the culture that was present while he was a student:

> Howard presented me with every dialectic existing in the African community. At Howard, on any given day, one might meet every Black thing...and its opposite. The place was a veritable tissue of contradiction, embodying the best and the absolute worst values of the African American tradition.

> Howard's most egregious image in the African community was as an elitist enclave, a "bougie" school where fraternities and sororities, partying, shade consciousness, conspicuous consumption, status anxiety, and class and color snobbery dominated the student body…

> Was this true? Certainly to some extent, but while this aspect was for some very visible, it was, give thanks, by no means the whole story...(Carmichael, 2003, pp. 113-114)

Carmichael's accounts of his elite HBCU experience further confirm the many

sides to the complicated stories that I have conveyed in this work. Elite HBCU students

and the institutions that I highlight are complex entities. Elite HBCUs are not "bad"

places, but there are changes that should occur for them to sustain their greatness. These

universities truly do encompass the best and the worst aspects of Black communities.

But, there is a richness in these polarizing aspects. They unveil a diversity within Black

communities that is often hidden and not discussed largely within higher educational

HBCU scholarship.

I find it fitting for me to "end" my dissertation with Stokely Carmichael's elite

HBCU student story. His story was "hidden" away in his autobiography for me to

discover, just like those of Zora Neale Hurston and "My Perfect Ten." These narratives

mirror each other and transcend time. This "son of Howard" was able to assert the very

notions that I have attempted to convey over and over again in this phenomenological

exploration. Yes, there is elitism present within HBCU communities, but there is so

much more to the story. His voice and others have been "hidden" away for us to

discover. There comes a time when powerful stories must be unleashed from the

shadows to inform, expose, effectuate change and call others to action. I truly hope that

this scholarly labor of love will do just that.

APPENDIX A

Mobley, Jr. High-School Valedictorian Address

MM Washington Senior High. A School? No! A place to simply have fun? No! Then what is it? "MM" affectionately known as the school behind Dunbar is a home, it is our home. Whether we like it or not we have spent a total of at least 27 months, 543 days, 3,258 hours 195,480 minutes, 11, 728, 800...801...802...803 seconds but who's counting? Oh, and don't let me forget 23.5 credits and 100 community service hours later we have now arrived here at the threshold of a new chapter in life.

Many people often ask us, how do you feel? The answer is simple. Of course we are happy to leave MM Washington to start new things, pursue new endeavors. But at the same time it is sad. All we have known for 3 some of us 4 years has been MM Washington.

Over the past couple of months many members of the faculty have asked me, What will happen when your class leaves? As seniors we often say that MM is going to fall down, but believe me it won't. The class of 2001 has planted seeds; seeds of leadership, seeds of commitment, seeds of tenacity and endless passion. To the faculty you are the fertilizer, *make them grow!*

To the class of 2001 we are now here together, but never forget who helped you here. We as a class are standing upon the shoulders of countless individuals who have sacrificed tremendously to get us to this point in our lives; mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandmothers, grandfathers, and teachers. These people have earned and deserve nothing but love and respect.

For a final thought, I have often needed words of encouragement to help me along the difficult road of life, but recently I have had to weather a turbulent storm as I am sure each of you have in your efforts to complete finals and finish papers not to mention having to deal with frustrations of prom and just general stress found in graduation. The following words have helped me a great deal and I am sure Ms. Bradshaw's class knows also.

If

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,

If you can dream -- and not make dreams your master;
If you can think -- and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken

Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings -- nor lose the common touch,
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run --
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And -- which is more -- you'll be a Man, my son!
(Kipling, 1910/2007, pp. 170-171)

In this class I see the qualities needed to persevere. The future holds many triumphs and disappointments, happiness and sadness. In this class I see the leaders of tomorrow. 2001 I applaud and love each and every one of you and wish you nothing but the best in the future. God Bless you all and may peace be always with you! Step out and change the world!

APPENDIX B

Cheryl D. Bonner Graduation Photo

<div align="center">**APPENDIX C**</div>

Recruitment E-Mail

Greetings [insert name here],

I hope that this finds you in the best of health and in good spirits!

As you know I am a 4th year doctoral student at the University of Maryland. During my time as a doctoral student my research has focused solely on the understudied facets of the HBCU community including issues surrounding race, class, and student sexuality. I am currently in the process of completing my dissertation. My work focuses on how low-income African-American students experience social class at Hampton and Howard University.

I would greatly appreciate it if you can refer alumni from the classes of 2001 to 2010 who are willing to be open and honest about their student experiences at either institution. It would be helpful if they are in close proximity to the Washington, DC metropolitan area, but it is not a requirement.

Thank you so much for your help in advance and I hope to hear from you soon!

Best,

Steve D. Mobley, Jr., PhD Candidate
Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education
University of Maryland

Email to Potential Participants

Dear [insert name],

My name is Steve D. Mobley, Jr. and I am currently a fourth year doctoral student at the University of Maryland-College Park. Under the direction of Noah Drezner, Ph.D. and Francine Hultgren, Ph.D, I am now completing my dissertation.

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study that will explore the impact of class on the HBCU student experience, specifically for low-income African-American students who have attended private, selective HBCUs. If you are a graduate of Hampton University or Howard University, you are eligible to participate in this study! To conduct this research, I require participants who are willing to engage in a series of activities over a five month period that will take approximately eight hours. You should expect to:

- Participate in an initial audiotaped conversation with me (lasting approximately one to two hours) about your experiences as a student at your alma mater and your perceptions of the impact of social class on your undergraduate experience; more specifically, the goal of this study is to explore your in-depth lived experiences of class while a student at your respective alma-mater.

- Engage in a written, reflective assignment.

- Participate in a second audiotaped conversation with me (lasting approximately one to two hours).

- Lastly, participate in a group conversation with me and other study participants (lasting approximately two hours).

To the extant possible, protecting your privacy, confidentiality, and identity are important to me. To maintain safety in the research process, I will do the following:

- You will be given a pseudonym (of your choice) that will be used when reporting the study.

- All of the conversations will be audiotaped, transcribed and forwarded to you for verification of content and intention.

- When the research project has been completed, all audio files and transcripts will be destroyed.

Finally, your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate and you can end your participation at any time without penalty. You may also decline to answer any question I ask during our conversation.

If the above is agreeable to you, you will be asked to sign and date a consent form at our first meeting. By signing this form, you are agreeing to participate in this research project. I look forward to working with you. Your participation is appreciated and important to the success of this study. If you have any questions that I can answer, please contact me at smobley@umd.edu or 301.405.8143.

Sincerely,

Steve D. Mobley, Jr., PhD Candidate
Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education
University of Maryland

Demographic Questionnaire

Difference Amongst Your Own: The Lived Experiences of Low-Income African-American Students And Their Encounters With Class Within Elite Historically Black University (HBCU) Environments

Demographic Questionnaire

Please complete this brief questionnaire by circling or checking the appropriate answers below. If you are uncomfortable sharing any parts of this information please leave the question blank. We ask that you do not sign this questionnaire.

1.) What is your age? _____

2.) What is your gender?   a) Female   b) Male   c) Transgendered d)
Other_____

3.) How do you identify yourself? a) Heterosexual b) Bisexual c) Fluid d) Gay e) Lesbian f) Queer g) Other _____

4.) What is your racial background?
   a) African American/Black
   b) Latino/Hispanic
   c) Mixed race (please specify) _____
   d) Other (please specify) _____

5.) What is your country of origin? _____

6.) What is your parent's country of origin? _____

7.) Name/Size of Hometown
   _____

8.) Name/Size of High School
   _____

9.) What is your family's religious background?
   _____ No religious preference or affiliation
   _____Pentecostal
   _____African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.)
   _____Baptist
   _____ Catholic
   _____ Jewish
   _____ Muslim
   _____ Other (identify _____)

10.) How would you describe the neighborhood or community you lived in while growing up? (If there is more than one, discuss either the most recent neighborhood/community or the one you spent the most time in)

_____ Urban
_____ Suburban
_____ Small town
_____ Rural

11.) Undergraduate Institution(s)

Institution Name(s)	Years/ Dates Enrolled	Major(s)	Part-time/ Full time	Degree(s) earned

12.) What activities or organizations were you involved in during your undergraduate career?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

13.) Were you a member of a historically Black Greek fraternity or sorority during your undergraduate career?_____ If, yes which organization and when were you initiated?_____

14.) Which statement(s) best describe your undergraduate living situation (circle all that apply):

Lived at home w/parents: indicate time frame _____
Lived off-campus: indicate time frame _____
Lived on campus/in campus owned-apartment: indicate time frame _____
Other _____

15.) Which statement(s) best describe your undergraduate student involvement?

Not involved
Moderately Involved
Involved
Very Involved

16.) What is your mother/female guardian's highest level of education?
a. Elementary school only
b. Junior high school only

c. Some high school
d. High school diploma
e. Some college
f. Associates degree
g. Bachelors degree
h. Some graduate school
i. Master's degree
j. Ph.D. or professional degree
k. Unknown

17.) Mother/Female guardian's Job title; place of employment; kind of work performed

_____
_____
_____

18.) What is your father/male guardian's highest level of education?
a. Elementary school only
b. Junior high school only
c. Some high school
d. High school diploma
e. Some college
f. Associates degree
g. Bachelors degree
h. Some graduate school
i. Master's degree
j. Ph.D. or professional degree
k. Unknown

19.) Father/Male guardian's Job title; place of employment; kind of work performed

_____
_____
_____

20.) How would you identify your family class status as an undergraduate student?
a. Poor
b. Working-Class
c. Middle-Class
d. Upper Middle-Class
e. Upper Class

21. Graduate Institution(s)

Institution Name(s)	Years/ Dates Enrolled	Field of Study	Part-time/ Full time	Degree(s) Earned

Consent Form

Project Title	Difference Amongst Your Own: The Lived Experiences of Low-Income African-American Students And Their Encounters With Class Within Elite Historically Black University (HBCU) Environments
Purpose of the Study	This research is being conducted by Steve D. Mobley Jr. at the University of Maryland, College Park, under the direction of Dr. Noah Drezner and Dr. Francine Hultgren. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you are an alumni of either Hampton University or Howard University. The purpose of this research project is to explore the impact that class on the undergraduate experience within the HBCU context.
Procedures	The research process will take place over four months, and the procedures involve at least two individual interviews (one-on-one) and one group meeting with all participants. There will be a written reflection activity to complete following our first individual meeting. Steve D. Mobley, Jr. will conduct the interviews. Each interview will last no more than 90 minutes. The interview will be conversational in nature and will explore your experiences as a student at your respective institution, and your perceptions of how class impacted your undergraduate experience. Before we begin the first interview you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. All meetings will be audio taped. The interviewer will also take handwritten notes. The topics for each of the meetings will be based around your experiences with social class during your undergraduate years.
Potential Risks and Discomforts	There are possible risks in this research project. You may disclose personal information (i.e. 'stories' or personal anecdotes) related to your undergraduate experiences during the course of this study. You will be asked to directly confront the sensitive issues of race, class, and ethnicity. However, you do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. You are in control of what you wish to share. Allowing participants to review audio-taped discussions and conversations to make additions, corrections, and/or deletions at any time should do much to reduce the risk of discomfort. Audio-tapings and video tapings may be reviewed by participants after completion. You are encouraged to ask the researcher questions throughout the duration of the study and may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
Potential Benefits	There will be no direct benefits from this research for participants. However, potential benefits are that the communities present at historically Black colleges and universities may benefit from what we learn about the experiences of the participants. This research study was designed to learn more about how class, institutional context and environment as well as campus culture play critical roles in the experiences and persistence of African-American low-income students who have attended HBCUs.
Confidentiality	We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, the confidentiality of the participants' identities will be accomplished through several means. (1) Names of participants will not be included on collected data. You will be asked to offer a single fictional name which will be used in all documents; (2) All collected material and information will be kept in a locked filing cabinet; (3) electronic files will be secured on a private computer using password-

	protected computer files; (4) consent forms will be separated from material by participants. Only the researcher and principal investigators will have access to the material collected.
	___ I agree to be [audiotaped] during my participation in this study.
	___ I do not agree to be [audiotaped] during my participation in this study.
	In addition, collected data such as transcriptions and audiotapes will be kept for ten years then destroyed. Written data will be shredded, computer data will be deleted, and audiotapes will be erased.
	If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.
Medical Treatment	The University of Maryland does not provide any medical, hospitalization or other insurance for participants in this research study, nor will the University of Maryland provide any medical treatment or compensation for any injury sustained as a result of participation in this research study, except as required by law.
Right to Withdraw and Questions	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.
	If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the principal investigators,
	Dr. Noah Drezner Department of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education 2103 Benjamin Building University of Maryland College Park, MD 20742. 301.405.2980 ndrezner@umd.edu
	Dr. Francine Hultgren Department of Teaching, Learning, Policy and Leadership 2311B Benjamin Building University of Maryland College Park, MD 20742 301-405-4501 fh@umd.edu

	Steve D. Mobley, Jr. PhD Candidate Department of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education Suite 1204 Benjamin Building University of Maryland College Park, MD 20742 301-405-8143 smobley@umd.edu
Participant Rights	If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: **University of Maryland College Park** **Institutional Review Board Office** **1204 Marie Mount** **College Park, Maryland, 20742** **E-mail: irb@umd.edu** **Telephone: 301-405-0678** This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.
Statement of Consent	Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form. If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.
Signature and Date	**PARTICIPANT NAME** **[Please Print]**	
	PARTICIPANT **SIGNATURE**	
	DATE	

APPENDIX G

Co-Researcher Letter Reflection Activities

Nicole's Letter

Hello Nicole,

I know that you are very excited to head to Hampton University tomorrow. It's been an interesting road this year, but don't worry you've made the right choice! You are feeling quite a few emotions: excitement, nervousness, pride, happiness, arrogance, anxiousness. You are planning to step on to Hampton's campus and take over – well DO IT. You are equipped with all of the talents, intelligence, and gifts necessary to do anything that you could imagine and more.

Tomorrow provides a fresh start for you to create the YOU that you really want to be. Your family and your background have shaped you, but they are not who you are and what you will grow to be. That is in your hands now. However, as you grow, and you will grow, don't forget to be thankful, appreciative, and respectful of all the blessings and opportunities that will come your way. And NEVER forget to be humble. If you don't humble yourself, God will do it for you.

There may be times where you feel you have to work harder than everyone else, do more than everyone else. It's okay. This will build your character. Instead of things just being given to you, you will learn exactly what it takes to go and get what you want.

One last thing: dream bigger! I know Hampton University seems really big right now, but there is so much more than Hampton, parties, Greek Life, Homecoming Court, clubs, honor societies, and grades – you have the whole world waiting at your feet. Don't be afraid to step way outside of your comfort zone and explore. Work hard, play hard, and live harder.

Love,

Yourself (Nicole)

Alonzo's Letter

Dear Alonzo,

This is an exciting time in your life. You are finally leaving the state of Kansas and headed to D.C. for college. Your experience at Howard University is about to change your life. Here are a couple of things that will help you on your journey:

The first thing you should do is find a mentor. Not having any older siblings or anyone else in your life who attended college/an HBCU, may place you at a disadvantage as compared to some of your classmates. Do not worry about trying to keep up with them though. You simply need to find someone who can help you navigate the waters. College life will be so much easier if you know which fraternity to join, which organizations in which you should volunteer and who you should meet.

I know you are excited about being a member of the band and it is a great experience…for now. Get out of the band after one year! That's all of the time you have to devote to it. You should be more concerned with making your mark in other areas of campus life.

Sadly, you are going to lose contact with many of your friends from back home….and some of your family. That's just the way it is. Prepare yourself for it. Many of them will think you've changed; and in turn, you will think they *haven't* changed. Your relationships will dissolve as a result. It's okay though. You will meet enough friends while on the east coast that will supplant both your Kansas City friends (and some family) that you will not miss a beat.

Start thinking about internships and post-graduation plans now! You could certainly use the internship money, plus these summer jobs will help your resume' when it's time to search for full-time employment later. Dare to be different with your internship search. Spend some time working in NYC with an investment bank, or travel to Chicago to work in a corporate headquarters. The possibilities are endless. Don't sell yourself short by getting an ordinary retail job. On a related note, consider spending a semester or a summer studying abroad. It does you no good to take French lessons for all of these years and never step foot in the city of Paris. Although you'll get there later in life, it would be so much better for your resume (and a great conversation piece) if you go now. You can spare to miss one homecoming at Howard.

Pick up a copy of Our Kind of People ASAP! It is required reading. So much will be uncovered. If you can digest this information during your first semester at Howard, you will see things in a new light. As a matter of fact, make sure your mentor (mentioned above) is someone who fits this mold. Hopefully, he will work to help you become a member of the club.

Lastly, soak up the Howard experience! This college is more than just a place of higher learning; it is a piece of black history. You should attend every rally, listen to every guest speaker in the chapel, savor each moment of homecoming and relish the memories

that you are making while indelibly stamping your place in the making of modern history. You will soon learn that an education at Howard is priceless and you will be "so glad you went to Howard U."

Blair's Letter

Heyyyy Blair,

I pray this letter finds you in the best of pre-college spirits. This letter is just for you and you only. I'm going to impart some words of wisdom at this time with you. Who am I? I'm you a few years from now. I came to compose this message to you because I have some insight to share with you. I want to speak on things you don't yet know or fully understand so you can achieve your ultimate end goal of being happy.

The most important tool in life that you will need to learn how to use is the skill to network. Networking will help you acquire connections, access, information, advice, and referrals for many situations to include the job hunting experience – in which you will need as you travel across the world every three to four years. Yes you are smart and charming; however you have to be able to network with people who may rub you the wrong way. Friend or foe, continue to respect the individuals you encounter and never ever burn your bridges.

While you are focusing on mastering your networking skills, also take the time to build more friendships. I want you to socialize more and grasp that there is life outside the Hampton classrooms. You have a tendency to analyze a person before befriending them... Don't. Take that leap of faith and say hello to people who may make you uncomfortable with yourself or people who you may think are just flat out mean. Say hi to the strangers that live beyond your dorms and classes. You will run into people years from now that you saw walking around on campus all the time, and talk to them like you were best friends at school... even though you never spoke to them while you were there. So carpe diem and take a chance on meeting more people.

As you are enjoying your college experience, there will be a time that you and your love will take a break. Use that opportunity to explore the wonderful world of dating. No one is going to examine you for going on a variety of dates. You are in college and that's what college people do! In fact, I'm certain most people won't even care who you are/have dated. Go out and explore the dating scene. Recognize that the opposite isn't always about the sex life and if they are, so what – you still control that realm of the bedroom. There are guys who are there to open you up to new experiences – that could be beneficial to pass down to your own legacy as you guide them through life.

Outside of the social experiences, I need to talk to you about your independence. Although standing on your own two feet is a remarkable accomplishment – especially for a teenager such as yourself – it's okay to lean on others during times you need them most. I'm aware of you feeling abandoned. You don't have to sit alone and worry about your future. Your path is already lit and you just need to keep on walking the illuminated runway. Share your concerns with those who you surround yourself with. That's why they are there. You do not have to know everything. It is darn near impossible to be ahead of everyone and as time will quickly show you, you aren't the only smart kid on the block. Use your resources. Ask the professors for assistance. Sign up for tutor

programs. Rely upon your mentor. Use whatever and all programs out there designated to you. There is no shame in asking for help – even when it comes to money.

Speaking of money, finances will be something that you will have to learn how to master. At all costs, please avoid the credit card companies. Having a credit card does not mean that you are rich or that your financial concerns are eradicated. There will be times where you feel peer pressured to maintain the Hampton prim and proper imagine. I will say to you, don't go crazy. While it's important to adhere to the Hampton Dress Code, understand that Coach and other designer labels are not a part of that requirement. All that luxury living is not going to be able to translate over to your financial wealth. You will not need all four credit cards. If anything, take the one credit card so you can bail yourself out of true emergencies (buying books, medical expenses and NECESSARY travelling expenses).

I would like to see you save your summer paychecks instead. The money generated from the summer position you will have throughout the years will be more than enough to keep you afloat and also teach you about financial discipline. While I'm thinking, I also believe you should enroll in another finance class so you can understand how interest rates, savings, stocks, bonds and other financial areas work. Trust me when I say you will thank me for bestowing this particular pearl of wisdom with you.

Other information that will serve in your best interest will be to focus on you – yes you! Pay attention to building your own dreams and becoming the best person you can be. Note that I am not just referring to academics either. You've never had a problem in challenging yourself in education, but you do struggle with focusing on yourself and your purpose in life. You don't realize it, but you are trying to find out who you are as a person and your place in society. That answer will come when you turn the tables and analyze yourself – both inside and out.

Concentrate on areas such as beauty and health; patience and faith. These areas will help you become happier with who you are as a person. While your self-esteem is pretty average, there is always room for improvement and growth. Never ever think you have done all that you can when it comes time for self-improvement. As you grow older, you will find more areas to develop.

Pay attention to your beauty, not for the world, but for yourself. Beauty does not equate vanity. Beauty does not mean you are a snob. Beauty does not guarantee access to denied areas. Beauty however, does feed your soul. You are pretty stunning and I'm not saying this to make you feel good, but for you to take notice of all of you. It is forever true that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and as long as you are pleased with who are you are as you look in the mirror, who are the critics to challenge you? You certainly won't need their validation.

Centering your attention to health, understand the freshman 15 is real and your health will be very important to you and your family when you reach an older age. Take the nutrition class in school so you can begin to understand what preexisting conditions you

have and how to better overcome them. Society will not have a pill for that and after all, do you really want to be on a bunch of medication at such a young tender age? Go exercise – yes exercise (swimming, walking and roller skating counts!), eat healthier (stop getting the same fried foods in the café – check out the salad bar during lunch at least) and incorporate water in your diet. These tips will help you increase your livelihood.

Additionally, I want you to keep firmly to your faith, beliefs, values, and your morals. You will be tested throughout your life on these fundamentals. While you pride yourself in being a ultimate woman, also understand that it's okay not to know the answers; it's okay NOT to achieve the highest mark at all times; and it's okay to fail. As long as you know you put a good foot forward, you will be able to rest easy knowing you gave it an earnest try. Know that everything isn't revealed to you when you want it and you may never get an answer.

Therefore I will also say work on patience and thinking before you speak. You are a woman who is governed by both intuition and passion, so there will be times that you will put that foot of yours in your mouth. Friends will come and go. Job opportunities will be at your door. Love is always stiletto'd in your heart. All of that to say, step out on faith and trust your discernment. Faith will be there to help you get through the very rough times often whispering to yourself, keep going in spite of the situation at hand. The way you perceive a situation will ALWAYS rule supreme. If there are too many negatives, make a conscious effort to shift them so you can control your own moods and thoughts to achieve a better outcome.

My darling younger self, I want you to mediate on what I just revealed with you. Meditate over the areas I have spoken about. I want you to enjoy your college years as best as possible. When you open up your eyes, the vision in front of you will be ever so clear. I vow to you, this information has not be given in vain. Have fun!

Emmanuel's Letter

Dear Emmanuel,

Congratulations on your acceptance to Howard University! You don't know this yet, but going there will be one of the best decisions that you have ever made. It will also be four of the most fun-filled years of your life. I know that you have gone through many trying times up until this point, but the journey is not over. Quite the contrary, it is just beginning!

As you begin to transition to the next phase of your life, never forget the importance of the values that were instilled within you. Collectively, they will serve as a guiding light down a dark tunnel you have never been down before. College will be a time for you to experience things that were never in the realm of possibility in Houston. There you will grow into your man hood.

Also, do not forget that you did not get to this point in your life alone. You were blessed enough to have a host of family, teachers and mentors who helped make this possible. When the opportunity presents itself to pay these gestures forward, take it wholeheartedly and do not look back. In addition, keep that hard work ethic. It has yet to fail you and I seriously doubt it will in the future. Keep in mind that a little bit of manners and some southern charm can go a long way.

The number one thing for you to focus on is your academics! Hit those books and hit them hard! I'm going to be honest with you: there is a strong possibility that the workload will be unlike anything you've ever experienced. It is definitely manageable, but you must use your time effectively and learn how to study. Don't be afraid to attend office hours with your professors and join study groups.

Even though you are in DC, things at home will continue. Do what you can, but don't stretch yourself thin. You're not superman. Goal number one is to walk across that stage four years from now with a college degree. Then you will be in a place to do more. However, I caution you about living your life for others because it will cause bitterness. Become your best self and then you will be able to help your family.

Be smart with your money because that refund will be the largest amount of money you've ever had. Keep enough to live off of, but think about putting some away in a CD or savings account. Enjoy yourself, but don't go overboard. Keeping up with the Joneses isn't all it's cracked up to be when you're broke.

Howard is a place where you learn just as much outside of the classroom as you do in it. There will be countless opportunities to expand your horizons. While at the Mecca, students find out about the power of building a network of talented individuals that have similar goals. Howard has a vast network of students and alumni in many different fields

doing some amazing work. Those who attend Howard rarely leave without understanding the importance of building a network even if they did not put in the effort to create the foundation of one. Eventually, one comes to realize that while being intelligent and hardworking goes a long way, it's not always what you know, but who you know.

People say that Howard is a bubble that many get trapped in. I would agree, but with a caveat: there's nothing wrong with enjoying the bubble as long as you understand you're in one. I know that's confusing so please allow me to explain. Howard is its own unique place with its own unique culture. The campus, as small as it is, may as well be a town inside of town. Enjoy your experience, but be sure to accumulate the skills necessary to be successful once you leave the bubble. The mistake of not acquiring the hard and soft skills to be able to achieve in the professional world is a mistake that one too many students make. You have been warned.

I know there is something that you dread happening in the back of your mind and that it scares you. All I can say is that you must keep your faith that God does not make mistakes. Everyone is more proud of you than you know for your accomplishments. The worst is bound to happen. The true measure of man comes not how he acts in times of peace and tranquility, but during trials and tribulations. The process that creates a diamond requires tremendous amounts of heat and pressure, yet we consider them to be some of the most precious things known to man. Humans are similar in that we become the best of who we can be when we face adversity head on and conquer it. I wish you the best on your journey.

Sincerely,

Emmanuel (25 yrs old)

Roman's Letter

Dear 18 year old Roman,

In May 2001, you officially graduated with honors from H.D. Woodson Senior High School Academy of Finance and Business. You are ecstatic to be graduating Top 10 out of 99 from the Academy of Finance and Business and Top 20 overall from the biggest class (274) ever at H.D. Woodson Senior High School.

Your journey has just begun, becoming the third in your family of eight to graduate from high school. You grew up in a violent, drug plagued community (Trinidad) where the likely hood of graduating from high school was very slim. Being incarcerated or having a funeral before the age of 18 was very likely. You didn't grow up wealthy nor had the finer things in life but you have always kept a positive mindset to succeed. Your brothers became statistics but you had a different mindset and that was to fulfill your Mother's biggest dream of seeing one of her eight kids graduate from college. Your mother tried her best to make academics your focal point. Your Mother was your rock, your best friend and your Father figure. She enlisted you in a program Reach for Tomorrow which assisted with anger management and taught making one choice in life can turn into a positive or negative tomorrow. Your are also a graduate of the Trinity College Upward Bound (College Preparatory) where you have lived on campus, took college level courses and have been apart of many counseling sessions (wide range life discussions). Lastly, but not least, you have had a Big Brother from the Big Brothers Program since you were 8. It was he who taught you how to become a man, play sports, and take you to different events, taught you study habits, the importance of saving and gave you your first computer and car. He did everything a Father figure could/should do and you have learned a great deal.

You have aspirations of going to college and to graduate. What you don't know how is how you will afford the tuition. Hoop Dreams will help. While at H.D. Woodson, you joined the Hoop Dreams Scholarship Fund. Hoop Dreams was hope for every student who wanted to attend college and the only thing holding back the individual was finances. Hoop Dreams has paired you with a mentor whom is a successful entrepreneur. You have already thought to yourself "how is someone so successful going to mentor me and we are totally different". WRONG –your mentor has a lot of similarities: poor family, had the drive and determination to make it out a rough neighborhood, lost friends before age of 18 and didn't have a way to pay for college.

Remember that while in Hoop Dreams – you received vouchers to apply to any school in the country and SAT preparatory classes to increase your SAT scores which were too low for any University. Remember your Mentor asking "What college/university would you like to attend?" Your first, response without hesitation was "Hampton" followed by "but". Before I was able to finish he stated we will get you into your school of choice and if I'm willing to put in the necessary work (improve SAT scores, fulfill requirements from Hampton) he will guarantee I will be able to attend the school of choice.

How did you choose Hampton to be your first choice? Hampton University has a lot of history and academically was rated one of the top Historical Black College University's (HBCU). Hampton University is a comprehensive institution of higher education dedicated to the promotion of learning, building of character, and preparation of promising future. You were also intrigued by the Battle of the HU (Hampton vs Howard at RFK Stadium) as you have played the trumpet since Junior High School (Browne Jr High) and wanted to march in a HBCU marching band.

You began to work harder and harder to improve your SAT scores, you have met the requirements from Hampton. The key was to receive funding throughout for your next four years.

As it became closer to graduation for you – you had yet to receive an acceptance letter into Hampton. You didn't give up! As time went by - blessings came with it. You applied for the Big Brothers Big Sisters scholarship award. You won the award and received a full ride (4 years) to the school of your choice. That moment you broke down and told your Mom "you will not have to give a dime nor apply for a loan because I'm going to school for free". The happiness on her face – you saw. You later returned the Leonsis Scholar and it answered someone else's prayers.

Soon you received the news you long awaited. You received a certificate stating you were accepted into Hampton University. God answered your prayers!

You have now arrived! You are now at Hampton University, your "Home by the Sea" in the class of 2005(ONYX VI). As, you walked on the campus you knew the journey had just begun. You made a huge stride and that was making it to college. Although, the statistics were high among freshman not returning for their sophomore year, you made a promise to your Mom to fulfill her wish. Your Mother will be your motivation and will help you daily.

You will take 18 credits as a freshman and march in the band "The Force". Everything will be different strumming from: being independent, classes are tough, adapting to a private college after attending public schools and being home sick. The culture will be different, a majority of the students will come from upper class income or private schools and from across the world.

You will not adapt well to the culture. You will struggle in classes because you were not prepared from the DC Public School system and you will also receive the worst news that your mom is suffering from kidney failure. Your grades will reflect (1.9 gpa) and you will be placed on academic warning and be in jeopardy to lose your scholarship. You will realize that all you worked for was slipping away very fast. You will beg your mom to come back to DC and attend a local school (UDC or PG Community College). You will become furious and want no part of Hampton. Your mother will tell you: "Hampton was your school of choice and you will not come home and don't forget about your promise."

You will come home for the holidays, speak to your mentor and have a different mindset to do better. Still, you will return to Hampton and struggle with the culture and become anti-social and have a small group of friends. Teachers will give you a hard time especially your English teacher (Ms. Banks). She will tell you that she sees potential in you and she will bring it out of you.

You will share with some people that you are from (DC) and the high school you attended and they will have a look of disbelief. Your mom is your motivation; You will work hard to fulfill her dream of having you graduate from college. You will study after classes, get tutoring and learn to adapt. After Sophomore year will not fall under a 3.0 gpa, graduate with honors and be voted President of the Sports Management Dept.

Reflecting back on your tenure at Hampton University there are a lot of positives that you will overlook throughout your matriculation. Hampton instilled within you that upon graduation we will be "Hamptonian Men and Women." They will teach us proper etiquette and business acumen. You will learn share, and cherish the quote "To be early is to be on time; to be on time is to be late; and to be late is unacceptable." You will not realize that you will transform into a Hamptonian man. You will mature over time. Believe it or not you will trade in the Jordan's, Nike's and sport apparel (HOBO, Aja Imani) clothing in for suit and ties. What is hard is that you will never really adapt to the college life (rules, socializing, and student activities). It will be a culture shock stemming from: private University rules, culture change and economic change.

Graduation Day will be a meaningful day at Hampton, it is always held on Mother's Day. During your senior year your Mom's health will begin to deteriorate quickly. She will be on dialysis three days a week and have extensive stays in the hospital. You will visit her the week before graduation and remind her that she has to be strong and get better for graduation. She will be released from the hospital two days before graduation and your mentor ("John") will get a driver to escort her there.

Graduation day will be emotional. As you march through the campus and into the stadium, you will see your Mom in her wheelchair and begin to cry. Your best friend will say: "Man, you're crying and we haven't started yet". If only he knew the emotion you will feel seeing our mother's BIGGEST dream come true. When you walk across the stage as President of the Sports Management department and also having the highest GPA in your major, you will be greeted by your freshman English professor (Ms. Banks). She will hug you tightly and say "You made it and I knew you had so much potential – there was a reason I was so hard on you." You will give her our diploma, hat, and honors cords. Remember to tell her "I love you and Happy Mother's Day."

Shortly after graduation, The Washington Post will feature you in an article regarding your life story and graduating from college. You will sort of become a neighborhood hero – You will make it out "Trinidad" and be successful.

Be thankful for everyone that supported you. Our mother will pass away from kidney failure – three days after her birthday. Reflect on the promise we made to our Mom, I

know that if we did not have her we may not have graduated. We will be devastated of her loss, but keep pushing and everything we accomplish in life will be dedicated to her.

If I could change our time matriculating through college, I may tweak a few things to have enjoyed college a little more. I would have tried to be more social and open to change. I would have had more relationships with my fellow Hamptonian's. If I could offer advice to you and will share with the son you will have in the future; I would share: embrace the moment, strive to do your best, treat class as your job and your pushing for that promotion, and most important accept change. Accepting change and learning others culture is very important in the business world. I am and forever will be a Hamptonian Man!

Summer's Letter

Dear 18-Year-Old Summer,

Mentoring has always been a concept with which, even at your now tender age of 18, you have always been extremely familiar. I am writing you this letter from 2013, 13 years from your current day, to provide you with the kind of mentorship that I hope will serve you well, given how intimately I know you.

First, I want to congratulate you. No, seriously. CONGRATULATIONS! It is June 2000, and you have graduated from Martin Luther King, Jr. Senior High School! You have graduated from one of the three best high schools in Detroit, Michigan, as King is known to be by anyone who knows people who are from Detroit! You have graduated as the 14th ranked student in your class of 433 students! You have been accepted to and will attend Howard University this fall, which is the MECCA and the HILLTOP! Through your hard work and dedication to applying for scholarships, you will be attending Howard free of charge for your first year (and, as you do not yet know, you will attend Howard free for all of your four years)! You have achieved all of these wonderful things, all of it, by fighting odds at every single step along your journey. I am congratulating you and telling you to accept it because even at 31, you hesitate to fully accept the magnitude of your accomplishments.

You think that succeeding is what you are supposed to do, and on a broad scale, that is most certainly true. But, please allow me to give you some perspective—succeeding is not what most people expected you to be capable of doing. Remember, Summer…both your mother and father were once drug addicts. And, while it's sad for me to say to you, as an adult, you will experience even more periods of time without your parents, as they will again become victim to substances. You have several peers with whom you grew up that will never have the option of leaving Detroit, or more sadly, will die at a young age. Sadly, many of your peers will end up in jail, and that will be the lifelong reality for more than a few of them. Even more realistically, most African-American women, even if they are promising students, never receive the guidance and help that they need to have a vision for their lives. So, at this critical time in your life, I encourage you to stop and pat yourself on the back. You have no idea how much you owe yourself the opportunity to be proud of your current achievements, as well as the ones that I look forward to you experiencing in the future.

But, today, you are a high school graduate. You feel accomplished because, quite frankly, you have done what you set out to do: you are going to college. Howard University. Interestingly, right now you have no allegiance to this school. In reality, you don't even know much about it. Let's be clear…you had every intention on attending the University of Michigan. So, for you, attending Howard is not a dream come true; it's a means to an end. Howard was where you received the most scholarship opportunities. Howard is where your high school counselor and future big sister figure, Ms. Gilbert, encouraged you to set your sights. Howard is a school to which many of your friends,

old and new, are dying to go. But, still, Howard was not in your dreams, your plans, and until recently, not even in your cards.

Let's reflect again on your journey. Once you decided that Howard was where you should go, you fought tooth and nail to get there. Every single person in your family doubted your decision, including the extended family that was often your greatest sources of support. Plainly put, Washington, DC was much too far. How would you ever make it home? How could your family access you if they needed you (and they always needed you)? You have only been on a plane once in your life! You'd certainly never been to DC! All of these objections were flying everywhere, but you refused to change your mind. You were going to Howard because you had been convinced by circumstances that it was best. So, as you sit here on the verge of attending, let me let you know that attending Howard University will unequivocally be one of the best decisions that you will ever have the opportunity to make in your life.

BEST. DECISION. EVER.

You will go to Howard, and there, you will experience freedom. Freedom like no other freedom you have ever experienced before: freedom from all of the sadness that you experienced during your childhood; freedom from your mother, who in particular, never allowed you to grow and experience the activities and opportunities that the other kids your age were doing; and even better, freedom from financial constraints. Let me be the first to tell you—that full scholarship situation will finally give you the opportunity to spend money in a way that you never have before, and it will feel amazing! But, I will tell you, as wonderful as Howard is, it will also be equally as eye-opening.

For all of the opportunities you have enjoyed, and the success you have earned, and the progress that you've made, your hometown reality as a urban Detroit girl born to substance abusing parents who does not have a high class wardrobe and has no understanding of the dining rules that people in the know refer to as "etiquette'" will be quickly become clear to you. And you will learn. Think of this as baptismal by fire. You will go to Howard, and for every awesome experience you have, you will receive an equally as curious experience. I call it "curious" because I hesitate to refer to these experiences in the negative. It's a baptism of curiosities, indeed…you will be ignorant to what you are experiencing, you will process these moments for yourself, and they will slowly change you…mostly for the better (at least I'd like to think so). Most certainly, the changes will be exactly what will be required for you to live the life that you will come to live at our current age of 31.

You are probably confused. I apologize. I should be a little clearer about what I mean. See, little did you know when you made the decision to attend, that Howard University is a place of historical significance. It is a place…THE place…where African-Americans go to receive a two-prong, world class education. Of course, the first prong, the classroom education, is top notch. You will have professors that will expect nothing short of excellence. You are a wonderful student, so you will easily give them that. That

is why the worries that are in the back of your head have nothing to do with being fearful of the educational aspect.

You have instead been occasionally wondering what it will be like being so far away from home? Will you make friends easily? Who will be your roommate? Will you get along with folks? What will they be like? Of course, these are valid questions, given that you will be a new college freshman. You are transitioning into a new place in life, so of course these are the thoughts you have. But, along these lines, you will learn about the second prong that Howard will so effortlessly teach you. That prong has everything to do with socialization.

You've never thought about this or experienced it before, but the world is made up of all kinds of people, Summer. And soon, in order to live a life that is better than the one in which you've grown up (which is all you have ever been sure that you wanted), you will be necessarily exposed to those people. To put it plainly, the world is composed of and run by white people. Okay…okay. That's not exactly true. It is probably more precise and accurate to define the universe more broadly, so I will revise my assertion. The world is composed of and run by people who live by a particular set of rules and standards, and many of those people happen to be white people. However, there are also very well to do African-Americans who live and breathe in the same rarified air. And they all know and understand the well-established rules about etiquette, proper hairstyles, the appropriate clothing choices based on the occasion, suitable conversation styles and topics, and the list goes on and on. The reality is you will find out that the true baptism that Howard will give you will be the quick opportunity to learn all of these lessons that Detroit and your family could not begin to teach you.

You will learn all of this, Summer, by observing. You will close up like a flower and protect your story, and you will observe. And largely, and admittedly, sadly, you will spend the great majority of your Howard experience being an observer and protecting yourself. Even after you come out of your shell after joining an organization called Phi Sigma Pi during your junior year, you will still keep a large portion of yourself closed off and protected, and you will primarily spend your time at Howard functioning as an observer. In fact, even now as an adult, I still make concerted efforts to make us be an active participant in everything that we do instead of closing up.

You will not become Greek (even though, you will put forth an effort, and the fact that you will not ultimately become Greek at Howard is actually not your fault). You will not be involved substantively with Homecoming (you will volunteer, but never seek a leadership position). You will not try out to become a Campus Pal or Student Ambassador. You will not do these things, or you will do them in a shy way, because you will be protecting yourself.

You will protect yourself because you are worried what people will think of your past. You will worry because you think that if they find out you don't come from money, they might forget that you have an amazing personality. You feel like the girls are all cuter

and fancier than you, so you will only seek to be the cute boys' friend or study partner. And this is why you're quiet. You will not take risks or do the cool things you would love to try. You will refuse to put yourself out there so that there's no opportunity for rejection. And in a way, for all of the teaching that Howard will bless upon you, it will also reinforce these ideas.

You see, there will be times when you feel that all of the people with grand families do become members of the best campus organizations. It will definitely seem like all of the prettiest girls are dating the best looking boys. All of the cool people who will oddly know one another on your first day of Freshman move in will continue to hang out together as the years go by. So, while I am extremely complimentary of the Howard experience, I am not ignorant that it will also isolate you in an unfair way.

But, that's why I am writing to you. I am here to give you some much needed advice. As you go through your college experience, particularly during your first two years, please take some risks. Do your best to have a great time because you are wonderful, and your personality will always, always win people over, and you have earned the right to enjoy yourself. You need to understand that your story is not a pathetic story; your story is a story of triumph against seemingly insurmountable odds! And you will find love…he won't be a Howard man, and he won't be the safe person from high school that you are currently leaning toward, but he will be an upstanding man and father, and together, you guys will achieve great things.

And, then there's Howard. My advice is to enjoy your Howard experience instead of sitting on the sidelines wasting time being afraid. Meet as many people as you can. Your future alma mater is a school that produces CEOs, judges, professors, actors and actresses, singers, dancers, musicians, lawyers (including you!), businessmen and women, engineers, entrepreneurs, politicians, news anchors, and theologians, to name a few. Get to know your classmates! Go to every Homecoming event! Enjoy DC! Take the Chinatown bus to New York! Date guys…lots and lots of guys. Get into trouble (but not too much trouble)! Drink before you are 21! These are all of the fun things that college is about, and you have earned the right to take it all in, and you will have the privilege of doing do so at the best college on this planet.

My final piece of advice is to be confident in who you are. God has given you all of this talent (yes, talent) and opportunity for a reason. After 31 years, the best I can guess is that he probably expects for you (more accurately, us) to share our story with the world. He expects us to be a shining example to prove that a person does not have come from perfect beginnings in order to achieve a full and successful life. So, for all of the times that something happens to make you question your worth, ignore it. Every time you feel an inkling of self-doubt or pity, stomp it out. Do observe your surroundings, but relish in them. Your time at Howard will be shorter than you can ever imagine, and soon you will be me, reflecting on the past, smiling at the fun you had, and trying to figure out the things you'd make happen if you could do it all over again.

I love you, and I will always be here for you. Now go be great, and again, CONGRATULATIONS! You'll forever be glad that you went to Howard U.

Your very best friend,

31-Year-Old Summer

Xavier's Letter

August 23, 1997
Xavier Claiborne
326 Harkness Hall

Dear Xavier,

As I write this letter to you--a full 16 years post entering Hampton University--I am tempted to recommend that you to do nothing different. You may ask why, but it's because as a 34-year-old adult, I am nothing more than the sum of my experiences. But as I sit back and reflect on those experiences, I cannot help but to spell them out for you, elevate them in your 18 year old consciousness so that as you experience them, you know to cherish each and every moment that you're about to embark upon. Your combined experiences and the people that you are about to meet over the next four years will not only shape your current being, but the person you are to become as an adult—a future husband, father and productive member of society.

The first words of Hampton's alma mater are *"O Hampton, a thought sent from Heaven above, to be a great soul's inspiration"*. You can truly find your life's inspiration through the people you will meet very soon. The first piece of advice that I give to you is not to let your previous experiences limit your next opportunity. Many of the people you'll meet will be those whose experiences are vastly different from yours—some coming from wealthier and better-educated families, but others who share your humble beginnings. You have much to learn from each of the individuals and communities you meet at Hampton University, as the people you meet will be your inspiration to achieve greatness.

You will achieve greatness not solely due to the people you meet at Hampton, but because of who and how you were raised. Although you grew up in a single parent household, you had a loving family and a great support system. You are and have always been a leader; make sure this does not change whatever your situation. *"Thy foundation firm and the roof tree out spread"* describes what you're about to experience—already possessing a firm foundation prior to Hampton, coupled with an amazing opportunity to be great...an opportunity to spread your wings and get to know those outside of your comfort zone. Grow.

When your four years at Hampton are over...and you reflect back on what you've been through and what you've learned, you'll want to let the world know the transformation that you've just experienced. You are and will be the epitome of a Hampton Man. The second portion of the alma mater continues *"O Hampton, we never can make thee a song, except as our lives to the singing"*, will describe how you'll feel when this great experience on-campus has come to a close. But know that once you graduate in four short years, these words should continue to serve as a guide as you enter into manhood.

As the next four years will be an important four years for your development as a man, know that it is also the most exciting four years that you will experience. Make some mistakes. Study hard and play hard. Grow in every aspect of life. But always remember that you're a Hampton Man, and when it's all said and done, your life will do the singing.

Xavier Claiborne, Ph.D.

November 24, 2013

Nora's Letter

Dear 18-year-old self,

Please understand that YOU are enough, just as you are right now. You have never been told otherwise and have always been supported and fiercely confident but entering this next phase of life into adulthood – you will start to question your brilliance. You will feel simply overwhelmed. You will feel a bit inadequate. You will second-guess yourself more than you ever have before. You will learn the lesson of rejection. However, it will all make you stronger and allow you to become your best self.

Throughout this journey, you will feel as if you're losing yourself. Your confidence will shift at times. You will question if you have what it takes to compete – academically, socially and professionally – almost immediately. However, you have to stay the course and continue to live life to your own truth. Don't retreat into what is comfortable and familiar. Don't give in to the pressure of fitting into a certain mold because your individuality will pay off. The world needs you just as you are; so let your light shine, even if it doesn't make sense to you at the moment.

Howard will help to develop your dreams and introduce you to the possibility of greatness but it will not utterly define who you are. But, you will need to step it up. You will have to achieve excellence because there are now a lot of 'big fishes' and doing just enough is no longer adequate, it will only leave you behind your peers. The experiences at Howard will shape your life and will make you beyond prepared for the 'real world'. The lessons that you learn in class and on the 'the yard' will become the basis and platform of great things that you will accomplish.

Years from now you will look back on the next four years as one of your biggest blessings and will laugh at the things that you're now stressing over! You will receive opportunities and participate in things that at this stage of life, you are not aware even exists or tangible to achieve. Your dreams of success will be realized but please stay present in this moment. Take it all in. Soak up the experience, as it will be life changing. You will create some of the best memories ever. You will meet incredible people. You will have fun. You will learn to trust your instinct.

When you walk across the stage, it will not only represent the hard work that you alone have achieved but for all of those who have sowed into you. You will make them proud. You will make you proud. You will pay it forward. At the end of the journey, you will be a child of Howard but first allow her to raise you. Allow her to teach you. This experience will seem difficult but trust me, you are not the only one who feels this way and it does get better; so don't fret because you are ready. You deserve to be here. Remember, you already are enough, so get ready for the ride because this is where the magic starts!

All the best,

Your 30-year-old se

Nia's Letter

18 year old Nia,

Nia, you're currently in your freshman year of college and everything is new and exciting. New friends, living in a new place and most of all, freedom! Freedom from that guy you were dating who didn't really care until you left, freedom from your mom, and freedom from a place that caused so much pain. Most people LOVE San Francisco but you hate it. It has so many bad memories. This is your chance to start over and you know it but what you don't know is that soon and very soon your past will start to haunt you.

A level of insecurity you never knew existed will start to present itself. As you meet people and hear their life stories you'll realize that your upbringing is not normal, and that more often than not, you'll spend your time around girls who don't have a care in the world. They have things that you don't. Those things aren't just material things, they are emotional processes, a level of emotional stability that you don't have. This may be a surprise to you because you feel fine but just you wait, it will rear its ugly head and soon everything will be out of your control.

So it is with humility that I say, go talk to someone. Not just your friends, not a pastor, a licensed counselor. Someone who can help you sort things out before all of the pain and hurt boils over. Don't go home. Yeah, I said it. Don't go home until you are ok. As the years go on, you'll go because that's what everyone does. It's Christmas time and you're supposed to be with your family but you'll hate going home. It'll feel like a trap, like jail, like a reminder that things are not ok.

Invest in yourself. Study abroad and see what the world has to offer. Truly find your passion and operate in it. There's nothing worse than living without a purpose. Save your money. Save some here, save some there and don't touch it. There will come a time when you won't have your scholarship to support you, and you will be on your own in more ways than one.

Love yourself. Love who you are and the way God made you. You are beautiful. Don't compare yourself to others because everyone is unique in their own way. You don't have to catch up or keep up. You are enough right where you are.

Find God. He's always been there but you don't know how to get to him. You'll see other people who grew up in the church and secretly wish you had too. You'll go to chapel and thumb through a Bible only to be embarrassed because you don't know how to find anything. You don't know what the words mean and nothing will make sense but you'll know all the answers you are looking for, all of the things you were never taught, are in those pages. So, find a spiritual guide; someone older who you trust and respect. Someone who can help you along the path to seeking Him.

And lastly, don't be afraid to take a step back from any and all things that no longer serve a purpose in your life. Whether it be relationships with family or friends, don't be afraid to set boundaries. You can't save everyone and your mission in life should not be to save

anyone. Everyone is given their own life. They have to make it beautiful. You'll waste a lot of time trying to save everyone and not enough time trying to heal. Allow yourself time to heal and to truly become all that God has called you to be.

Love,

Future Nia

APPENDIX H

Profiles of "A Hampton Man" and "A Hampton Woman"

A Profile Of A Hampton Man
The Hampton Man Is A Man Who Is...
Is aware of his historical heritage
Respects the rights and cultures of others
Is of strong personal integrity and good character
Is honest and trustworthy
Walks in dignity towards himself and others
Is courteous, reserved, cooperative and self disciplined, respects authority, appreciates
values and demonstrates ethical behaviors
Does not display rude, abusive, or violent behaviors
Does not display intimacy nor violate the sensibilities of others in public
Does not fight, steal, carry or use weapons
SAYS and DOES "NO" to illegal drugs
After all, the HAMPTON MAN is an educated, goal oriented, pace-setting entrepreneur
A compassionate man on a mission;
He realizes the need for proper attire for all occasions
Removes his hat when entering buildings,
Opens and holds door for Hampton Women,
Walks female students from the library to the residence halls at night
He is a gentleman!

Woodson H. Hopewell, Jr.
Dean of Men

A Profile Of A Hampton Woman
The Hampton Woman Is a Woman Who Is...
is of good character
is honest and trustworthy
displays dignity
abides by rule and regulation
is courteous, cooperative, self disciplined
respects authority and the rights of others
Does not display rude or abusive behavior
Displays non-violent behavior
Does not display intimacy in public
Avoids fights
Respects property and is not destructive of it
Is conscious of the importance of being on time
Does not permit men to wear hats in her presence
Wears appropriate attire for the occasion
Does not wear jeans or sneakers in Ogden Hall
Does not carry-on conversations from windows
Is ethical
Is goal-oriented
Respects herself and others
Is a good citizen of the university community and the world at large
Does not downgrade others
Is a future leader with great potential that can be realized with hard work and diligence
is mindful of her legacy

Jewel B. Long
Dean of Women

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