ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	IN THE PURSUIT: BLACK WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN PWI DOCTORAL PROGRAMS & THE USAGE OF BLACK JOY AS PERSISTENCE
	Christina S. Sessoms, Doctor of Philosophy, 2022
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Out of 104,953 doctoral degrees earned by women within the United States in 2019-2020, Black women obtained 10,576 PhDs across the span of academic disciplines, equating to 11.1%, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021). However, research has not done its due diligence of parsing through the data to understand the stories of the women who make up those 10,576 PhDs granted. This dissertation study explores the lived experiences of Black women who specifically transitioned from their undergraduate institutions into doctoral programs at predominately white institutions (PWIs) and how Black joy may be employed as a persistence mechanism toward degree completion. Because no literature exists to understand this community of doctoral students, this groundbreaking study begins with the question of what are the lived experiences of Black women who transition directly from their undergraduate to doctorate at PWIs? The dissertation continues to push further to then question how Black women in doctoral programs understand, experience, and sustain their joy and in what ways does joy

inform persistence and resistance amongst these sista scholars. Utilizing Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) Black Feminist Thought as a theoretical foundation and Black feminist-womanist storytelling as the chosen methodology, I argue that this specific transition is one that must be deeply explored because of unique components and that Black joy does, in fact, serve as a positive mechanism for persistence. Life stories were collected through two interlocking methods of semi-structured interviews and focus groups amongst 14 Black women spanning 12 different academic fields in PhD programs across the United States. By sharing life narratives of Black women in doctoral programs, in-depth insight is gathered concerning reasons for going to graduate school, academic and socialization transitions, three primary barriers to success - age being a salient identity, mental health challenges, and perceived & real pressure, and, lastly, understanding and experiencing joy through self, community, and work. Through this research project, Black women in doctoral programs created space to critique and disrupt the Ivory Tower while producing joy amongst each other.

IN THE PURSUIT: BLACK WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN PWI DOCTORAL PROGRAMS & THE USAGE OF BLACK JOY AS PERSISTENCE

by

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In Memory & Dedication

In memory of

Grandmother
Auntie
Fella
Lex
Grandpa Carl

To my loved ones who couldn't witness this moment.
I hope I've made you all proud.

&

Dedicated to

God
The Fab 5

And the Black women who entrusted me to amplify your stories.
I pray I told them in the most authentic way possible.

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"…weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning."
Psalm 30:5

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Chapter 1: "Am I the only one?": Understanding the Place of Black Women in Higher Education

"What is astonishing is that through all the suffering the dark body endures, there is joy, Black joy."
- Dr. Bettina Love (2019, 15)

How I Began…

I came to the University of Maryland, College Park during Fall of 2015 sight unseen with only my undergraduate experience under my belt. I graduated from Washington State University as a Cum Laude graduate and McNair Scholar with a Bachelor of Arts in Comparative Ethnic Studies. My bachelor's degree shaped my understanding of truth and knowledge, of the material consequences of one's intersectional identities, and of language to understand language to describe the existence of myself and those around me. And so, I came to the University believing that I was going to do dissertation research centered around historically Black sororities and racial identity development because that seemed like it was such a crucial project to explore as I consider the ways in which I developed my Blackness in my own organization. I landed at Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport on August 6th believing in my abilities to succeed and finish my degree in record time. As a fresh 21-year-old only to turn 22 ten days later, I was excited about the adventure ahead of me despite never experienced the metropolitan Washington area (DMV) or graduate culture.

Fast forward to the end of my first year and I was done. I was deeply exhausted. Constant crying. Angry at perceived mistreatment. Most importantly, I grappled with not being the "exception" anymore or of being the "smart Black girl" which was a title that I was bestowed upon me since grade school. I struggled with recognizing and acknowledging that the project that I came in with did not coincide with what I was learning. I struggled with the fast-paced

nature of graduate seminars where I was expected to read 1-2 books per week per class. The courses that I would take surrounding work and labor, the politics of space and its implications, and college choice compelled me to examine my initial research interests. And because of this, a deep, existential panic arose since the initial project idea did not fit who I was becoming as a young scholar.

Despite just receiving news about my failed comprehensive exam in October of 2016, I remember walking from Tawes Hall to the Stamp Student Union building and recognizing the fall crisp leaves under my shoes and just thinking how beautiful, vibrant, and crunchy these leaves were under my feet. It was at that point that I wondered if other Black women experienced the same swirl of emotions in their doctoral programs but also found these small moments to embody a certain happiness.

This project was born out of curiosity and healing for myself when thinking about the trauma of graduate education, thinking about my long nights and tears, but also thinking about those moments that sustained my being. How could I go ahead and use those small moments like the fall leaves to persist through my program? Something kept me here at Maryland despite the numerous trials and tribulations that I experienced. And yet, I continue to struggle to understand what that something consists of. I realized that majority of the struggle associated with the first two years of my program was met and combatted with moments of joy. The first two years were filled with homesickness and mental health bouts of depression and anxiety while trying to handle a level of academic rigor that was previously never encountered before in my undergraduate time. But, those first two years were also met with joyful acts of appreciating the small things such as watching a sunset, strengthening my religious and spiritual faith, and utilizing technology so that I may converse with loved ones back home. During this same

timeframe of 2015-2017, the idea of Black joy resurged through the hashtag of #BlackJoy out of Black Twitter and the showing of a certain type of bliss in spite of tragedies like extrajudicial killings of Black people. I became inspired by the usage of joy as a form of Black resiliency. This is how I came to look at the Black female doctoral student experience through the lens of joy.

Introduction to the Project

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the percentage of distribution of degrees conferred to Black women was 11.1% in 2019-2020 which is the second highest of recipients behind Asian/Pacific Islander women at 13%. This means that of the 104,953 doctoral degrees granted to women, Black women held 10,576 degrees (NCES, 2021). However, when compared to White women at 63% and White men at 67.4%, the number of Black women bestowed a doctoral degree is minimal.

While it is important to know the number of Black women who are matriculating to degree completion, the statistics of Black female doctorates are not inclusive of the full story. First, the percentages reported by the NCES not only include PhDs but also include Ed.D., M.D., D.D.S., law degrees that were classified as professional degrees prior to 2010-2011 (NCES, 2021). In addition, the educational background of the Black women incorporated within these statistics was not flushed out. Black women who transition directly into a doctoral program at a predominately White institution (PWI) from their undergraduate would be considered to be a part of the reported 11.1%. However, the unique transitionary experience is absorbed into a generalized narrative of Black women in graduate school.

This dissertation, *In the Pursuit: Black Women's Experiences in PWI Doctoral Programs & The Usage of Black Joy as Persistence,* examines the lived narratives of Black women who

have transitioned directly from their undergraduate degree into a doctoral program at a PWI without any gap years, work experience, or master's credentials and how Black joy is channeled as a persistence mechanism. Using Black Feminist Thought as the theoretical framework, this project yearns to address the following overarching research question:

1. What are the lived experiences of Black women who transition directly from their undergraduate to doctorate program at predominately white institutions?

The sub-research questions are as follows as well:

2. How do Black women emotionally respond to their experiences in their doctoral programs?
3. When, where, how and with whom do Black women in doctoral programs understand, experience and sustain their joy?
4. To what extent, and in what ways, does joy inform persistence and resistance among Black women pursuing doctorates at PWIs?

I focus specifically on the experiences of Black doctoral women who transition directly from their undergraduate because the intersection of race, gender, and age become salient to their graduate journey. As a young(er), Black woman entering in their respective academic departments outside of the field of education, they are often one of few, if not the only one, within their fields.[1] Graduate education continues to be predominately White and male which then often translates to being under or devalued, hyper (in)visible, or even aggressed through a variety of means.

[1] At 17.7%, Black or African American students were the highest population to receive their doctorate in the field of education compared to 5-7% of white students receiving a doctorate in education. Outside of the field of education, Black or African American students earn their doctorates at decreased rates compared to white students. For example, Black or African American students received approximately 6% of STEM degrees whereas white students received about 14% of STEM degrees (Taylor et. al., 2020).

Study Importance & Contributions

This study is critically important because I found that not enough research exists to understand the different lived experiences of Black women engaging in doctoral education. When one searches for articles for Black women, doctoral education, and/or persistence, there is infrequent and scarce scholarship related to Black women in doctoral programs and their experiences[2]. This is important to state because too many brilliant minds are slipping through the cracks and not completing their degrees. The intent of this study is to add to the minimal body of literature and knowledge addressing the Black female doctoral student experience as well as persistence factors such as Black joy. To my knowledge, this is the only study that addresses a specific trajectory of Black women going into doctoral programs by examining those who go into PhD programs right after their undergraduate degrees. A lot of what was shared with me was traumatic, but my project contributes to the affirmation and healing of Black women and their own contributions across the country as well as even myself. To have the validating (and joyful) space with other Black women especially through the focus groups achieves my primary goal of this dissertation study.

As Cockrell & Shelley (2011) articulates, a "gap exists in research related to doctoral education practices in the areas of student life and persistence (Gaff, 2002; Wang, 2003)." The articles that do exist are specified to a particular factor of persistence such as financial aid (Gururaj et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2010) or for particular populations such as biomedical doctoral students (Estrada et al., 2019). Unfortunately, the distinct focus of these articles are not focused

[2] As outlined by Shavers & Moore (2014), Smith (2004), Ellis (2001) and Nettles (1990), research on Black women in doctoral education is limited due to the commonly held belief that because Black women earn more doctoral degrees than Black men, then it is assumed that they're succeeding. Consequently, this causes Black women's obstacles to be overlooked and under-researched.

on Black women and especially Black women who transition directly from their undergraduate institutions. Centering Black women and their joy when examining doctoral education creates an impact beyond their immediate needs but will address issues that affect all graduate students. As the Combahee River Collective states in their Statement, "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (Taylor, 2020). In addition, this study gains insight into how joy, specifically, is understood, experienced, and channeled as a persistence mechanism toward degree completion. By understanding the ways in which Black women navigate doctoral programs through the usage of joy, there is greater understanding around persistence which will increase retention and, ultimately, time to degree completion.

Through the usage of individual interviews and focus groups comprised of Black female doctoral students, this vitally important project brings two fields - American Studies and Higher Education - into conversation with one another as few projects merge humanistic and educational thought. As George Lipsitz writes as a part of the 2015 American Studies Association (ASA) White Paper Series, American Studies is "an academic enterprise that monitors, registers, and responds to lived social experience" and part of those lived experiences involve higher/graduate education. Altogether, this study aims to illuminate not only the challenges of Black women who delved into doctoral education but also disrupts the common deficit approach by inserting Black joy as a cultural strength. Many pieces of academic scholarship will make plight, mental health problems, and, ultimately, the departure of programs as the epicenter of the work rather than exploring how Black women are surviving among programs that were never designed for their academic or professional success. The discussion surrounding Black women's understanding,

production, and sustainment of Black joy is important in understanding how a positive emotion can contribute to higher levels of persistence.

To understand the life histories of a specific student population enrolled in higher education will shift how to best recruit, support, and retain Black woman in doctoral programs across disciplines. The anecdotes shared by the participants prove that Black women who transition directly from their undergraduate have a unique experience within doctoral education.

Defining Our Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will be used as a common reference point:

Black or African American: A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Predominately white institutions: A college or university with the majority of its enrolled students of European origin.[3] The PWI classification recognizes how race and racism are considered to be cornerstones of how the institution was built and continues to operate (Bourke, 2016).

Joy: the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires (Merriam-Webster, 2018).[4]

[3] In this case, majority equates to 50 percent or more of the student enrollment being white (Brown & Dancy, 2010).

[4] Although joy and happiness are often used interchangeably, these two emotions are different. As Tracey Michae'l Lewis-Giggetts (2022, xix) would argue, happiness is "temporary at best" and does not have the capability to withstand life's trials. Joy, instead, "indicates something deeper, more embodied, more acute - it is akin to aliveness, or animating force" and is linked to "experiences of loving and being loved" (Moschella, 2015).

Black joy: an emotion rooted in the cultural experiences and expressions of Black people across the Diaspora that serves as a strategic and radical demonstration of sustainment, humanity, and hope (Lewis-Giggetts, 2021, p. xx-xxi).

Literature Review

To obtain a position within the ivory tower of academia as the pinnacle tenure-tracked faculty member, one typically obtains a doctorate. The journey to procure the elite credential behind ones' name is filled with obstacles that impedes degree completion. Black women, in particular find themselves embodying a duality of marginalized identities - Blackness and womanhood - placing their bodies in a precarious location within higher education (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Despite impediments to their success, there still are Black women who continue to persist through their programs to become scholars and experts in their respective fields. This literature review will examine the various factors that impact the experiences and narratives of Black women in higher education - first as undergraduates and then into graduate school as doctoral students particularly.

History of Black Women and Higher Education

Due to the political, economic, and social institution of slavery, enslaved Black women's access to formal education was often minimal which then forced clandestine and ingenious methods to acquire literacy outside of their difficult labor (Williams, 2005). Duties include serving as field hands for a variety of crops, caring for livestock, child rearing for the master's children, sewing, cooking and preparing the meals, cleaning, and laundering. The multiplicity of Black women's bodies allowed for them to labor in and outside of the plantation home. Although the intention was to restrict Black women of their personal agency, these women resisted and "subverted the master-slave relationship" by developing literacy as cited by Williams (2005). For

the free Black women, they too believed in education as a form of mobility and resistance (Ricks, 2014). Despite having limited employment opportunities, free Black women sought out to become teachers – an occupation that proved to be dangerous throughout the slavery and Reconstruction eras. Many states such as South Carolina passed slave codes which were harsh state laws that established the status of slaves through the rights of their owners. These laws often prevented slaves from learning to read and write (Rasmussen, 2010).

Despite opposition and legal obstacles, slaves and freed people alike found secretive ways of teaching themselves and others how to read, write, and perform mathematics. However, in predominately Northern cities with high freed Black population such as Baltimore, schools were established to teach the children. Black women such as Frances Watkins Harper, Charlotte Forten Grimké, and Ann Plato were a part of a committed cadre of Black women who taught in northern schools dedicated to the uplifting, educational experience of Black Americans (Harley et al., 2002).

The limited educational space for Black Americans expanded with the Northern win in the American Civil War of 1861-1865, the declaration of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 thus contributing to the abolition of slavery in the United States. After the cease of the war, Black people realized that hard work was not the only aspect that can promote upward social mobility. The necessity to capitalize on the once clandestine educational system became evident. Newly freed Black slaves believed that an education, which was previously unavailable to them, would have the ability to detachment themselves from slavery and their subordinate status in society (Allen & Jewell, 2002). During the Reconstruction period, newly freed slaves who were starving for educational opportunities were aided by the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, often

referred to as the Freedmen's Bureau. The federal bureau was created in 1865 as an agency for freedmen as well as poor Whites and refugees. One aspect of the Freedmen's Bureau was coordinating the search for teachers to educate students young and old. Black women soon answered the call so as to replace many White Northern women. Many middle-class Black women became trained and employed as teachers and contributed to the advancement of the race through education.

In order to add to the formation of the Freedmen's Bureau institutions, Black women accessed two options for their own education and training. Some women attended HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) for their training whereas other women sought out traditionally white institutions of higher education. For example, in 1862, Mary Jane Patterson became the first Black woman to graduate with a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College, a private liberal arts college founded in Ohio in 1833 (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2015). In terms of graduate education, northern schools were considered to be the only option as southern states continued to ratify racist legislature to legally uphold racial segregation. This is not to say that Black women automatically flourished on northern campuses. According to the National Women's History Museum (2009), harsh and uninviting campus climates did not impede Georgiana R. Simpson, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, and Eva Dykes from receiving doctoral degrees from various institutions in 1921. All three Black women attended schools located within the northern region of the United States - University of Chicago, University of Pennsylvania, and Radcliffe College in Massachusetts (National Women's History Museum, 2009). As a highlighted figure, Dr. Georgiana Rose Simpson earned a Ph.D. in Germanics from the University of Chicago and is considered to the first Black woman in the U.S. to obtain a Ph.D. on June 14, 1921.

Chilly Campus Climates for Black Students on PWIs

The experience of Black students on PWI campuses is largely researched, creating a robust body of scholarship. This section specifically examines one specific element of that literature - chilly campus climate experienced by Black undergraduate students. Research indicates that while White students perceive the PWI campus as being open and welcoming, students of color continue to have differentiated perceptions (Rankin & Reason, 2005). Students of color, instead, believe the PWI campus climate to be chilly, unwelcoming, and hostile leading to feelings of non-safety (Hurtado et al., 1998; Rankin & Reason 2005). In part there is a feeling of a negative campus racial climate due to the pervasion of microaggressions - subtle insults that may be characterized by verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual cues (Solórzano et al., 2000). First coined by Chester Pierce in the 1970s, racial microaggressions are "innocuous" while having the "cumulative weight of their never-ending burden [as] the major ingredient in Black-white interactions" (Pierce et al., 1978). Solórzano et al.'s 2000 study demonstrates how racial microaggressions impact the campus racial climate and the experiences of Black college students through a critical race theory framework. Within the classroom, Black students felt "invisible" and dismissed when experiences surrounding Blackness were "omitted, distorted, and stereotyped in their course curriculum" (Solórzano et al., 2000). This is represented by the narratives of two Black female students. One student shared, "I think that when the professors see that there's fewer of you, they're less likely to address your concerns." Another Black female student noted, "When she [the professor] gets to talking about the subject of racism, she doesn't say 'racism,' and I'm like, "No, it's racism.' She doesn't quite understand" (Solórzano et al., 2000). The articulation by Black students within the Solórzano et al. (2000) study confirms what Fries-Britt & Griffin explores in their 2007 article, "The Black Box: How High-Achieving

Blacks Resist." The high-achieving Black students within Fries-Britt & Griffin's research experience what are called "minority status stressors," causing Black students to internalize higher surveillance and judgement being passed by their White faculty members and peers based off racialized expectations. One of the most negative racial assumptions White students, faculty, and staff held about Black students in the 2000 study by Solórzano et al., was the misconception of how Black students were able to take up academic space in the first place - affirmative action. One student recalled:

> "Like, a couple of our class discussions were about the whole Proposition 209 issue and affirmative action and [the White] students really though that the only reason Black students were getting into these universities was because of affirmative action. A lot of them could not fathom that we earned our way in here" (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 67).

Outside of the classroom, Black students on PWI campuses continue to experience a negative racial climate as the university still is a microcosm of society at large. For example, Black students highlighted instances in which they were under surveillance or singled out by campus police (Solórzano et al., 2000). This experience mirrors those within Shaun Harper's article, "'Niggers No More': A Critical Race Counternarrative on Black Male Student Achievement at Predominately White Colleges and Universities," in which Black males felt as though they needed to constantly prove they were not "criminals from the local community that did not belong on campus" (Harper, 2009). Black students then look to create an escape from harmful microaggressions and stereotypes, to make sense of campus experiences, to find support & validation for their realities, and to identify & organize responses (Grier-Reed, 2010). Black students at PWIs often find it necessary to create their own social and cultural networks to combat perceived exclusion at PWIs due to the incongruities between their cultural community

and the campus community (Allen, 1992). With that being said, the formation of a Black cultural community through organizations, programming/events, and spaces serves as a "sanctuary" for Black students against a harsh campus climate (Grier-Reed, 2010).

Black Women in Doctoral Education

The outlined issues for undergraduate Black students at PWIs do not cease when the Black woman enter into a doctoral program. Not only does the Black female doctoral student have to deal with the general campus climate but must also intimately navigate the departmental culture as well (Morelle, 1996; Joseph, 2012). The coping mechanisms employed during the undergraduate career of the Black woman to overcome racial and gendered oppression may shift to accommodate the politics of their program in addition to the campus. These strategies range from silence to active resistance and have been used to assist in the persistence and preservation of the Black female graduate student (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Robinson, 2013). This is vital because for the Black female doctoral student studying in her department there are many hindrances elevated by the double bind of race and gender such as student socialization, psychological issues such as imposter syndrome, and lack of mentoring and advising.

Student Socialization. One of those deterrents consists of the socialization process. Socialization is defined as "the process through which an individual learns to adopt the values, skills, attitudes, norms, and knowledge needed for membership in a given society, group, or organization (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Tierney, 1997). Put simply, student socialization as a graduate student is vital as it allows students to navigate complex environments and interactions so that there is adherence to norms and practices. However, because of the dual marginality of Black women, the process of student socialization is somewhat complicated (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). For example, other students may not feel inclined to be inclusive in forming study groups

thus excluding Black women from accessing capital other than intellectual knowledge (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Socializing with White faculty is also difficult for many of the Black women studied in Johnson-Bailey's 2004 article, "Hitting and Climbing the Proverbial Wall: Participation and Retention Issues for Black Graduate Women." Interactions between White professors and Black female graduate students "appear woefully inadequate and/or insignificant" (Johnson-Bailey, 2004).

Imposter Syndrome. Imposter syndrome was first introduced through the work of Clance and Imes (1978) to describe the "describe the traits and behaviors of a group of high-achieving women who were struggling to internalize their success" (Parkman, 2016). "Imposter phenomenon represents characteristics and behaviors of individuals who do not attribute their success to their own intellectual abilities and prowess" thus inducing feelings of fraudulence, inadequacy, and unworthiness (Clance & Imes, 1978; Parkman, 2016). Research has shown a relationship between imposter syndrome and mental health triggers in students (Cokely et al., 2013). More specifically, imposter syndrome positively links with anxiety, depression, psychological distress, and minority student status stress (Cokely et al., 2013). The stress associated with being a graduate student is one that is heavily researched. According to the study, Stress and Relief for American Graduate Students (2011) by the University of Texas at Austin's Sociology department, 43% of all study participants reported experiencing more stress than they could handle with Ph.D. students expressing the greatest amounts of stress. "Of the students polled, more than half listed stress or burnout as a major concern, about a quarter cited feeling like an outsider, and nearly a third listed their relationships with professors" (University of Texas at Austin, 2011). In regard to the feeling of being an outsider in academia, Patricia Hill

Collins (1986) contends that Black women hold an "outsider within" status.[5] This metaphor serves to not only acknowledge the position of frustrating marginality of Black women in academia but to also recognize the experienced realities and the "special perspectives and insights" to others who are "outsiders" as well (Collins, 1986).

Mentoring & Advising. When looking at the results of the study by Patterson-Stephens et al. (2017), one of the major challenges faced by the participatory Black female doctoral students included mentoring. Those who did not receive mentoring within their experience as a doctoral student felt as though "they were missing information that they could not attain from other resources, or that lessons were learned at a slower pace" (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). A study by Howard-Vital and Morgan (1993) reiterates the benefits that are outlined in Patterson-Stephens et al. (2017); psychosocial benefits such as self-esteem, motivation, and self-confidence were perceived functions of mentoring relationships. In addition, intellectual ideas could be furthered developed by the guidance of a mentor in addition to access to informal networking, advice, encouragement, and feedback on performance in seminars, research activities and teaching (Patton, 2002). And yet, many Black female graduate students are not able to identify a mentor.

Again, while Black women graduated and continued in their higher education pursuit, the perceptions by their White faculty members may not have changed from the undergraduate experience. "Duality of oppression may manifest when identifying advisors and mentors who have implicit biases about women and/or people of color" (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Johnson-Bailey, 2004). This results in a greater desire by Black female graduate students to seek

[5] This concept of "outsider within" will be elaborated under the theoretical framework section in which Patricia Hill Collins' work on Black Feminist Thought is discussed.

fellow Black female faculty members and staff for mentorship instead. This practice has proven to be beneficial to the Black female graduate student. Grant (2012) looks at Black women in educational leadership doctoral programs and the significance of mentoring. Grounding the study in the narratives of five former Black female doctoral students, Grant (2012) examines the benefits of same sex/same race mentors. The participants found a greater sense of comfort and confidence knowing that personal business attached to racial and gendered challenges would remain confidential in their relationships with their Black female mentors (Grant, 2012). The responses regarding trust alludes to the "culture of dissemblance" as outlined by Clark-Hine (1995). This performed process is "the behavior and attitudes of Black women that create the appearance of openness and disclosure, but actually shield the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors" (Clark-Hine, 1995). In other words, Clark-Hine alludes to a sense of code-switching that Black women exhibit in and out of academic spaces. Grant's 2012 study also supports the results of Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) in which mentoring relationships were found to be contextual in nature thus resulting in a "counter-space" for graduate women where joy can be found.

Navigating the Doctoral Landscape: Joy & All Things Black

The phenomenon of joy has been theorized by Black feminist scholars such as Gina Dent, Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, and philosopher Cornell West. Dent (1992) argues that joy is about the potential of coexistence within another sphere of knowledge - one that may not have previously accepted the Black body before. Alternatively, this means that joy serves as a space to combat and cohabitate with trauma, suffering, and pain that impacts the Black body daily. The argument put forth by Dent is one that diverges away from historical theorization of joy. For many scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and Audre Lorde, joy is usually attached to a sexual

politic. Collins (2004) writes how by engaging the "honest body" one is able to find all "forms of sexual expression that brings pleasure and joy." Lorde (1978) describes what is called the "erotic" as "the physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us" (pp. 55). As a sensual feeling, one of the ways how the erotic functions is through sharing joy as a bridge built across sharers thus establishing a basis of understanding (Lorde, 1978). Outside of the sexual politic attached to joy, Cornell West (1997) argues that joy attempts to bring people together as well through "non-market values." These values include love, care, kindness, service, solidarity, and the struggle for justice (West, 1997).

As of recent, the phenomenon on Black joy resurged across social media platforms as a framework to understand a certain form of liberation from oppressive, institutional constraints and structures. This resurgence is evident on social media platforms such as Twitter. The #BlackJoy is a prominent hashtag on Twitter with particular attention on Black Twitter, an online assemblage of Black users focused on social, cultural, political, and economic issues of interest to the Black community. When discussing Black oral culture online, Lu & Steele (2019), with support by Chapman (2017), Blackness historically is disassociated from joy because of the subjection of violence and oppression preventing folks from being worthy of joy. "The expression of joy is a subversive intervention insofar as it asserts Black people as possessing a full range of emotions" (Lu & Steele, 2019). This means that by Black people outwardly exuding and performing joyful activity and behavior, it displays a depth of humanity that previously has not been bestowed upon this population. As Tracey Michae'l Lewis-Giggetts (2022) emphasizes a similar point when writing, "Choosing to express our joy loudly and without reservation is directly connected to bringing our Imago Dei (image of God) humanity front and center in the

movement. And that's a necessary form of resistance because it clearly punches the lights out of the pervasive dehumanization we encounter on any and every other day" (p.7).

In regard to higher education, there is little to no literature that examines the usage of joy as it relates to Black students at the undergraduate or graduate level. Argued by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2019), feeling race does not always constitute negativity thus creating the room for the work of scholar Antar Tichavakunda (2019). Most recently, Tichavakunda (2021) argues that joy, as a positive emotional response, is formed through race and examines Black joy through recreation and celebration by Black students at historically white institutions. One of the primary findings of Tichayakunda's 2021 work that is integral to this dissertation is that universities inhibit Black joy outside of racially- affirming spaces through institutional practices and policies. This is seen through the policing of homecoming festivities, graduation celebrations, and on/off campus parties associated with historically Black Greek-lettered organizations known as the Divine Nine.

Theoretical Framework

The primary theoretical framework utilized for this study is Black feminist thought (BFT) as coined by Patricia Hill Collins (2000). Collins' theorization of BFT proves to be valuable when examining Black women in doctoral programs. No one has previously done scholarship about this particular community of women so I argue that BFT is still applicable and relevant to the work of this dissertation. Black feminist thought allows for understanding in how race and gender intertwine to inform how one moves through their department, college, and even campus as a whole.

Black women intellectuals and activists began to understand that traditional feminism did not address the complexities of race and gender combined. That discovery emerged the need to

speak to and theorize specifically about the Black female experience thus causing the inception of BFT. BFT is the belief that Black women are positioned differently in society due to the combination of their race, gender, and socio-economic class. The Combahee River Collective (2014), a radical Black lesbian organization dedicated to challenging White feminism, capitalism, and other forms of institutional oppression, early on refers to this combination as "interlocking systems of oppression." The interlocking systems refers to various identities that have been historically subjected to oppression (ie: race, class, and gender) and are defined through a "matrix of domination" (Collins, 2000; The Combahee River Collective, 2014). The matrix of domination speaks to the interconnectedness of different social identities and classifications. Collins' naming of identity consideration alludes to and reinforces the idea of intersectionality - an idea first officially coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1993) in her work discussing male violence against women. As Collins (2000) eloquently writes,

> "Using the term 'Black feminism' disrupts the racism inherent in presenting feminism as a for-whites-only ideology and political movement. Inserting the adjective 'Black' challenges the assumed whiteness of feminism and disrupts the false universality of this term for both white and Black women" (pp.12).

I understand this to mean that Black women desired to interject a new thought into traditional feminism that historically aligns with White women who did not have to contend with a racial component of identity.

Within BFT, there are three outlined primary themes (Collins, 2000; Counts, 2012; Taylor 1998). The first being the ability for Black women to redefine and reshape the value associated to their bodies which ultimately will counter negative images of Black womanhood. In terms of graduate education, research concerning Black women has not always been

conducted by them or framed within their worldview. Thus, Black feminist thought allows for an appropriate context for the proposed study. In addition, Black women are also able to "confront and dismantle the 'overarching' and 'interlocking' structure of domination" as well as to combine political and intellectual thought and action (Collins, 2000). Finally, the skills to resist discrimination comes from the Black woman's ability to embrace culture. This will be seen by examining how joy is experienced by this particular population. All three themes speak to Black female graduate students at PWIs by providing a richer framework to understand the perspectives, experiences, and standpoints of Black women.

Collins and her concept of BFT "suggests that marginal positions in academic settings have been occupied by African American women" (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, pp. 23). The peripheral position that Black women have occupied is perceived as what Collins (2000) calls the "outsider within" status. In relation to this paper, "outsider within" status means that Black women who are graduate students still experience an unequal distribution of social and political power due to their race and gender. This may consist of doing extra forms of labor for the department or poor student evaluations due to White students not being able to "read" Black faces very well (Lazos, 2012). Counts (2012) writes that the "outsider within" status results in the commodification of Black women thus causing "social institutions to 'hand-pick' Black women to serve as examples of their commitment to diversity and inclusion, while allowing the same unequal power relations/conditions which created the 'outsider within' status to exist in the first place, to remain unchallenged" (Collins, 2000, pp.30; Counts, 2012).

Doing the Work - Methodology & Methods

In order to study Black women within doctoral programs at PWIs who have completed this unique transition, Black feminist-womanist storytelling is utilized as the designated

methodology. Black feminist-womanist storytelling is the blend of autoethnography, storytelling, Black women's language and literacy practices, and both Black feminist and womanist theories. As cited by Gilliam & Toliver (2021), Baker-Bell (2017) argues that this particular methodology's "theoretical and methodological combination provides Black women with a means to collect, write, analyze, and theorize our stories while we simultaneously heal from them." The autoethnographic component allows for the centering of personal experiences, intertwining the personal with others, self-flection engagement, and the "balance our academic lives alongside our emotional and creative existences" (Gilliam & Toliver, 2021). Black feminist-womanist storytelling is vital to the execution of this project because this methodology will amplify and illuminate the voices of the intended study's population and provide the space for me, as the researcher, to share my experiences as well. This specific form of methodology creates and solidifies Black women's knowledge and experiences as sources of legitimacy (Haddix, 2016). The art of storytelling "considers story as a vehicle to transmit our knowledges, our experiences, our struggles, and our triumphs to the world in hopes that these narratives promote self and communal healing as well as societal change" (Gilliam & Toliver, 2021). By using Black feminist-womanist storytelling, the stories and life histories of Black doctoral women who have undergone this specific transition will be gathered through both personal interviews and focus groups as the intended methods.

Data Collection

In order to gather data, I placed my dissertation flyer in various professional listservs such as SisterMentors, a DC-based organization dedicated to the doctoral education of women of color, on multiple social media platforms such as the BLK Doc Students chat on GroupMe, in Facebook groups including the Women of Color in Graduate School, Women and Nonbinary

People of Color in Grad School, and on my personal page.[6] However, the primary social media platform that was utilized was Instagram through tagging the following pages: @blkwomenstudies, @diversityinacademia, @blackphdnetwork, @blackwomanphd, @notsoivorytower, @citeasista, @blkingradschool, and @academeology. This garnered a lot of attention through likes, shares, and comments tagging qualified participants. The flyer also transversed beyond platforms that I personally utilize and entered Twitter through multiple users such as @SOCYsimone which received 269 retweets, 8 quote tweets, and 179 likes.

In addition, I also used snowball sampling to find participants as well. Originally introduced as a way to study social network structures, snowball sampling is a method conveniently studies "hard-to-reach, or equivalently, hidden populations" (Heackthorn, 2011). This includes populations that may be geographically dispersed or when the desired population is relatively small in comparison to the general community (Heckathorn, 2011). Because of the uncertainty of the specific number of Black women in their PhD programs, snowball sampling proved to be helpful because participants were able to pass along their associates' contact information as well. This tactic was particularly advantageous because there is not one specific institution that holds a high saturation of Black female doctoral students within one geographic region as graduate schools across the nation accept Black women. The usage of referrals by participants at the end of their interviews proved to be extremely helpful. In addition, the number of Black female doctoral students who have made the direct transition is unknown as data does not disaggregate by educational background, race, and gender as stated before.

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[6] It is important to note that while I cannot assume the racial identity of those participating in the GroupMe chat as well as the Instagram and Facebook pages, the administrators of the these groups screened and admitted people who adhere to the group's racial and academic purposes. This, in turn, creates a "verification" process of sorts with those who are interviewed.

Through my professional networks, posting on social media and snowball sampling, I attracted participants who fit the criteria of the study. Initially, the study looked for a sample size of approximately nine to twelve self-identifying Black women who have transitioned directly from their undergraduate into a Ph.D. program at a predominately White institution (PWI). She must be at least one semester out following the first academic year of her doctoral program but not at the dissertation stage. This parameter is placed due to wanting the participants to be far along in their program to adequately reflect at least the first year but not too far out where remembering becomes difficult. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the participant needed to live within the metropolitan D.C. area otherwise known as the DMV (District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia) due to the high concentration of universities and colleges in the area. By establishing regional parameters, in-person interviews will be conducted rather than telephone interviews due to creating a comfortable personable interaction between the interviewer and interviewee (Colombotos, 1969).

However, because of COVID-19, IRB approval of this dissertation project changed because in-person human subject research was prohibited. In-person interviews were no longer an option thus resulting in the relaxing of geographic restrictions and opening up the criteria to interview Black women across the country. Once the criteria of being located in the DMV was no longer, I received 20 responses and 16 self-identifying Black women were selected based on their program, location of graduate programs, and undergraduate experience. It was especially important to diversify the undergraduate institution type so that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are represented accurately. HBCUs historically provide a pipeline for Black students into graduate education as highly researched particularly through the hard sciences (National Academy of Sciences, 2011). From those invitations sent via secure

communication through university Gmail, 14 women responded and agreed to participate in the study (Refer to Appendix A).

Within the humanities, three women represented American Studies, Africana Studies, and Rhetoric in doctoral programs located in Rhode Island, Kansas, and Maryland. The social sciences remained the largest population of participants. Seven women enrolled in Comparative Human Development, Clinical Psychology, Sociology, Counseling Psychology, and Political Science programs in states spanning from Illinois, Texas, Michigan, Indiana and Florida. Three women representing STEM, commonly known as science, technology, engineering, and math, represented three states of Maryland, Texas, and Florida. One lone participant is enrolled in an education doctoral program in the state of Maryland.

Once the participant was confirmed, a link through HubSpot, an online scheduler, was sent to set up their individual interview. Interviews were conducted over Zoom due to COVID-19 and were of semi-structured nature of approximately 45 minutes to an hour.[7] Having semi-structured interviews allows for open-ended questions and gives participants the space to explore and expand upon their thoughts and experiences. Memo notes were taken during and after the interview indicating body language, tone and pitch of voice, and my initial reactions/thoughts to the participant.

From there, focus groups were utilized.[8] Considered to be a "very innovative research method," a focus group uses informal discussion among a group of people so as to gather information on a particular topic (Acocella, 2012). Focus groups serve as a tool to stimulate participants which raises "inter-subjective representations" as well as offer clarification on

[7] Refer to Appendix B to see the individual interview questions.
[8] Refer to Appendix C to see the focus group questions.

individual opinions and positions (Acocella, 2012). Focus groups within this study operate as a form of triangulation. By using focus groups as a secondary collection method, evident themes found in the individual interviews will be member-checked thus allowing for the space to elicit feedback by members of the studied population. This, in turn, establishes a higher level of trustworthiness of findings through these two steps.

Four focus groups were organized with the intent of having no more than four women in each group. However, due to scheduling and cancellations, there was one group that included 5 women and one group that included two women. One woman, Alexis, did not respond to the focus group request email thus only 13 women participated in the focus groups. For the purpose of this study, the focus groups were recorded so as to capture not only the verbal cues but also the body language (ie: visceral reactions) to the discussion. Both the individual interviews and focus groups were recorded via Zoom and saved securely on my password-protected laptop.

Data Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed through Rev, a speech to text online platform, and were edited by myself to do a verbatim transcription. From there, the interviews and focus groups were placed within the qualitative coding software, Dedoose, to conduct a combination of inductive and deductive coding. By combining both inductive and deductive approaches, I deductively started with a codebook based on my research questions while continuing to inductively arrive at new codes when sifting through the data. The themes evident through coding will speak to the experiences of the interviewees.

Chapter Review

Chapter one, "Am I the only one?": Understanding the Place of Black Women in Higher Education, delves into literature delineating the history of Black women in higher education at

large and graduate education specifically. This chapter will also be dedicated to address the so what of the study, theoretical framework, research questions, and background of the problem. Chapter two, Gettin 'through the Door: How, Why, & When Black Girls Enter Graduate Education, will start off with discussing who these women are, their undergraduate experiences, reasons why they decide to go into a PhD program, and the transition from the undergraduate institution directly into the doctoral experience with particular attention to the first year. Within this chapter, I explore the academic and social transition with peers and faculty through advising in particular. An analysis of these experiences through a Black feminist lens will discuss the impact of race, gender, and age on Black women's mental health while engaging in doctoral education for Chapter 3, "That's not my knowledge bank": The Mental Process of a Black Female Doctoral Student Putting on Her "Big Girl Panties." Barriers concerning maturation, imposter syndrome, and microaggressions associated with being the "only one" are all issues outlined in chapter three. In addition, I explore the importance of including age as a salient identity in understanding the experience of Black women in graduate school. In the final analysis chapter of this dissertation, Chapter 4, Walkin' in Joy: Making the Finish Line, is dedicated to the joy that contributes to the sustainment of Black women in doctoral programs at predominately White institutions. For the participants, joy is seen, cultivated, and experienced through the production of work, sustainment of self, and engulfing themselves in their respective communities. Chapter 5 is the conclusion chapter titled "This Ivory Tower is Real Ivory": Black Women Joyfully Disrupting Academia. This closing chapter overviews the dissertation as well as provides implications for future research and practice. It is my hope that this project changes and enhances doctoral education for all Black women across academic disciplines, programs, and institutions.

Chapter 2: Gettin' through the Door: How, Why, & When Black Girls Enter Graduate Education

"Congratulations! You have been admitted!"

The celebratory greeting and its' semblances are a standard for any acceptance letter when applying to academic programs. Based on the data cited in chapter one regarding the percentage of Black women with PhDs, the receiving of such a letter is not as frequent in relation to other racial and gendered groups.[9] Typically, elation rises to the surface often resulting in tears of happiness, screaming, jumping up and down, calling of loved ones, or even silence met with disbelief that you actually got in. The acceptance letter is an indication that your possible academic contributions are plausible, but this does not include the hidden, fine print of graduate education. The verbiage of the acceptance letter does not indicate the arduous academic and socializing journey ahead. Black women will apply to doctoral programs across disciplines but will not be accepted. But, for fourteen high achieving women enrolled in programs across higher educational institutions highlighted in this study, they share their journey from an acceptance letter through their year(s) of doctoral education.

In this chapter, I outline the undergraduate backgrounds of the Black women who chose to go to graduate school and their transition into graduate education. There are myriad reasons as to why Black women seek to earn their doctorate and still even more reason to transition directly out of undergrad. What is not unusual is the similarity across experiences despite the difference in academic programs and institutions. These include being heavily involved in research through graduate pipeline programs as a preparation tactic to gain entry into graduate school, being debt

[9] U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2021

averse as a reason for specifically obtaining a PhD and being challenged academically and socially once enrolled in the graduate program.

Who Are We? A Portrait of Black Women in Doctoral Programs

As stated before in chapter one, I, too, am a Black woman who underwent the transition from my undergrad into a humanities PhD program. The women of this study and I come from diverse backgrounds only to be united in our similar academic trajectory of going from their undergraduate into a doctoral program. As stated before, three women represent the humanities, seven women are in the social sciences disciplines, and three engage within STEM fields. Only one woman was a doctoral student in the education field. Although the academic programs differ, the journey to get to graduate school was somewhat similar across experiences.

As an American Studies doctoral candidate at an institution in Maryland, Dominique was a high achieving undergraduate student at a small religious midwestern institution who looked to become the first person in her family to graduate from college. [10] She participated in Student Support Services (SSS), a federally funded TRIO program intended to assist college students with the completion of their postsecondary education, where she was able to learn about resources for students of color designed to ease the acclimation into higher education. Because the SSS office shared space with other TRIO funded programs, Dominique became exposed to other opportunities such as the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program which ultimately led her to applying to graduate school.

Marie is a rising third year bioengineering student at a program located in the state of Maryland. Her academic career began at a state school in a neighboring institution where she was involved as a resident assistant for three years, supervising over 120 students during her

[10] For the protection of all informants, all names have been anonymized and have been replaced with pseudonyms.

tenure. She also was an active member in multiple organizations that were centered around her undergraduate major of biomedical engineering such as National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) and the Louis Stokes Alliances for Minority Participation (LSAMP). While many were preparing to go the medical school route, Marie decided that she preferred research and followed the direction toward graduate education.

As a research assistant in the psychology department that had no Black faculty or graduate students except for one person who served as her graduate mentor, Jaime experienced a predominately white institution through and through for undergrad. There was difficulty in finding community for her but she was able to join different organizations that enhanced her educational and social experience. Jaime was an active member in both the Psychology Club and Psi Chi International Honor Society as well as a member of the executive board her school's National Society of Collegiate Scholars. In between coursework and extracurricular obligations, Jaime worked as a campus brand ambassador and manager for a Fortune 500 company while preparing for graduate school. She now is a 3rd year PhD student in clinical psychology at her large, southern state school in Oklahoma.

Eboni, a PhD candidate in an Educational Policy & Leadership department at a university in Maryland, is a native to the mid-Atlantic region and decided to attend a local HBCU as a first-generation student. Academically, she found that her HBCU experience was very fulfilling as she enjoyed the content that she took in. The courses that she took in her major of African Studies prompted her to also engage in undergraduate research as well. However, socially, there was a struggle as Eboni found that her HBCU was a "microcosm" of the Black world associated with elitism, colorism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc. which she found to be deeply

troubling. Despite the relationship with her HBCU, Eboni felt as though she met some good friends and mentors that assisted in the shaping of her decision to attend graduate school.

Alexis is a fifth year PhD student in her clinical psychology at a school in Illinois. Originally from Texas, she stayed in state to attend a large state university where she began her academic journey as a first-generation student on full scholarship. Alexis admits that her transition to college was difficult because of the lack of knowledge surrounding higher education. Part of the difficulty was major choice which prompted Alexis to switch from the pre-medicine track to psychology. To find a social reprieve, Alexis expanded her community through involvement in many different organizations - marching band, honor society membership, a short-term mentoring program, and a Christian-based sorority. In addition, she also participated as a research assistant in neuroscience.

As an incoming fourth year doctoral candidate in sociology, Monique's educational journey has been one of transitions. By this, I mean, Monique moved multiple times during high school thus solidifying the importance of securing scholarships and financial considerations. She ended up receiving a full scholarship to a "very traditional, midwestern" school in Michigan which was "very racist." However, that may be, Monique thrived in and out of the classroom with hyper participation in almost 15 different student organizations including a prominent social capital building organization on campus. She also participated in undergraduate research midway through her time at her institution and worked at a local non-profit organization.

Tiffany is an Africana Studies doctoral student enrolled at a Rhode Island institution. She is a proud HBCU alumna, hailing from the northern mid-Atlantic region. During her tenure at her private, Southern HBCU, Tiffany switched majors; initially, she was a political science major and then transferred to the sociology program. The switch was thoroughly valued by Tiffany

because she enjoyed being “able to study under Black women sociologists and anthropologists.” By doing so, she felt inspired to participate in undergraduate research as well. Socially, she articulated that adjusting was challenging because of the transition from her predominately white hometown to a bustling majority Black southern city. This insinuates a level of culture shock that did somewhat impact the social experience, but Tiffany learned to like “the people there” and “the vibe.”

As a counseling psychology student entering in her third year at her Floridian institution, Jasmine is an alumna of a mid-Atlantic medium sized HBCU where she described a great experience. She picked her institution due to being a legacy of both parents attending the same institution for their undergraduate years. She, too, was a full scholarship recipient which built upon her already established relation to the HBCU and perceived fit. As she exclaimed excitedly in her tan t-shirt and pulled back knotless braids, Jasmine described all of student organizations that she was involved in including the presidential role of her historically Black sorority chapter. Academically, Jasmine felt “very supported” in the psychology department and graduated salutatorian of her class.

Maya, a fourth-year biochemistry and microbiology doctoral student at a school in Texas, is a proud HBCU alum from a private, southern institution who originally majored in pre-med/biology but switched to biochemistry during her sophomore year of college. As described as “the best years of my life,” Maya loved college and thrived socially, meeting folks from all over the United States. She discussed the importance of being “community based” which led to the involvement in many organizations that did work on and off campus.

With a warm smile and soft tendrils falling to the side of her face, Princess let it be known that she is a second-year doctoral student in human development at a private midwestern

institution in Illinois. She is a proud North Carolinian native with a bright smile and faux locs. Princess came to her private southern HBCU as a first-generation student where she exclaimed that she loved her undergraduate experience. She mentioned that she had a great relationship with her professors and formed strong relationships with peers, solidifying lifetime friendships.

"Black." That was the first word used to describe Morgan's HBCU experience at her public southern large HBCU. As an Honors College political science student and proud Southerner, she "learned a lot" and "had a great time" at her HBCU. Part of her exemplary time is contributed to her social activities. Morgan was an active student in the Student Government Association (SGA), her historically Black sorority, Pre-Law Society, and Pi Sigma Alpha which is a national honor society for political science students. Her academic and social achievements set the foundation for her fourth year in a political science doctoral program at a Midwestern private research-intensive university in Indiana.

As one of two former student-athletes in the study, Erica began playing basketball at a young age and started her journey at a public southern HBCU. However, her true academic journey began when she transferred institutions to another southern large, private HBCU where she became a third-generation student. At this time, Erica stopped playing basketball and began to focus to her academics in the engineering department. The engineering program at her alma mater encouraged students to also take courses at a neighboring PWI as well. Erica continued to thrive academically and did not find difficulty in the coursework at all. This prompted Erica to share that because this was her "first PWI experience" compounded upon being a transfer, it was difficult for her to find community. She currently is a fourth-year mechanical engineering doctoral student at a large public, research institution in Florida.

The second former student-athlete is Keisha who is now a rising seventh year PhD candidate in the English department at a large, public midwestern PWI in Kansas. She began her academic career at the rival PWI across the state where she refers to her undergraduate institution as "very small and very white and very conservative." There she majored in English education and minored in Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies after she became hurt and redirected her attention from sports to academics. She speaks fondly of her time at her undergrad! During undergrad, Keisha was a social person, making friends within her residence halls.

The last participant of the study is Asia, a third-year doctoral student in clinical psychology at a public Texan PWI. Her undergraduate time was also at a PWI in another southern state and is considered to be relived as a "period of self-awareness and kind of coming into identity formation" by Asia herself. She explored many academic majors until sophomore year where she finalized psychology as her major; in addition, she also studied abroad in Spain her junior year. Outside of academics, Asia served as a resident advisor for a first-year residence hall for two years, volunteered for numerous mentoring programs on and off campus, and co-chaired a summer initiative for a minority student recruitment committee.

All 14 women who participated in this dissertation study were all dynamic leaders on their respective campus communities whether it be socially or academically. The division between PWI and HBCU attendance for their bachelor's degrees were even. While seven women to PWIs for their bachelor's degrees, the other seven attended HBCUs spanning the northeastern and southern coasts.

Similarities and Differences between the Women

One large, nuanced similarity between many of the women was the undergraduate participation in formal graduate education pipeline programs[11]. As it stands, 12 out of the 14 interviewees were involved in a program dedicated to preparing eligible, typically underrepresented populations of students for graduate education with seven programs represented. The top two common pipeline programs represented within this dissertation were the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program and the Summer Research Opportunity Program. However, within the similarity of each program, particularly in those that had multiple interviewee 'involvement, there seemed to be differences in experience whether it be positive or negative.

The Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, also known as McNair, prepares students from first-generation, low-income, or underrepresented backgrounds for doctoral studies through involvement in undergraduate research. Four out of the 12 women are McNair undergraduate scholars - Dominique, Monique, Eboni, and Jamie. For Monique, she extended a form of gratitude toward her undergraduate McNair program, citing that becoming a McNair scholar "was super influential. And I think had it not been for that, frankly, I wouldn't be in graduate school." One of the primary reasons why Monique was appreciative of the federally funded TRIO program was that McNair provided graduate school application fee waivers. Monique said:

> Um, but for me, I mean it was absolutely what I needed and I, you know, went to all of the camps and the trainings and the GRE study classes and, you know, wrote, did all the exercises and that was really helpful. And I think what was most impactful was were the

[11] As defined by Katz et. al. (2016), the pipeline refers to "programs at all levels of education intended to target, enroll, and support to graduation certain students, usually underrepresented students including minority, low income, and women, with the goal of increasing their representation in certain fields."

> vouchers to pay for the applications. I would not have been able most likely to. I think I applied to 13 schools total, which you know, which is significant. And I don't think I would have been able to pay for those.

As an undergraduate student who worked her way through school, the financial component was pivotal for Monique because graduate applications alone ranged from $50-170 thus creating a potential barrier to graduate education.[12] The financial support provided by McNair diminished one of many impediments to enter a doctoral program which in turn received some of the pressure of figuring out how one can afford to apply.

With animated hands and a sheepish smile recalling her undergraduate tenure, Jaime, too, expressed a gracious demeanor toward her time in the McNair program at her large, Eastern public PWI. For Jaime, McNair was where she was able to find support through a faculty mentor and a much more diverse cohort of students, undergraduate and graduate, who were like-minded in the desire to do research and obtain a graduate degree. Jaime believed that up until the McNair program she didn't understand why the practice of research at the undergraduate level was an important element of the graduate application. She recalled:

> I didn't really understand why, um, until I became a part of the McNair scholars program and, um, that my McNair mentor really helped to put into perspective why graduate school was so important, at least for me in my career path as well as of course gave me the tools that I needed in order to get there. And that, I think being a McNair scholar, again, really, really solidified that I really wanted to go to graduate school to be

[12] According to Intuit, a global technology platform that powers the like of TurboTax, Mint, and Credit Karma, university applications range between $50-170 each. In addition, students can also factor in entrance exam costs like the GRE and GMAT, travel expenses for in-person interviews, transcript fees, and professional clothes. (https://mint.intuit.com/blog/how-to/how-to-budget-for-grad-school-applications/)

able to achieve all of my career goals. Um, and I, I ended up really liking to do research.[13]

The introduction to research allowed Jamie to cement the possibility of research being a part of her career aspirations. Prior to McNair, it appears that those who attended a PWI as an undergraduate had a lack of faculty representation which shows up in the individual interviews that there was limited career and educational exposure. This is important to understand because the presence of Black faculty, specifically Black women, impact the lives of Black students. As claimed in Patitu & Hinton (2003) and supported by the likes of Fleming (1984) and Gardiner, Enomoto, and Grogan (2000), mentoring of Black female undergraduate students by Black female faculty is highly important because enrollment and persistence toward degree completion is linked to the number of Black faculty on campus. As a result, when Black students see Black faculty particularly on a PWI campus, "they too believe they can succeed and hold professional positions" (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). This research is supported by Eboni's experience with McNair; however, she enrolled at a private research intensive HBCU located in the mid-Atlantic region. Even with the high presence of Black faculty available for McNair mentorship at her disposal, Eboni still felt the inspiration of what it meant to have representation in her classrooms. With her glasses perched on her nose and locs messily overflowing perched on top of her head, Eboni exclaimed her time as a participant in her HBCU 's McNair program. She shared:

It just almost didn't feel like there was any conversation about anything else, PhD, like PhD or bust. PhD or die. Um, so that was definitely like intense in a lot of ways, but I still was interested in getting the degree because I had several in particular like Black

[13] It is important to note that there were moments within the interview that joy was evident in the discussion of participant's lives. These moments are seen within both Chapters 2 and 3. I will elaborate more about the ways in which joy is understood and experienced within their lives later in Chapter 4.

> women mentors in my academic department who I admire deeply, who I thought the world of, who were very encouraging no matter what I wanted to pursue. And I kind of like saw myself in them and I wanted to be able to like influence people to work with people the way they had worked with me.

The second formal pipeline program is the SROP or Summer Research Opportunity Program housed across many institutions of higher education across the country. This initiative introduces graduate education through intensive research opportunities, faculty mentorship, and enrichment activities such as GRE prep. Taking place during the summer months of their undergraduate careers, the women who participated often traveled from their home institutions to another, typically in a different region of the country. For many of the women, their SROP experience confirmed what they did and did not want to research for their graduate education. Jasmine, a graduate of a midsized, Southern HBCU, recalled her minimal research experience and the potential impact that may have had on her SROP applications across the country. A SROP eventually approached Jasmine with an opened waitlisted seat, causing her to believe that she "was just this close to being too late in the game to really know what was going on that summer." This statement indicates that there was a lack of knowledge of the importance of undergraduate research in the doctoral application. Should she not have been exposed to her SROP, then she believed that she would not be adequately prepared for graduate education. Jasmine stated:

> They gave us GRE prep courses for free. They gave us a stipend, they had us do research. They talked to us about the process of applying for PhD programs. And then that's when I discovered counseling psychology, because they had us research what PhD you want and so then that's when I decided to apply, because it seemed like

> counseling psychology fit with what I wanted to do and how I see myself as a person and the PhD was also really cool because I like that you could do multiple things like research, counseling, teaching with this one degree and so that's what influenced me into wanting to do it.

SROPs also confirmed to its' participants what type of research they did not want to do based on their experience at the host institution. For example, interaction with unsupportive faculty during one of her SROPs deterred Tiffany from the scholarship she initially thought she wanted to do but also provided confirmation in the work she found the most fulfilling. She recalled:

> And the funny thing was that he wasn't really supporting, he didn't really support that project cause he didn't find it to be very sociological in [redacted]'s mind. And he was like, this is more Black studies. And so that's why I was like, I really just want to work on the projects that I want to work on the way I want to do them. And I found that my best fit was in Black studies, African American studies, Africana studies programs.

The poor interaction and lack of support by the SROP faculty member prompted Tiffany to solidify her interest and even confidence in the academic program she ended up applying to for graduate school.

Outside of the prominence of McNair and the SROP opportunities, women participated in similar programs specific to their academic disciplines. For example, Princess was a student of the Research Initiative for Scientific Advancement (RISE) at her HBCU undergraduate institution. RISE is an initiative based out of the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS) dedicated to supporting the trainings of research-orientated undergraduates looking to

earn a research-focused higher degree (i.e.: Ph.D. or M.D./Ph.D.)[14]. For Princess, she found that in RISE was a community and camaraderie that was necessary during the application process:

> And then as a group, we did trainings on ethics. We prepare for conferences. We created posters. We wrote papers. We critiqued papers. We did retreats. We towards, the time to apply for graduate school, they really kept track of our GRE scores, and we did a lot of personal statement discussions. And I think most importantly, it put me in a room with other students who were pursuing similar careers. So it was just really helpful to be like, 'Interview time is coming up. Here we go again.'

Related to Princess' experience, Morgan participated in a discipline specific program through the American Political Science Association (APSA) Ralph Bunche Summer Institute which is a five-week intensive program held annually at Duke University. The intended purpose is to introduce doctoral study in political science to traditionally marginalized racial and ethnic groups, or "those interested in broadening participation in political science and pursuing scholarship on issues affecting underrepresented groups or issues of tribal sovereignty and governance." (APSA, 2022). Within this program, participants are not only able to gain research experience, but they also learn statistical analysis methods, gain exposure to leading political scientists, and become educated on career and doctoral opportunities associated with the political science food. It was here that Morgan built upon her confidence to apply to and thrive in graduate school. Morgan stated:

> And then I was in the Ralph Bunche Summer Institute, which is like a baby, a mini grad school simulation for Black and Latino students in political science going into the

[14] As indicated on the NIGMS website through the National Institute of Health, the RISE program initiative has since been broken into three different programs of May 2019, meaning the RISE program as stated at the time of the interview is no longer active.

summer of your junior year. And then I was kind of like, okay, I survived, I did well. So this grad school thing, if it's anything like this, you can do this.

The utilization of these pipeline programs by Black women allowed for the participants to gain exposure to undergraduate research which is a key indicator to graduate programs that there is some sort of preparation in and exposure to formulating original knowledge. Pipeline programs also give students the opportunity to participate with faculty mentorship which is also a primary component of the graduate experience. And for many of the women who did McNair, SROPs, and other pipeline programs, it was the mental process that was embedded within the curriculum that allowed them to visualize and manifest their presence within PhD programs.

One primary difference between the women are the educational institutions that served for their undergraduate degrees. Seven women were alums of PWIs across the country whereas seven women attended HBCUs. Specially for the HBCU graduates, the time at their universities proved to be especially special because of the supportive and culturally relevant environment and curriculum. Infused within the binding missions of the HBCUs represented within the dissertation is the production and maintenance of "Black excellence," a common moniker for Black identifying folks whose education, demeanor, and accomplishments uphold a level of Black exceptionalism. This standard constantly encourages students to engage in work that contributes to the progression of the Black community through avenues ranging from business, education, technology, and the arts. In regards to her southern HBCU, Erica recalled:

> The atmosphere really cultivated a lot of, um, strength and pride that I needed to help boost my confidence, knowing that there was support from people that looked like me and other people that, or on the same life paths that I could relate to.

For Eboni, the relationship to her HBCU is complicated; while she experienced moments requiring critical engagement with issues such as homophobia, fatphobia, colorism, and elitism, she also found her HBCU to have beautiful moments of connectivity across the African diaspora. She said:

> So it was a mixed experience, but all the same, still a good one. I would say overall, I met, I made some very good friends, um, met some very great mentors that I still keep in contact with to this day.

The pride associated with being a HBCU alumna does not necessarily translate into a warm reception by PWI graduate faculty once the women arrive on campus. According to Kim & Conrad (2006) and supported by the works of Burgess (1997), faculty at PWIs often perceive the academic training of HBCU graduates as "insufficient" and viewed as "less-skilled" in comparison to HBCU faculty. The difference of campus climate by HBCU alumnae contributes to a level of "culture shock" of sorts as they try to move from one environment to another. Jasmine said:

> I also think adjusting from being around mostly all Black people to being at a really large school where there are not that many Black people and me coming in for my cohort, I was the only Black person in my cohort… It was definitely an adjustment and talking about issues of race in class and how those conversations went were really difficult for me to transition because I found myself either one feeling like, 'Am I crazy? Why are these people talking about this stuff how they are?' Or I felt like I was the angry Black woman all the time because I'm having to call out things that are racist or that are problematic. So it was just an adjustment in trying to learn how to trust my read of situation because I had the privilege of going to an HBCU.

This translates to an even greater complicated transition for HBCU graduates such as Jasmine because there is a mental process of not only defending themselves and but also the caliber of their HBCUs.

Sources of Motivation for Earning a PhD

Although there were many reasons given for why participants want to attend graduate school and earn a PhD, I outline two primary reasons in this section - funding and limitation of career goals. How to finance a PhD often proves to be a large barrier to graduate education. For these women, the financial component attached to a PhD is largely important as many spoke to being debt averse and how their respective pipeline programs and mentors often mentioned the financial "incentive" of a doctoral degree compared to master's degrees. The primary thought that amongst many of the participants was that if the degree can be paid for, that is the degree that should be secured. Eight out of the fourteen women alluded to finances being a top priority when selecting what graduate programs to apply to and ultimately attend. One of those women is Marie, a STEM doctoral student at a grad program in Maryland state, who reflected upon conversations held in her undergraduate lab about PhD funding:

> They explained that we have paid our graduate degrees. Now it's time. I mean, we've paid our undergraduate degrees now it's time for someone else to pay for us. Um, after doing a lot of research, I found out that a lot of master's programs you have to pay out of pocket of PhDs. There are different departments who will actually pay for you. So once I found that out, I realized it was better simply to do my PhD. And then in certain programs, certain departments, they have it where once you complete up to your master's degree within a PhD program, they will give you a certificate for your master's while you

> continue on with your PhD. So, I was just thinking if I can get everything for free, I might as well just check everything off the list on my way to get a PhD.

The idea of "now it's time for someone else to pay us" is important to note because Black women accumulate an average of $41,466.05 in cumulative debt on undergraduate loans and $75,085.58 in cumulative debt on graduate loans, including principal and interest, one year after both graduations. For both undergraduate and graduate debt, Black women have the most cumulative debt, according to a 2021 report written by senior researcher Dr. Kevin Miller of the American Association of University Women on women and student debt.[15] So, PhD funding was and continues to be a vitally important part for Black women. Many participants shared that they were responsible for the financing of their own education with minimal family assistance and for obligations like taking care of family. Jasmine, a 3rd year counseling psychology doctoral student, recalls how an undergraduate faculty mentor encouraged the PhD over the PsyD so as to have exposure to both clinical and research experience. Jasmine stated:

> I was talking to one of my professors and she was like, "If you can try to get some research and things like that, you should try to go for a PhD because they'll pay for it." And that's when my eyes lit up because I didn't have any money for undergrad and I had gone there on scholarship and I was like, "Oh, somebody will pay for the grad degree too?" And so I was like, "Okay, let me look into that."

[15]At the undergraduate level, Black women surpass all other racial groups' cumulative debt with the second highest population being Pacific Islander/Hawaiian women with $38,747.44 and the lowest at $27,606.60 for Asian women. At the graduate level, the closest amount to Black women is $70,797.01 for Asian women and the lowest amount of all women are white women at $56,098.88. It is important to note here that there is no clarification as to what degree the "graduate" label is indicative of - masters and/or doctorate.

For Eboni, there was a cultural obligation established by being the daughter of immigrant parents to take care of your family. Research shows that approximately 96% of African parents hold high expectations and goals for their children to complete college, deeming education to be the sole key for success.[16] This, in turn, can create a level of pressure for the Black female student to achieving the highest degree of education possible with the littlest amount of debt. Eboni spoke to her deep reluctance of master's degrees compared to a doctoral degree:

> I think for me, a lot of this, if I'm really honest with you, funding. It was funding. Master's degrees are just not funded well point blank period. And I was like, it's no way I'm going to be able to enter into another academic program that's not baseline at least covering like tuition, fees, and I don't have some sort of stipend, right? Because like financially, it just didn't make sense. I think that was, um, yeah, one of the biggest motivators… Because I didn't have any sort of work experience or experience in the field as a researcher, [I was] offered… to be like a master's degree seat, but the funding was not there. So, I was, like, there's no way I'm doing this. Especially as like the child of, like immigrant, um, an older parent, a parent as well. And like, I, I've taken on like financial responsibilities. I was like, there's no way.

This passage demonstrates how the identity of citizenship/nationality is also an increasingly important factor in the decision-making process to decide attendance. It also displays a communal sense that is engrained within Black immigrant family structures. Because of that community-oriented spirit, the hesitancy and an outright no was directed toward master's programs, creating the outright preference for PhD programs.

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[16] Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2017; Dryden-Peterson, 2011

In fact, many Black women eliminated the possibility of going to certain PhD programs over others because of the financial obligation. This is seen in the case of Erica who even after being awarded a fellowship, there was still a financial gap. It is within this space that students find themselves looking for supplementary work in and outside the university and/or take out loans. And because of that gap, Erica rejected the extended admittance to another mechanical engineering program despite convincing herself that this was the place where she could grow the most academically. When asked why she declined, Erica explained:

> The number one factor was finding a university where everything was paid for, and not have to come out of pocket… That still wasn't sufficient to cover all of the out of state tuition and fees. And so the last, like bit of what needed to be paid for was supposed to come from that graduate school, diversity office and they did not get that funding. And so there would have been, uh, I don't know how large it would have been, but it would have been an out of pocket expense than what it needed to be covered by loans. And that was something I was not prepared to take on.

These examples of Eboni, Jasmine, and Erica illuminate how the lack of expected family contribution toward their graduate education revealed what type of programs to apply to and ultimately attend. The women did not want to take on little to no debt for their PhD and firmly believed that the right program for them was going to be fully funded.

For many of the women, career options and availability became limited with education less than a doctorate was a primary premise for graduate school across academic disciplines. To only receive a master's degree was not deemed to be adequate to fulfill the career aspirations for many of the women who participated in the study. A doctorate broadened the career options for the Black women who looked to achieve a certain professional and personal mission with the

work they wanted to contribute to their communities. For Asia, a doctorate was a necessity if she wanted to pursue her passion for Black wellness through a clinical lens. Asia shared here:

> I shared that my passion was to create culturally mindful interventions. And he [a faculty mentor] was like, how can you do that when this is the lack of research that's there? Right. And then these interventions don't exist. So that introduced me to the research lens and led to more clinical focus programs.

While all clinical psychology doctoral students exclaimed the same sentiments as Asia, Black women in other academic disciplines shared that they too needed the PhD to secure a position doing the work they wanted to do. Monique, a sociology doctoral student, knew that she desired to enter the academy afterward as a tenure track faculty member because of the teaching component. Her students' "lightbulb" moments, for her, provide "immediate gratification" in conjunction with visualizing the "undoing of like socialized things." Monique said in response to why the PhD and not a master's degree:

> And for me, I really, I value the idea of being able to think for the sake of thought and also to get paid for doing so. Um, I also value the idea that like doing empirical work could matter for people in real life. And, um, I know when I realized and was told kind of like how academia works, I was like, I can't imagine being able to do that type of work on such a short notice or short timeframe, which is what the masters looks like to me.

A doctorate is often needed to teach at the collegiate level but is required to teach through a tenure track for many universities. This excerpt exemplifies how for many participants the doctorate provided time to hone skills, to research topics that are important to them, and to secure a degree that empowered vocational satisfaction.

Introduction to the Transition - Academically & Socially

bell hooks (1989) writes in *Talking back: Thinking feminist* that Black female graduate students frequently face and deal with academic and social exclusion. And yet, the women of this dissertation study conducted nearly thirty years later describe scenarios that align with the same testament as hooks. In this section, I discuss how Black women become and continue to be acclimated academically and socially, or lack thereof, within their academic programs. It is important to note that the acclimation process is not definite with an end date indicating an adjustment period coming to a close. Instead, the transition is not finite with it ending after the first semester or even year is over but instead continues since the presence of Black womanhood exists until graduation.

Academic Transition

Academically, many of the participants indicated the initial struggle of graduate level courses due to the heavy load associated with the reading and writing load. Whereas undergraduate courses are typically based in lectures and exams, the structure and assignments of their graduate courses proved to be aggressively difficult at first. For example, transitioning to a different academic schedule for Maya, an HBCU graduate enrolled in a biochemistry program in Texas, was more so difficult than the actual coursework itself. She said:

> I feel like the hardest thing we were on a quarter schedule, which was really weird or not… So each class it's eight weeks. And I've been grad school classes, it's already a lot of information to get through, but eight weeks is not. It's not a long time, but I also know, I wasn't completely out of the study grind, so it wasn't. I feel like for some of my classmates who have been working for the past five years, they're like, "Oh my God, I got to pull this all night or what the fuck?" And so I wasn't like, I passed all of my classes, I think. Did I drop anything? I probably dropped something because I didn't like

> it. Because for biochem, our major was pretty, or our course work requirements were pretty flexible. So if I didn't like a class, I was dropping. But yeah, I passed all of my classes.

For some, it was not necessarily the structure but more so the content of the graduate courses that proved to be challenging. It was expected for these women to adapt and learn canonical texts that often did not reflect their personhood thus erecting a barrier to identify with the content. By not seeing themselves in the required literature, Black women such as Morgan retained little interest in her courses of her political science graduate program. She stated:

> No, I didn't know that I wasn't going to be reading stuff that really applied to me. When I took my American politics courses, it was really disheartening because I wasn't accounted for. And most of the canonical works that we were talking about, these were men. And they were talking about the citizen. They would be talking about the citizen. But then when they were talking about the citizen, they would say "he." And so I'm like, oh, okay. So the citizen is not a woman, and I damn sho' know the citizen probably ain't no black man. So we going to cross that out now. So this reading, I wasn't even accounted for, nobody from my race was accounted for in this reading. That's good to know. And then it was also hard because why do I care to read this then? Why do I care to remember his argument when I can automatically say that his argument is invalid because it is not representative of everyone?

For some of the participants, there was not an academic linear trajectory to their graduate programs meaning the undergraduate degree does not match their graduate academic program. With that disruption comes an additional learning curve that some of the women had to battle. For example, for Dominique, her undergraduate background is in business but shifted her

research interests to an American Studies program. By deviating to an interdisciplinary humanities graduate program, Dominique struggled initially with learning a new field as she articulated her thoughts:

> Man, learning, how to communicate with people over email, learning how to read all the messages on [the learning management platform], learning how to submit assignments, learning how to look like, you know, what you talking about in class when you don't. I had a whole vocabulary list of words that people would use in class that I had no idea what they were talking about. I would be reading stuff and I would literally have to have dictionary.com on my computer. Cause I'm like, I don't know. I don't know what's going on.

Social Transition

At its foundation, graduate education has been noted as isolating (Ellis, 2001; Shavers & Moore, 2014). Maintaining socialization in graduate school is challenging for many people when multiple obligations coexist at one time. However, for Black women in this study, the social component attached to the PhD can be even more difficult when trying to exist with chronic graduate isolation, academic and personal obligations, and various micro and macroaggressions. This section outlines the social transition from undergraduate to graduate culture and how Black women navigated those experiences.

It begins with experiences such as Maya's who is a HBCU graduate. Her immersion in Black culture plummeted once she arrived to her southern PWI to study biochemistry and microbiology. Although she sought and continues to seek friendship and collegiality from peers within her department, there proves to be difficulty. Maya exclaimed:

> And then making friends, even to this day has been really hard because I just feel like especially coming from... I mean, I can't speak for everybody, but for me coming from an HBCU, it's like you have so many great Black people to choose from to really pick who you want to be friends with. Whereas in the rest of the world, it's just kind of like there's four of us. If you want friends or not, you don't really have... It just doesn't feel as organic to make friends in this environment. And so that's been kind of a bummer.

And for many of the women, the undertones of racial and gendered micro and macroaggressions from department peers proved to be a hardship to decipher why they were not included was because of their race, gender, or both. The interaction of salient identities of Blackness and womanhood in conjunction of others like age, nationality/citizenship, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability often prompted the women to reflect upon their social interactions quite frequently.

Socially, there either was a hypervisibility or invisibility and often times, a simultaneous process called hyper(in)visibility as outlined by Petermon (2014). A common hypervisible example for Black women in doctoral education is being called upon as the racial representative during seminar discussion. For Alexis, this showed up as hypervisible as she was often called upon to be the "racial expert" often which is taxing emotionally and mentally. She thought back to interactions with her peers and shared:

> ... I came straight from… undergrad and then being the youngest in my cohort. So that was an of itself kind of an interesting element… I think that, that intersection of my blackness with my womanhood played out in a lot of ways in which people anticipated me to engage with them. So I quickly became like, uh, everybody's resource to work through their issues of race and there are four women of color, four other women of color in my, um, in my program, but I'm the only African American… And I felt like I had to

> like walk them through things and then also walk like a lot of my white peers and colleagues through things that they could even begin to have the conversations so that the classroom wasn't just me having a monologue on the side and awkward silences the entire time.

Similarly, Asia expressed being the designated speaker of all Black issues because she was the sole Black doctoral student represented in her seminar rooms. She commented:

> Socialization, as I mentioned, it was a lot of being the only person of color and especially the only black person in the room. Um, there was another black male in my cohort, but, um in the whole program of about 60, there's five Black people and maybe less than 10 persons of color. And so, yeah, it was just very not diverse. And that made it very challenging to feel welcomed, um, and to feel like I had a place, you know, and again, that pressure constantly to always carry the whole race with you and to be the advocate and that made it hard.

In these two quotes, Alexis and Asia both allude to a point of how her white peers believe that there should be a certain exhibited decorum based on the intersection of her race and gender. It can be said that there was the expectation that the behavior exuded by Alexis should have been mammy-esque because there was the desire to extract knowledge from Alexis' Black female body. Her embodying Black womanhood indicated an understanding to her white peers that Alexis is a place of mothering to grow and become anti-racist human beings.

Hypervisibility can also be evident in the times Erica enters her academic building and everyone stares, causing a bright spotlight materialized upon her. This mirrors a level of surveillance to make sure that she has the authoritative credentials to even be in the academic

building as other white scholars that predominately filled that space. Erica talked about her first-year attempt of trying to meet new people and make friendly colleagues:

> I'd say it was so challenged. And I think that's cause it was just new for a lot of people. My entire building, I'm the only Black person… just the building for mechanical… My first year was just me and this one guy and in terms of PhD and there's about, think there's 300 grad students and a hundred PhDs, whatever… I think I'm more trying to say that I feel like I don't know if I needed to warm up to people or people need to warm up to me, but that early on that was very challenging to not get people to stare at you awkwardly.

It is not just when Erica walks through her academic building at her large, research-intensive university in Florida that she was hypervisible in a group dynamic but also in personalized interaction in her lab. One specific example is when Erica used her lab's Slack channel to mention a national walkout event designed to bring greater awareness to racial injustice toward Black folks in STEM and American society at large. To her, it was important to inform her lab mates as well as her advisor not only of her participation but to also encourage a sense of solidarity with her as the sole Black woman. However, the message went unacknowledged, invoking a hyper invisibility; her experiences, body and message surrounding the importance of Black lives went ignored. Erica revealed her disappointment:

> I just politely put in there, hey guys, today is blackout day, explain what it was and what you're supposed to do and how I was going to be a part of that day and some suggestions for them and I was like, if you guys have any questions, I'll answer them. And it was complete radio silence, no responses, not even a thumbs up. My advisor said absolutely nothing… It was like I didn't say anything at all. And given that example, just want to

> say how it's even further amplify the bubble that we're in… I feel like there's this idea that we're supposed to be separated from what's going on because we're developing things other people can't touch it. I think it becomes even more frustrating when you look around you and it's like no one else cares so now you feel even more stuck.

Although Erica describes the situation as one that is hyper invisible at first glance, this example also serves as a hypervisible circumstance thus creating a hyper(in)visible moment. Erica offered to provide her own body and mind as a resource point for her lab colleagues in order for them to grow in equitable and inclusionary practices. Instead of placing the ownness onto her white colleagues to learn, Erica took it upon herself to labor and find additional resources to minimize the essential ask made by her - can you all learn, understand, and hear about the Black experience in STEM so you can treat me as a colleague better? And yet there is resistance to giving a confirmation ultimately leading to feeling unwanted, unsafe, and unwelcome by Erica.

Faculty Interaction

Interaction with faculty in and out of their departments often proved to be strenuous for Black women doctoral students who underwent a direct transition. Despite having experience with faculty before, the immersion in a PhD program was not previously had which complicates the relationship with graduate faculty. This places constraints around the socializing relationship with faculty as both white faculty and faculty of color.

The relationship with faculty often begins before one even steps foot through their departmental doors as an enrolled student and can begin at interview or preview days such as it did for Princess. For Princess, engaging with a faculty member during her recruitment trip speaks to the foreign level of discomfort that she felt with white faculty. She recalled:

> During my interview, I had a professor, he wasn't even signed up to interview me. He was just introducing himself. We had a conversation, and it was very blunt, not very welcoming. And essentially, he told me that I should pick another program. And this is during breakfast. The interview hasn't even started. So, if you are applying for a job and the secretary tells you, you should find another job, and you haven't even interviewed yet, how are you going to feel? And this wasn't a secretary, this was an actual professor, but it's just that level of uncomfortability. I spoke to my potential advisor about it at the time. And she rolled her eyes when I told her what happened, and that let me know that this was a thing.

By acknowledging that "this was a thing," Princess' potential advisor indicated that the discouragement of Black applicants was a constant by faculty within this department. Rather than trying to quell Princess' concerns over the interaction with this prominent faculty member with faux reassurance and sentiments, the dismal served as an acknowledgement of an departmental and maybe even an institutional problem rather than an individualized matter.

One of the ways that faculty interaction shows up is through the advisement of Black female doctoral students. Black women do have positive interactions often times with white and non-Black faculty of color serving as their faculty advisors. The relationship between a Black female doctoral student and their white or non-Black faculty of color is often contingent upon the recognition of the student's humanity as well as anti-Black racism's impact on the student experience. With that recognition, there is room for an affirmative working relationship as evident by experiences such as Marie has with her white female faculty member. Marie describes the undertone of their relationship as one that is customized to suit her needs the best in comparison to her being forced to fit in a one size fits all advising mold. She said:

> My advisor has been very helpful. I think it's a very interesting that all of us [in my lab] have had female advisors, but it's very difficult to explain how helpful she's been, just because I am in a different department than the one that she's actually a part of. So when it comes to the requirements for my research, she's there as a mentor. I'm thankful that she was able to accommodate me when it comes to my needs, versus other people. I'm a very hands-on person at first and then I'm hands off, but I still need people to hold me accountable and check on me.

While Marie and her advisor do not share the same interests much less departments, it is the adaptability by her faculty advisor that caters to what is required for Marie's success.

The relationship between Black female faculty and Black female doctoral students is an important dynamic to make note of in this research study. For many Black female doctoral students with myself included, there was/is an underlying assumption that because of shared ancestry, I will be looked out for and protected. Minnett et al. (2019) cites Zachary (2012) in stating that "Black women graduate students often view mentors who share their racial and cultural identities as vital for optimal success in their program of study." Monique perfectly reframed that same sentiment when discussing her advising relationship with the only Black woman on faculty:

> I had the only Black woman on faculty, and I just thought like, oh, sis got me. Like, it's going to be great.

And for many participants, being guided by their advisors was great and did occur. In fact, Jamie's exemplary advising she received from her Black female advisor brought a warm smile that reached her brown eyes as she fondly reflected upon her advisor:

> And my mentor relationship with her, I think, is really great in the sense that not only do we have in common being Black women but she is a tenure track professor and so she was able to relate to what it's like being in grad school because she was just in grad school. And so, when she gives us advice or when she ask for what we need, she has that perspective of having just been there and so I think that really impacts the relationship and she also really honors our ideas… Like this summer, we spent the whole summer working on an initiative that is not particularly research related but it was an idea that I came to her about and then we made it happen.

To have an advocate in a department that has few Black faces is a source of strength. To know that one does not have to fight by themselves provides a place of restoration in an unsupportive environment. These fights can be directed toward major issues like legitimacy of research topics, community involvement, professional agency and funding.

Black women in this study also described negative interactions with fellow Black women as their faculty advisors. It was understood by many the burden of service & research upon their advisor thus creating a contentious space filled with questions of "what about me?" and "where do I fit in?" The women recognized that their faculty advisors of color, particularly Black women, are overloaded with responsibilities in advising & mentoring, research and writing, department and university service, and outside obligations. Morgan even described her advisor as the "academic Beyoncé," alluding to a high production of projects and saying that her Black female advisor pushes her work out "like they hotcakes." The reality of being a Black woman faculty member in the ivory tower compounded with "publish or perish" pressure contributes to the growing neglect and thus igniting an autopilot mode to cope with the multiple

responsibilities, leaving the graduate student to figure "it" out.[17] The women explained that often times there was the held assumption that Black faculty advisors and mentors would automatically extend care and protection to their Black advisees. Unfortunately, that was not the case for all doctoral students who participated in the study. This is seen within the statement outlined by Tiffany during Focus Group 4 where she summarizes the unique impact of being a Black woman who transitions directly from her undergraduate and receiving poor advising from faculty especially Black faculty. Tiffany commented:

> I think what I'm hearing in all of this too, is just like, especially all of us being young in these programs, just like the lack of care in a program and I'm like very big on that… yes, we could all agree that we were accepted for a reason and that we were approved by the committee and they felt like we would know what we're doing, but when you see that we have peers with extra degrees and are 10 years older than us, do you think, regardless of what's on our resumes, that the experience is the same? And so the fact that they kind of expect us to posture in these ways and to talk, like, damn, they talk big shit. Like you know we don't know what we're doing. You're only 22, 23-years-old, like stop playing.

When looking at specific moments associated with advising, Jasmine, Monique, and Eboni discussed the relationship with their advisors, all three Black women within their departments, who did not serve their particular needs well. Jasmine needed a faculty member who aligned with her particular politic embedded in a radical love for Blackness as outlined by Johnson et al. (2017). She proclaimed:

[17] "It" can refer to anything associated with graduate education ranging from how to complete degree benchmarks to class selection to how to publish a conference paper.

> I think that race wise, having to navigate finding good mentors and things like that and navigating also the idea of, like they say, 'Not all skin folk are kinfolk.' So navigating people who have their own internal anti-blackness and that was a lot for me. Also, trying to find my community while I was here, because it was just different and so navigating that, I think I had to be more discerning in who I spent a lot of time with and who I sought out as mentors because not every just Black faculty member was going to be a good fit for me as a mentor or a person to interact with.

Accessibility to and time with their Black female faculty advisors were the primary issues associated with the relationship for Monique and Eboni. Because neither had not experienced graduate culture before, both Monique and Eboni described the desire for a greater level of mentorship and advising so as to limit missteps and ultimately time to degree completion. Monique recalled her experience with her first advisor, a Black woman in her department:

> You know, I was really looking forward to working with her like as a Black woman, researcher and scholar who has accomplished a lot. I mean, she's brilliant… I was a big fan and make lines short, ended up getting into [redacted]. And she became my advisor and we worked together and she just was very, um, she has been very unavailable. Um, she's just been a little unavailable and that was for me too much. And I didn't have the best experience kind of working with her and like the investment as a primary, but she was giving me very like committee member when I needed like full advisor energy.

Eboni echoed the same sentiment after switching from a white Latina woman whom she recalled as not understanding "her racism as racism" and "really patronizing" to a fellow Black woman. With her faculty advisor pursuing tenure, Eboni remembered:

> So there are a lot of ways where she had to do what she had to do to, um, mobilize, to do well to like gain tenure. But at the expense of like sometimes I just couldn't access her. Emails would go unanswered, phone calls, text messages, all those kinds of things.

For some, the neglectful treatment by their faculty advisor translated to a "hazing process" rather than a more care-filled relationship. For example, when talking about the lack of support of Black female doctoral students provided by faculty, Eboni exasperated how that the problem is structural:

> Um, so many things about my experience were just difficult and it didn't have to be. And I think that was always the critique. Like structurally there need to be different things in place to make sure we're successful in this process. And it doesn't make sense to accept us, put money aside for us and then fucking haze us throughout the entire process and expect us to do well or to succeed or to, I don't know. The whole process has just been a lot.

In the same breath associated with Greek life terminology, Morgan described her relationship with her advisor, a Black woman seeking tenure, as a "being on line," a term associated with the process in which potential members seek membership in the National Pan-Hellenic Council's historically Black Greek lettered organizations (BGLOs).[18] She said:

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[18] Being "on line" refers to the period of time in which you learn information associated with the fraternity or sorority's history, Greek alphabet, organization's tenets of service, and chapter background. This timeframe can be understood two different ways - official and unofficial. Officially, this is the designated time that is sanctioned by the organization's headquarters. On average, the official time ranges from 3-6 weeks culminating in a membership ceremony whereas when potential members go "underground" or deviate from the official process, it elongates the timeline by months and sometimes years. When going "underground," this is when common hazing practices such as paddling/beating, not being able to wear certain colors, sleep deprivation, social isolation, and unexpected late night meetings typically occur (Banks & Archibald, 2020). The intended purpose of hazing is to provide a sense of

> …my advisor explained it to me early on that in, two ways, that our relationship was … almost like we, you know, we are an academic family, but she also described it as me being on line again. And that, you know, how I was big sister, may I? And that it was going to be Mother, may I type of thing. So, you know, it was a matter of, I mean, but it was at first I was kind of like, okay, don't, don't take me back to a place of being on line. Like I got my letters and crossed, leave me alone, but I guess, you know, I got to cross PhD, who knows? But I also understood that it was her way of protecting me because my field at the time was very, and it still is very predatory towards women.[19]

By using language associated with Greek life such as "being on line" and "crossed," the unspoken text here indicates that Morgan understood the consequences associated with the relationship with their advisor. By this I mean, if a potential new member were to tell authorities (ie: an office for Greek life) about being "on line" vis-á-vis underground, there is great risk of having the line or group of women being dismissed from sorority membership. Taking the same analogy and applying it to the academy, the Black women who alluded to being "on line" understand the consequences of telling administration about their graduate advisor of color, in particular Black women. Faculty members are similar to Greek members who have already gained entrance into exclusive, membership-only clubs - the academy and the sorority; often times, the hazing cycle associated with membership-only organizations continues with the

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belonging amongst those in the organization and builder of tradition while "solicit individual commitment to an organization and exert dominance over those seeking to become members" (Bruckner, 2018; Chambers et. al., 2018).

[19] The usage of "predatory" by the participant is indicative of the historical and current racial and gendered demographics of her academic field of political science. One way that political science is considered to be predatory is by way of sexual violence and general violence toward women during fieldwork according to Hunt (2022).

mentality of if it happened to me, it can happen to you, perpetuating and projecting trauma onto those who seek membership.

It is here that the importance of "and" comes into practice. The Black women who were interviewed continue to have an understanding and grace extended toward Black faculty, particularly to Black women And it is also important to note the grave disappointment and harm in the lack of care extended back to them as students experiencing graduate culture for the first time. Tiffany specially notes that in light of the global pandemic COVID-19 there was a dismissal of support by her Africana Studies faculty when told "your labor is part of the movement" indicating that Tiffany needed to put aside her personal needs for the collective sustainment of the department.[20] In a frustrated tone and heavy shoulders, Tiffany outlined her interaction with a Black faculty member:

> And I've really been thinking about this entire doctoral experience because a lot of people consider these next five to seven years, depending on how long it takes you, is like a training ground, but it's not only a training in skills, it also trains you for treatment and the lack of care you'll be getting once you gain tenure, once you become an associate professor, and I was able to see that early on, that especially if you're a Black woman… And so that puts a lot of stress on us because we are having to kind of compensate for all of these lacks that are happening on the faculty level as graduate students and we just don't get the support that we need at the end of the day.

Mistreatment, whether it be inaccessibility, internalized anti-Blackness, or swift repudiation, is often disguised as "tough love" - something that many continue to take because of the desire to

[20] As explained by Tiffany, her department's labor through scholarship and community work contributes to the production of knowledge designed to aid in the progression of folks of African ancestry.

protect the name of their faculty advisor. Socialization through advising with faculty remains a mental hurdle associated with distrust, exhaustion, and ultimately, trauma. While the Black women in this study were not physically hit, the mental health concerns with navigating graduate education are important to address which will be outlined in the following chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed the background of the 14 Black women who have decided to plunge into graduate education by going straight for the PhD credential. I discussed the similarity of involvement in graduate pipeline programs and the difference of undergraduate institution type in order to transition into the top two reasons associated with going to graduate school. Because of the funding attached to a PhD versus a master's degree and the limitation of career opportunities with only a Master's, the women spoke with energy and excitement at the thought of becoming doctors in their fields. I, then, closed chapter by reviewing how the transition academically and socially went for the women of the dissertation study.

Based on the profiles of these 14 Black women, programs must expand upon their understanding and practical application of support so that it addresses issues surrounding a direct transition. Some recommendations include:

1. **Creation of a Black Girl Cohort** - A simultaneous cohort model of Black women who transition directly from their undergrad into PhD programs and their faculty advisor can be created. This model can exist at the department level, college level, campus wide, and even within particular fellowships earned through pipeline programs participation (i.e.: Ronald E. McNair Fellows) that many Black women enter academia through. For students, cohorts can reduce isolation, resulting in a greater sense of belonging and community orientation thus increasing retention. Within this cohort program, there would be opportunity to have

sessions for the Black women enrolled that look to increase the agency of the participants so they are equipped to handle the aforementioned graduate tensions understood in this chapter. These sessions would entail topics such as how to navigate difficult faculty dynamics, publish in journals and present research at conferences, and defend against pushback when research is invalidated. Simultaneously, the Black women's faculty members would also undergo sessions that provide training on how to advise from a culturally responsive frame point. Faculty usually do not receive formal training on how to advise students but rather replicate what was done for them in their graduate program.

2. **Additional Funding** - When Black women are being called upon to do diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) work because they are often the only one or one of few, departments need to incentivize and pay them for the time and labor contributed to the betterment of the department and institution as a whole. This service includes committees and advisory boards dedicated to progressing DEIJ ideals forward at the department, school/college, or university level. Quite frequently, contributions by Black female doctoral students are unpaid when doing this form of labor but is projected by administrators that it can serve as a CV line. In practicality, CV lines do not provide tangible, financial compensation, and the time away from researching, writing, and reading is time distracted from the PhD credential. Additional funds would allow Black women to protect their time and shorten the time to degree completion which is a priority for many graduate schools across the country.

Chapter three discusses the challenges associated with being a Black woman who directly transitions into their doctoral with two primary foci dedicated to the maturation process and imposter syndrome. Through Black feminist lens, one is able to view how race, gender, and age

impact the mental health of Black female graduate students who undergo this unique transition to a PhD.

Chapter 3: "That's not my knowledge bank": The Mental Process of a Black Female Doctoral Student Putting on Her "Big Girl Panties"

"In truth, we don't belong because we were never supposed to belong. Our presence in most of these spaces is a result of decades of grassroots activism and begrudgingly developed legislation. Academic institutions and corporations are still mired in the cultural inertia of the good ol 'boys 'clubs and white supremacy." - Tulshayan & Burey (2021)

Princess' Portrait: An Intimate Look into A Life of a Black Doctoral Student

Settling into her chair and wearing a gray t-shirt, Princess greeted me over Zoom with a warm smile and a slight scratch of her curly tendrils with teal acrylic nails. Princess, who is a rising second year in a social science PhD program in Illinois, began speaking excitedly about her undergraduate experience at a southern HBCU. Very bluntly, Princess recalled having a great time and described the great support she received from the sociology department. In the sociology department she became an interdisciplinary scholar and began doing public health work which led her to becoming a member of a research lab dedicated to pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and its access to college students[21]. That experience of doing undergraduate research prepared her for academic experience. Even with these forms of support she experienced mental health challenges during her graduate tenure. She discussed feeling of being the "outlier" as the "youngest, the only Black one, the coolest one."

> Everybody else they're a little older, not significantly, but they all have master's degrees. And yeah, that just kind of made it a little awkward. And you could just kind of tell, I mean back then, I think I was in my head a lot, so when I would hear people talking, I'll be like, 'Oh my goodness. They know so much more than I do. They're so much more prepared.' I felt like I had to uphold a certain… I don't know. Uphold a certain status,

[21] According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is a medicine that prevents people from contracting HIV. PrEP "reduces the risk of getting HIV from sex by about 99%" (CDC, 2021).

> because I'm the only Black person in the room…. So, I really struggled with that. I felt lonely a lot of times.

One specific memory that was quickly shared to emphasize her struggle came from a mental health and higher education course taken during Princess' first year and the final paper was her choice. Princess chose to write about a Black PhD student at Vanderbilt who took her own life and how one of the primary contributing factors was the lack of support by her graduate program.

> And I'm like, whoa, that could have been me. So sad!... So for my paper, I started with that idea… Like, because you don't feel welcomed in your program or in your cohort when class was over, you go straight home… And so to other people it's like you're not engaged or you think you have better things to do, or you're socially isolating yourself from the group. But, it's like, this isn't a welcoming environment for me. And it's actually really hard for me to be around ya'll… And some of those things are just being a first year and getting acclimated to the school. But, a lot of it has to do with the intersectionality of race and gender and then age as well. Because I don't think older students have… the same desire to make friends at school.

Princess described this moment as a moment of reckoning for her as she was the sole Black woman who deeply felt and identified with the Black female doctoral student at Vanderbilt. Her intersecting identities as a young, Black woman within her program surrounded by non-Black cohort mates reminded her of by not having anyone to process the research she was doing. The topic of suicide is extremely heavy and to not have a confident in her program added to the isolationism and solitude. She identified distance between herself and her classmates.

For Princess, moments like this were not unusual which greatly impacted her mental health and how she reacted to her graduate program emotionally. Recalling her emotions for her first year at her PWI, Princess shared how she responded to the continuous experiences where her race, gender, and age became increasingly prevalent. Her bubbly demeanor and bright smile withered a little and was replaced with duller, downtrodden eyes but yet a calm fire determined to tell her story.

> Sad, lonely, anxious, yeah anxious. I don't know if isolated is [an] emotion. Segregated. I felt segregated. Felt like Rosa Parks… Yeah. It just felt really not included, but yeah, I was just really, just not really here. I didn't feel like I was living life. I just felt like I was just doing stuff just to do it. Just doing stuff because I had to, which was a really sad feeling because I think, in a lot of ways you join programs to do this amazing research, and you're in this space to change the world. And when you feel like you're just somebody's punching bag ... nobody ever hit me, but the whole world would know about it if they did. But if you felt like people are just here to be mean to you or make you feel less than it's uncomfortable.

Princess recognized that the situations that continued to occur were damaging to her beyond the lack of support given with her research paper topic and extended to situations such as her department colleague commenting on her hair changing styles at a symposium or another colleague giving her "permission" to ask a question to the faculty member. As she digested the words of the older students and faculty in and out of the department, she struggled with processing what was said. Princess was consistently advised to become "immune" and to ignore the microaggressions because "these people have thought this way for decades and they're going to continue to think this way." She said:

> Well, whatever people said to me, they just said to me, 'it is what it is.' But, I'm also like, 'There are too many people that work extremely hard for me to get here for me to sit here and shut my mouth. That just doesn't work for me and I just watched that Michelle Obama documentary and she told me to speak up. So I said, okay I got something for ya'll.

Ultimately, Princess articulated that she shifted away from being vocal to recognizing that racism and other systems of oppression are "simply a distraction." Through Princess was still navigating her mental health as a Black woman in a doctoral program, she seemed assured that her work will "speak for itself." As an incoming second year, her decision making led to the tactic that she believed would work best for her, which felt like progress.

Chapter two began with elation related to acceptance into graduate school. However, in chapter three, it is important to take note of the multiple barriers that impede progress and success for Black women who transition directly from their undergraduate. Here, I focus on three primary barriers illuminated by Princess' story and supported by other women's similar anecdotes. These three barriers are 1. age as a salient identity and its contribution to feeling an uncomfortable maturation process, 2. mental health challenges feeding into imposter syndrome, and 3. debilitating perceived and real pressure. Overall, I found that although these women have experienced all three of these barriers, they continue to persist through their respective programs.

Barrier 1: The Prominence of Age as a Salient Identity

The most recent data from the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES) based out of the National Science Foundation (NSF) indicates that in 2016 Black or Indigenous/Alaska Native U.S. citizens and permanent resident doctorate recipients were more likely to receive their degrees at age 41 or older (NCSES, 2018). In the same study, women were

reported to receive their degree at 32 years old in 2016. When considering the educational path to the PhD, 59% of 2019 doctorate recipients earned at least one master's degree while 11% of doctorate recipients earned more than one master's degree prior (NCSES, 2019). These statistics prove to be vitally important in understanding the traditional educational pathway to a PhD. When one comes into a PhD program with a master's degree(s), this then would add additional years of lived experience and exposure to graduate culture thus providing a benefit to the student. Whereas a Black woman who directly enrolls in a doctoral program from their undergraduate institution, she would not have the same benefit due to their academic and personal background. Albeit helpful in understanding a general overview of doctorates, all statistics provided by the NSF or NCSES's Survey of Earned Doctorates does not disaggregate the data to view the experience of Black women who do not come into their PhD programs without master's degrees or time off.

Consistently, the women interviewed mentioned age as a prominent identity alongside their race and gender and its' impact on their graduate experience. This is not to say other identities such as region and sexual orientation were not contributing or minimized identities in relation to the doctoral experience. These three identities must be considered in tandem when thinking about this particular group of Black women because someone's race, gender, and age or proximity to youthfulness are often the first identities to be perceptible about another person.

Jaime, a clinical psychology third year doctoral candidate, spoke about how her age was perceived as a deficit by many of those in the department. Because of how youthful she looked and that the youth that she occupied was in closer proximity to the undergraduate students, it was often questioned on if she could academically perform within the seminar room. She commented:

> Um, I'm the youngest person in my cohort. I'm only one out of two Black people in my cohort. And, um, I am one out of two of people who came from undergrad. And so I think with all of those things kind of combined, I had, I was just really worried that I wasn't going to perform to the extent that other people were performing cause they had more experience than me or they were older than me, those types of things. And so I think that I worked a lot harder to feel like I was meeting everybody's level, I guess.

Jamie felt as though there was a necessity to adhere to the graduate posture because she wanted to prove her worth and ability in the classroom. Why did Jaime say that she "worked a lot harder" despite being selected by the admission committee as academically ready for the doctoral program? Because she simply felt the desired to be seen as an equal and validated by her department peers so that she is perceived as a contributing member to the department community rather than as the affirmative action admit.[22] For Jasmine, her age was a constant in the range of microaggressions she experiences as a clinical psychology PhD student at her southern PWI. She stated:

> And then age wise, I think just people not taking me as seriously, because they're like, "Oh, well she's young, whatever." But I'm on the same year as everyone else in this space as far as the programs. Saying things like, "Oh you could stay here an extra couple of years if you wanted to because you're because you're young." It's like, "No, no, no I'm trying like everybody else that came in here." Or for interview day, I think finally, maybe

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[22] According to Zamboanga et al. (2002), white undergraduate students who were interviewed before and after applying to graduate programs "reported that they would be likely to associate poor performance in minority students with affirmative action policies, and to presume that affirmative action policies allow under-qualified minority students to gain admission into graduate school." In the same study, it was reported that the same group of respondents indicated that with affirmative action policies, "underrepresented students are likely to receive preferential treatment on the basis of ethnic group membership, reducing the study participants own graduate school admission chances."

> this year interviewees will stop asking if I'm an undergrad or if I'm applying with them because I would get a lot of, especially like white people that are interviewing, being like, "Oh, are you interviewing? Are you an undergrad? Like researcher or something?" And I'm like, "No." Because I'm sitting on the side with the grad students. So, so just like little things like that.

In this example, Jasmine handled her own interactions with department peers and faculty who question her time to degree completion because she is “young.” This translates to many things such as being overseen for fellowships or funding opportunities because people in the department equate Jasmine’s youth with frivolous time. If she has time, then funding opportunities are not an immediate necessity. The above statement by Jasmine also illuminated how prospective students as well - those who haven’t even been admitted into the program Jasmine is already enrolled in - question her presence. The interrogation that Jasmine receives during recruitment events each year contributes to the proof that age is an important identity when thinking about this particular population of Black graduate women.

There is a level of “presumed incompetence,” a term coined by Muhs et al. (2012), describing the perception of Black and other women of color in academia as less than due to the intersectional identities and social affiliations they may be a part of. While presumed incompetence is typically applied to race and gender identities, I would argue that the concept can be further applied to age. For example, Erica shared an observation of her faculty advisor’s interaction with her compared to her lab mates.

> Like, I don't know what the formal term is for it, but basically like the initial doubt that you get from people questioning how qualified or like well-equipped you are to do certain things. And I see it most in my advisor, um, just in terms of trusting me in

> handling certain tasks… It, there was a time when he felt like he needed weekly, you know, very lengthy, weekly follow-ups for me to prove to him that I was performing according to what he was expecting.

Because of the frequent negative interactions with her advisor, Erica's perception of her advisor's behavior toward her illustrated the doubt that began to grow, resulting in a diminished sense of self confidence. It is important to note that Erica is her advisor's first Black female advisee so there is a lack of an intersectional understanding in how to properly mentor and advise her. Initially, Erica accepted her advisor's harsh commentary and micromanaging demeanor for absolute fact meaning she believed that was just the way the doctoral advising process happened and that the feedback must be true. It was only after working with another faculty member who provided praise rather than critique on a research paper that she began to realize the emotional damage that her advisor caused her. She explained:

> And I was like, I'm actually doing fine. You know? Cause it was cause I was like, this is my advisor and he's just being a perfectionist or... I don't know what his problem is, but I was like this, this has really skewed how I see myself because his opinion had been the only one that I was getting for my first two and a half years before we started working on some other work with other professors.

It is assumed that there is a level of professional and academic naïveté and ineptitude associated with not having a certain level of lived experience coming into the doctoral space. I would also argue that because of the youthful perception of these Black women, an urgent demand becomes prevalent to mature academically, mentally, and even financially to adapt to

the graduate environment.[23] This was found through multiple ways for women like Eboni- learning and incorporating academic jargon and dense theoretical concepts, managing the emotional toil of graduate education as a major responsibility at 22, and budgeting a meager graduate stipend in a high cost of living region. In regard to academic maturity, Eboni recalled during her focus group that she felt as though she had to grow up academically too fast otherwise she would be left behind. She commented:

> It was just an abrupt thing from undergrad to grad school… which also kind of, I guess, prompted me like to say, Oh shit, I better get myself together. Fast. I have to learn here quickly because I also recognize I was the only Black woman in probably almost all of my classes. Okay. I'll have to feel like - they come with a certain set of skills or knowledge bank that I don't. Like, people are quoting and talking about Foucault and all of these people. That's not my knowledge bank. I need to step up my game and figure out thing and I never felt like I could reach out to any of the white professors I had and very few of the students in class because we weren't the same.

Eboni also proclaimed:

> One of the things that also was interesting throughout this process was that because of the difference in terms of responsibilities and duties, sometimes there will be tensions amongst family and friends for me, which was also difficult to navigate because it was, there were these expectations as a Black woman in a doctoral program that I have for myself, that I know others have for me, especially others who invested it for me… Sometimes, I do wish I had taken a year or two off just to actually just live because from

[23] To mature means to become more developed mentally and emotionally and behave in a responsible way" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022).

> high school to undergrad, to grad school, all throughout those times working and going to school was just a lot.

The maturation process for Eboni and for many of her peers in this study sped up the burnout process to stay motivated through the program. The dissonance of being physically closer to the age of undergraduate students but needing to mature in other ways to adjust to their doctoral program is a level of labor that many of these women underwent but felt was an unspoken condition of entry into doctoral education. Eboni describes it as a "necessity." She said:

> Um, it [maturing] definitely was a necessity, but I feel like that was also just a thing of Black girlhood. I always had to be like just older than I was like coming into grad school. It was necessary because I had to strategize more in particular my finances because grad school money is just nothing. Right? So I had to figure out how I would be able to attend classes, still present, take on all these different academic, like responsibilities and duties while also balancing the duties that I had to my family. And in particular, my mother in supporting her as we support each other, really in just living in this country, right.

In Eboni's quote, she mentions Black girlhood which serves as a reminder that age is integral in understanding maturation. For Black girls, there is an erasure of childhood because "beginning as early as 5 years of age, Black girls were more likely to be viewed as behaving and seemingly older than their stated age; more knowledgeable about adult topics, including sex; and more likely to take on adult roles and responsibilities than what would have been expected for their age" (Epstein et al., 2020). This directly translates to a lack of protection, care and innocence which are all essential to this developmental period, resulting in a form of dehumanization. Located in that dehumanization is no room to explore or to learn because Black girls are already seen as matured or "grown." This process is somewhat mirrored in Black

women who transition directly into PhD programs because there continues to be no room or opportunity to be a novice in a space they have not previously occupied; the knowledge is expected to already exist wherein a steep learning curve academically, emotionally, and financially is present. This plays into the historical "strong Black woman" troupe that has plagued Black women, insisting that Black women can withstand copious amount of strain. As research shows, racism contributes to the accelerated weathering and decline of health which ultimately means they physiologically age faster.[24] Black women and their younger selves were always aged in different ways (literally and figuratively) than white women and this process is continued as a doctoral students as Eboni discussed. Eboni mentioned that she also had to take care of her mother who is an immigrant which directly correlates to the findings of Epstein et al.'s report on Black girlhood. Unfortunately, for Eboni and many of the other interviewees, their age in doctoral education catalyzed a maturing process that often proves to be laborious and yet still distressingly familiar.

Barrier 2: Mental Health Challenges Feeding Imposter Syndrome

Female graduate students are more likely to report having stress, as well as higher depression and anxiety symptoms compared to male graduate students (Barreira et al., 2018; Hyun et al, 2006). However, when you factor in a racial lens, Black women have higher rates which contributes to being the most dissatisfied and isolated group of individuals at PWIs compared to other population of students. This suggests despite academic persistence performed by Black doctoral women that the emotional well-being may be at risk (Shavers & Moore, 2014; Ellis, 2001). Princess' mental health story is not unique in the fact that it illuminates the constant challenges of Black women in doctoral programs. As she continued through her first year of

[24] Chae et al., (2020)

graduate school, Princess recognized the increased importance of taking care of her mental health and her struggle gives insight into how Black women in the study experience unique challenges of Black women who transition directly from their undergraduate into a PhD program at PWIs across the United States.

Underqualified. Incompetent. Anger. Rage. Sadness. Loneliness. Frustration. Princess' recollection is not a siloed story but rather provided insight into negative mental health responses to doctoral education as increasingly evident amongst the 14 participants. Maya, a 4th year biochemistry student, stated:

> I mean, graduate school has been probably the worst thing, for the worst decision I've ever made for my mental health. But I don't know if it's just the, of grad school or if it's where I currently am, because it's not like I've ever met a grad student who is just like, "I absolutely love this. This is great. I'm having a blast." It seems like a hazing process. And it's who can hold out the longest, we'll give you a doctorate.

As similarly outlined in chapter one, Maya was not the only student who mentioned that the pathway to the doctorate was considered to be hazing. Part of how she perceived hazing was through the mishandling of racial trauma of the murder of George Floyd in May of 2020. The frustration toward the lack of a supportive response by Maya's Graduate School along with trying to navigate the racial trauma associated with the extrajudicial murders of Black bodies proved to be a common thread for many. For Eboni, a doctoral candidate in educational policy & leadership program, this frustration continues to show up as disillusionment since she has seen the racial trauma manifest not only at the national level but also at the campus level. Eboni explained with a spirited response:

> I did not sign up for this shit… I did not think I was going to come into this space and deal with so much trauma. And also because of the communities that I care about, I've often been in spaces and doing work on this campus where I'm working with people that look like me and they're sharing their experiences… I did not sign up for this sort of racial terrorism, you know? Um, so that's a lot of what the disillusionment is.,, I feel like to a degree it's some of the students, faculty and, you know, staff here that make it so like, okay, I at least have a space and a community, but this bombardment of just, I just don't even, I can't even understand it. I can't even put my finger on it.

The deep disappointment, rage, and anger that Eboni feels translates to a sense of abandonment by the university for Eboni. The lack of care shown toward Black students concerning murders of Black folk nationally and campus wide was not something that was expected as her program lauded diversity as one of its' strengths. Eboni came into the university believing that in a diverse state such as Maryland that there would be greater institutional supports established but there were not. Instead, she, personally, was forced to expend labor and energy to find support outside of her department through conferences, informal mentoring "sista scholar" networks, and external employment opportunities.

Another emotion that was ever-present amongst participants is confusion. As a rising third year doctoral student in STEM, Marie commented how she often felt confused because she was still trying to figure out her path to degree. Marie recalled:

> Um, my path of doing things was totally different from everyone else's. I felt like most people, they just got in the lab and they immediately started doing their research. However, I was like, okay, well I want to figure this out. I want to see what I can do. I

> want to see, like, how do I... if I was like a puzzle piece, I want to see like, where do I fit?

Marie's statement indicated the question of belonging is ever-present amongst the participants which connects to the idea of imposter syndrome. Jasmine, a Black woman farther along in her social science doctoral program, also indicated a similar notion. When talking about one of her initial responses to her experience, Jasmine honed in a mental reflection that occurred during her first year.

> Because sometimes I'd just be like, "What am I doing here? Why am I doing this?" Not in the sense of the work I was doing, but just, "Is there a better way that I could be serving my community than being stressed out for the next five years?" … I'm at a PWI. I'm giving all this energy to an institution in a school that really may not value me. So some resentment in maybe I shouldn't have tried to go a PhD path. Maybe I should have done something else so I could be more of a service to my community." And so some resentment in those decisions, I think now I've come to, this was a good decision. But initially my first year it was like, "Dang Jasmine. Did you make the right decision in coming?"

Questions such as Marie's "where do I fit?" or even Jasmine's "did I make the right decision?" arose out of negative socializing interactions with colleagues that invalidated their experiences. These doubtful thoughts were in relation to their presence in a space that historically marginalizes Blackness, womanhood, and younger age. When referring to the internal doubt grown from external forces, Asia stated:

> I felt behind in some of the classes. I heard the voices of all those people that tell you to take a year off, um, or more than one year off to gain more experience. So, I felt

> inadequate in a lot of settings. Um, I felt like I didn't really know how to answer a lot of the questions I was being asked at first, but a lot of that I realized in reflection was overthinking and just being again, imposter syndrome and just not having that confidence in that space.

Battling this doubt and feeling of fraudulence takes mental and emotional energy that is often depleted from graduate education. To constantly combat the imposter syndrome that is often mentioned in conversation surrounding Black women in graduate education, women within the study have indicated a high level of exhaustion. Black women consistently proved themselves and their worth to colleagues but also to themselves which led to levels of exhaustion, depression, and anxiety as evident by questions posed by Marie, Jasmine, & Asia.

Barrier 3: (Debilitating) Perceived and Real Pressure

The last barrier to be discussed is pressure that is understood occur at to be at the internal and external level.[25] Internally, there were two different types of pressures that are present in the lives of the women interviewed. One is the pressure to represent all Black people when being the "only one" which refers to the sole Black student in a seminar room or workplace called upon to speak for Black people as if Black people are a monolith. For many women, the second internal pressure mentioned is to remain authentic to themselves despite graduate school's culture of conformity to the academy. Externally, the pressure associated with making the family and community back home proud is a yoke that many women commented on. Earning a PhD degree serves as a tangible return of investment of the sacrifices and contributions made by loved ones.

[25] When looking up the word "pressure" in the Cambridge Dictionary, all definitions include a level of persuasion, force, and attack despite its syntactic function as a verb or noun.

Alexis discussed the internal desire to remain authentic to who she is and was rather than adopt the ways and language of the Ivory Tower which would further remove her from her community. She spoke to not wanting any separatism or gatekeeping against her own community and to not be another extracting source but to feed into her community. She was able to dissect her thoughts to a mentor through the numerous conversations. In those discussions, Alexis reflected:

> But it's, just, how weird is it to have to leave my community in order to be able to, like, gain access to information about my community so that I can give it back to my community? That just seems weird to have to become isolated from my people in order to gain information. Um, in a way that's kind of like, will I be able to be… like I can't go back to where I was. And so there's this way in which now I have all this newfound information, but I also feel, um, like detached from my home in a lot of ways. And so that was really hard, um, to have that feeling and then… like, well, if, this is how it's gonna be then I need it to be worth it, which felt like pressure.

The pressure to shift and stretch herself in order to assimilate into graduate culture - a culture that is not of her own is tense and daunting to conceptualize. However, from this statement, one can witness that in her 5th year, Alexis struggled with codeswitching back and forth between two different communities that often don't intertwine.[26] The ability to codeswitch is becoming harder and harder for Alexis to do and because of that, she is trying to adamantly push back against the elitist pressure associated with the PhD credential. While there is an acknowledgement of growth

[26] According to McCluney et al. (2019), codeswitching is considered to be a survival tactic for Black people when navigating interracial interactions. This may mean that there are adjustments in the style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expressions in the company of non-Black people to appear as non-stereotypical and ultimately rendered as "safe."

attributed to being in graduate school, for many, there still is a desire to remain connected and grounded in the woman that was once was. This type of internal pressure is wearisome because the time dedicated to constant grappling of who one is in different spaces causes a barrier o personal and academic success. In fact, a study by Hewlin (2009) indicates the facade of collectivism through codeswitching contributes to a lowered authentic self-expression and increased burnout rates. This is important to take note of because I argue that joy combats against these moments of inauthenticity, burnout, and desire to depart from these PhD programs.

For many of the women, it was perceived external pressure to succeed from family, friends, and community that proves to be an impairment to success. Although not one respondent indicated that their loved ones gave an ultimatum to secure a PhD, it is best to think about the woman who began chapter three off - Princess. In reflecting about the feeling that the degree is something greater than themself, Princess stated:

> So even when I just get small messages, asking me how school's going, and I really want to be like, "This sucks. They hate me. And I hate them too." I have to just kind of say, "You know, it's coming. It's challenging, but it's nothing that I don't have. I have everything that I need to succeed, and I know what's going to work out well." So I think knowing that this is something bigger than myself, is something that really pushed me. My parents worked really hard to get me through undergrad so I can come in to this space. And if anything else, it's a free education… I always said I need to finish with the school stuff so I can have a family and my parents can spend time with my kids and we can do stuff because I'll have money and we can live a certain type of life.

According to Princess and other women who echoed her viewpoints, this degree is not just for themselves but for their loved ones as well. The support whether that is financial, emotional,

social or physical is given by the communities and is to be reciprocated at a later date once the degree is conferred. The PhD represents not only upward professional trajectory to do the work that they are called to do but to also provide financial mobility for loved ones. To not let down those who were physically left behind to pursue this advanced degree was and continues to be difficult to manage. As seen in Princess' statement, she talked about a level of guilt for complaining about being in a position that is different than the conditions of those back home. Princess shifted her language when discussing her graduate experience to those back home, masking the trials that she is experiencing so as to not look ungrateful. Oftentimes, people consider academia to be "just" reading and writing all day and as the question of "how hard can that be?" The questions arise from a lack of understanding, access, and transparency associated with the academy. Recognition of the privilege to study, read, and write as a career accompanies the hesitancy to authentically share the reality of earning the PhD.

Conclusion

Overall, there are three barriers hindering the success of Black women who transition directly into graduate school for their PhDs. Those barriers are the prominence of age as a salient identity and its contribution to an uncomfortable maturation process, mental health challenges feeding into imposter syndrome, and debilitating perceived and real pressure from internal and external forces. By finding out these three barriers, there is greater understanding on what can be addressed and changed so as to increase the quality of life and graduate experience for these particular Black women enrolled. In the next chapter, I will discuss how even with these three barriers Black women who transition directly into their PhD program continue to understand and experience joy to become doctors within their respective fields.

Chapter 4: Walkin' in Joy: Making the Finish Line

i had been dancing in my black joy
body rolling against strangers
who were all so shocked i was glee
ecstacy, was unbroken
was in my power
was magic
was spinning a golden thread
from my left hip
off that rooftop in brooklyn…

… i got gathered into black joy
got delivered got spent
got lifted up and plunged deep down
got left with
gifted and offered
got caught by
and filled up to overflowing with
got spilled over my own edges
with black joy

- adrienne maree brown

For Black identifying women specifically, the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic is often used in social media platforms. Lauded to be a "Black cultural pioneer," CaShawn Thompson created the concept of "Black Girls Are Magic," which ultimately was shorted to hashtag #BlackGirlMagic with the intent to uphold, celebrate, protect, and revere Black girls and their magic (Ballin, 2019). The visualization and articulation of Black joy by Black women combats the thought that Black women cannot reach that level of elation and euphoria (brown, 2019). Joy has been and continues to be theorized as a praxis for everyday life. Considered to be a concept of resistance and resilience, exhibited Black joy combats and counters constant imagery of Black death and mourning. Joy offers a breathing space for Black folks and has been evident across various modalities and institutions of art, media, fashion, etc. However, joy within higher education, specifically in graduate/doctoral education, has not been explored and has not been tied to persistence at all.

Study participants described multiple ways in which joy is understood, practiced, and sustained while in their doctoral programs at their respective PWIs. Several participants shared how joy was understood as a Black female doctoral student and how their social identities informed their perceptions of joy. Furthermore, they described how joy actively contributed to and informed their persistence in their academic programs. No matter if fleeting or sustaining, moments of joy within these three areas - within self, community, and academic work continues to maintain the desire to continue within these Black women's programs.

Understanding Joy

For the purpose of this dissertation, joy is defined as the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the project of possessing what one desires.[27] Again, it is important to note that while joy and happiness are often used synonymously and interchangeably, they are not the same. Generally, happiness is considered to be temporary and situational compared to the deeper nature and active embodiment of joy.[28] However, it is important to make a cultural distinction when discussing joy and that is where Black joy comes into significance. Black joy, according to Lewis-Giggetts (2021), is an emotion rooted in the cultural experiences and expressions by Black people across the Diaspora that serves as a strategic and radical demonstration of sustainment, humanity, and hope. Joy is important within this conversation around Black women so as to challenge the negative experiences and emotions associated with doctoral education. Joy was chosen as the actor to understand persistence for Black women who have undergone a prototypical move from undergrad directly to a PhD degree granting program.

[27] Werriam-Webster, 2018
[28] Lewis-Giggetts, 2022; Moschella, 2015

The women who participated within the dissertation did not speak to a homogenous definition of joy because the ways that Black women exhibited, experienced, cultivated, and maintained their joy varied across disciplines thus creating a nuanced understanding of joy. For example, Dominique, a doctoral student in a humanities program, stated:

> Bliss joy is, um, peace to me. It's like a space of peace and uh bliss and of contentment and umm... Joy is being able to flourish. Joy is being able to be yourself and be confident in who you are. Joy is, um, when everything else is falling apart, you're still able to be upbeat and you're still able to hold your head high and, uh, face the world.

In fact, there are two general understandings of joy within the context of this project - joy paralleling pain and joy as a birthright for Black women. The first one described here in this study is joy paralleling pain. Outside of their doctoral programs, it is important to note that data collection took place during the summer of 2020 - a time where social unrest due to the historical trifecta of extrajudicial murders of Black bodies - Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. For many of the women, there was a certain level of "death" that was expected of them once they entered graduate school and a level of grieving indicating that their lives will forever be changed. The death of their younger selves in order to mature into the performance of a doctoral student as outlined as one of the barriers to doctoral success. Keisha spoke to this when she said:

> We can't mute the trauma just to have joy so you do have to have them connected but it would be so nice if we could just have joy in itself. The way that I see it connected is I think when me and my community are really desperate for a Black game night or a Zoom check-in we've been doing where it's just us. I think unfortunately what pushes us towards that space is the exhaustion of dealing with whiteness all day or whatever it is.

> And it's like, we really need to sit in front of each other or laugh with each other because of all the heaviness of everything that will be going on. And so I think unfortunately in that way, I think the joy and the trauma gets linked because we do sometimes just get together just for fun but a lot of times it's with this almost desperation of I really need my people right now.

"Dealing with whiteness" as a doctoral student at a PWI is constant and consistent meaning that the coursework, faculty, graduate students, and climate of both the university and the department itself are steeped in white supremacy and anti-Blackness.[29] The trauma associated with being Black and hyper(in)visible within the graduate education space is painful and exhausting. As Jaime, a 3rd year clinical psychology student, reiterated:

> I really don't like them be intertwined, the joy and the trauma, but also I feel like being Black in these systems, your joy and trauma always intertwined because there's always some type of trauma going on, whether it's vicarious trauma or happening to you.

The trauma and pain paralleling joy is present except for the purposeful clustering of other Black graduate students instituted and initiated informally. It is in these spaces that Black graduate students of all gender orientations have the ability to just be in a physical or virtual environment. However, joy is understood to counter that pain through the practice of finding it within the self, community, and the work being produced while in school.

And so, for many of the informants, there was push back to have joy stand alone without it coexisting with pain and trauma. This leads to the secondary understanding of joy - a Black

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[29] Feagin (2013) outlines the white racial frame (WRF) as a set of cultural narratives and symbols that place inherent value in whiteness and includes five components: stereotypes and prejudice; racialized narratives; racial images; racialized emotions; and a tendency to discriminate against people of color. For higher education specifically, WRF is woven into the fabric of the the institution and strengthened through discourse, policies, values, and standards (Grier-Reed et al., 2018; Feagin, 2013).

woman's inherent birthright meaning that joy was believed to belong to them. Alexis spoke to the perpetuation of the "strong Black woman ideology" and how that often prevents the presence of joy. She said:

> I feel like for me, it is also something that I have like access to. Like I have access to stepping into joy. Not that I'd have to like push through something to get to it, but I feel like it's intricately tied to my ability to like care for myself and love myself well, so I can experience joy. I don't have to choose to like strong Black woman ideology, my way through stuff and kind of like, you know, wrestle all the struggles and take on the battles for everybody that exists. If that's something that's not life giving to me, and that does not bring my joy, then I can say no to that.

Although ethereal joy, pleasure, and ecstasy were not created with Black women in mind, we continue to understand and experience joy in many aspects of our lives in and out of graduate school. Black joy must be named to in order to counter the imagery of black death, mourning, and trauma. When joy fills a space, whether that be digital or in person, it creates room for the possibility of full life and humanity. Three ways joy is practiced, experienced and shared by the women of this study are joy found within the self, joy found in the community, and joy found in the work that these Black women take on.

Joy in Self

> I think even now I still interpret much of this PhD journey as that, right? Like, I'm about to go through seven years, maybe eight years of hell and like that's supposed to pay off in this status benefit, right? Like I'm going to be a professor… And I might maybe, after six or seven more years, get tenure and that, that is like the payoff. So this like perpetual purgatory where you're like it's long suffering and you put your work in and the

> valor and your value comes through the pain and your ability to produce through that pain… I would say arguably like the conditioning of most Black women's experiences in the United States that we are valorized for being able to sustain long suffering.

This is a quote by Monique, a fourth-year sociology doctoral student, who articulated the level of suffering that Black women in the Ivory Tower undergo to produce the research they want. This quote simulates how women in this study often recognize how trauma and struggle while in pursuit of the doctorate and in academia as a whole are institutionalized and embedded in the practices, policies, and programming of graduate education. In order to push back against the pain of academia, many women found and practiced different forms of self-care in order to preserve themselves and create space for joy to be practiced and experienced. This serves as the first way that joy is to be understood within the lives of Black female doctoral students - through the self. By preserving herself through varying self-care practices, Monique shared:

> So unlike happiness, where I think that is very like contextual or situational, um, that you can be happy today, not happy tomorrow, all these things, but like if you're a joyous person, that's something that is sustained over time and that despite your moods, you can maintain the joy you have in your life. Um, and that sense of like stability has like really kept me going in graduate school to know that like one it's, it's deeply tied to, I think, like self-worth. And like, you can have joy in yourself and in your surroundings because you know that like you are loved and you are worthy and you are valued. And all of these things, um, that allow a person to even begin an endeavor of a PhD, for example.

Self-reaffirmation combats the negative environment either cultivated by the campus itself or the department specifically. It is within the person that identifies that what is going on around and to them should not be occurring and that graduate education does not need to be like this. By saying

"this", I mean the exploitative, violent, and dehumanizing conditions in advising, teaching, and working spaces of Black women outlined in earlier chapters. And yet, Black women within doctoral programs continue to persist through to find joy on campuses that are marked with deeply racist origins and markers.

The second way that Black women in doctoral programs have understood joy is as an inherent birthright. Although many articulated the ways in which joy was a struggle to be had and that it was never meant for us as Black women, all of the interviewees believed that we are still entitled to the formation of joy in our lives. It is insisted upon that the pursuit, understanding, and desire for joy is for Black women as it serves as a political act of resistance. Dominique, a PhD student in an American Studies program, spoke to these sentiments within this statement here:

> I want to have joy regardless of if the things go well in my program or not… I want to experience joy on a day-to-day basis, but it's been difficult because so much of my life is wrapped up into this program, and it's almost like a weight that's always there. And if you have a little bit of success, there's always something after it, to bring you back down to reality, there's more for you to do. And so some of the ways that I've been attempting to find joy, is to find things that I like. Find different things that I like to do… I feel like self-care and Black joy are revolutionary. Things that we do as Black doctoral graduate students to care for ourselves is a part of how we become revolutionary.

By centering herself as a Black woman in this quote, Dominique's statement illustrates a radical love in a space that is always projecting constant productivity through the common sentiment "publish or persist." This, in turn, often dilutes the vision of joy because there is the facade that joy cannot exist because of time constraints. Time is always dedicated to balancing the numerous

responsibilities of doctoral education. Dominique's language surrounding "finding" is indicative of an amount of time dedicated to discovering the activities, people, and spaces that she likes and inspires her - to sustain her. Joy creates the space for Black doctoral women to choose and celebrate their beings when the structures of graduate education heighten the burden of prioritizing others and neglecting themselves.

Joy in Community

Joy is also to be found and sustained amongst community which does contribute against the fight of graduate isolationism and translates to greater levels of persistence. Community has been found through two different means - with other Black doctoral women in and out of their respective programs and with a community of folks not affiliated with the university which can include friends, family, and community organizations. For both designations of community, the time that is spent outside of the Ivory Tower with others who are not a part of the academy allows for a reality check of sorts.

Personally, I found my closest and dearest friendships in graduate school with other Black women in and out of my department. The sisterhood that we have been able to develop has engulfed and carried me when I felt as though I had no capacity to carry on. My girlfriends made in graduate school have not only been present to write and workshop ideas with me until the late hours but we have been there for each other during the grave times of breakups, sudden deaths, medical concerns as well as the joyous moments - new publications, conference acceptances, anniversaries, birthdays, concerts, pageants, and so much more. Eboni, a PhD student in education, and Dominique also shared the same perspective when thinking about her community of Black women in graduate school. Eboni stated:

> So we intentionally like, we'll just create these spaces. Um, and these networks for each other, even if it's just to like cry it out or if it's to write together or, you know, it's, it's just been so helpful, you know, because honestly, if you talking about these white boy PhDs, they're not trying to share resources or space, they don't care about you. It's an old boys club and they're trying to get in. Man.... Like when I finish this process? The kind of like that acknowledgements page going to be decked out specifically, like has helped me through so much. I can't even... And not just, it's not just academics. It's social. There've been times where there's been financial support, but that, I'm just always, I don't know if it's... It's as I said like I would not have made this through it, through this without Black women. There's no way.

For Dominique, she too felt similar in terms of the importance of Black women and the community that they have provided while in graduate school. She reflected on how the communal understanding amongst Black female doctoral students whereas others such as family may not understand the doctoral process. She commented:

> I think that community has really helped me to grapple with that and help me to gain a lot. I think even just the community, having community to share with and share experiences with and say, look, I'm not feeling this today because the truth of the matter is your family doesn't know. Your family doesn't always understand what's going on. Your family has no idea what you're talking about half the time. Um, people are wondering why it's taking you so long. Um, and I think that creating community among other doctoral students, particularly for me connecting with other Black women and other women of color in community has been helpful. Mmm.

Both Eboni and Dominique's statements directly undergird the importance of genuine Black sisterhood within graduate school. These intentionally created relationships with other Black women in graduate school produce Black affective networks, a space where "counter-hegemonic knowledge of Blackness is created" (Ohito & Brown, 2021). And in those assemblages of Black women within the context of this study, that knowledge pushes against the deficit perspective many had of their presence in the graduate classroom. As Ohito & Brown (2021) argue, Black affective networks provide temporary escape from anti-Black violence and offers a refreshing source of "Black excitement, pride, love, and joy." The constellations formed by Black women and I in this study embrace our identities that are often ostracized, surveilled and ignored, and othered by other students and faculty in PWI spaces. The social, academic, and professional support organically created and spread by Black women in graduate school amongst each other is sustaining and have been found to contribute to the maintenance of joy.

Black affective networks with other Black women in graduate school is not the only form of community outlined by the interviews and focus groups conducted in this study. The community formed by folks not affiliated with the university is incredibly important to the joy produced. This community can entail non-graduate school friends, family, and community organizations. This trifecta of a Black woman's community especially non-profit organizations and mutual aid groups have kept Black women such as Tiffany, a 3rd year sociology doctoral student, grounded in the work that they do. She stated:

> Especially in this grad program because you know, I've become a little disenchanted with the Academy or the idea of academia, but not so much with my love for writing and my love for being in communal spaces, with communicating with people, um, for organizing

and making events happen for people who need certain resources. And so that's really, what's kept me grounded in the program.

To see the direct impact of community engagement generates joy because it serves as a reminder of multiple things for the Black female doctoral students in the study. One of the reminders is that there is possibility of a healthy work-life balance especially when the PhD journey can be overwhelming. The chaos of graduate education can often cause one to lose sight of their why but ending in various forms of community continues to serve Black women the opportunity to experience another form of joy. Another reminder is that community allows for the authentic self to be present rather than constantly performing to adhere to academic hauteur. In reference to her community, Keisha talked about how there is the centering of joy as a liberatory foundation. Her community which is "a very Black and a very queer community" creates the capacity and centering of intersectional identities that may not populate the seats of her midwestern university. The space affords her to be surrounded by folks who are not white, cisgendered, heterosexual men and women and for Keisha, that is joyful. In community, the time to reground in activities, conversations, people and behaviors that existed before and beyond graduate school are still deserving of being watered. However, doctoral education often prevents students from believing there is time to live fully and it is joy found through community in both forms that pushes back against that.

Joy in Work

While there is truth in acknowledging the anti-Black violence institutionally intertwined in graduate education, the Black women within this study pushback to find joy in the work they do. Numerous women discussed how the deep satisfaction in conducting the work attributed to their degree program contributes to joy. This may include clinical or lab hours, research,

coursework, conference presentations and publications, and teaching. Multiple women within the study spoke to how joy is found and understood through the work that they respectively undertake as a part of their doctoral programs.

One of the primary components for many of the psychology programs, clinical or counseling, is didactic practica in which doctoral students provide mental health services to members of the university community. For Jamie, Asia, and Alexis, all counseling psychology doctoral students in the study, providing mental health services aligns with their purpose of withstanding graduate school - to improve the mental health of the Black community. As evident within their individual interviews, they are in unison that the work that they do confirms the driving force behind starting and eventually finishing the doctoral process. All three women found that their time working with their multicultural and especially Black clients is fulfilling and often reorients their professional compass back to their why when other aspects of their program may go astray. Asia talked about her work illustrates this point. She mentioned:

> Confidence started coming in when I realized, you know, like I got an honorable mention from Ford and I was like that, you know, like it might not be what I'm looking for right now, but it's progress. And, and I have these publications now and it's, you know, and so the progress that I was making… Um, started to bring the confidence, like starting to see therapy, like have clients in therapy, you know, which again was part of the motivation for doing this program in the beginning. And so making an impact on people's lives and starting to have a name for myself and things starting to come together definitely led to more confidence.

Keisha is a 7th year PhD student in English who mentioned how the COVID-19 pandemic impacts her work. The conversations around the “return to normalcy” in conjunction

with the fear of the unknown surrounding the pandemic did have an immense effect on the mental well-being of folks. The push to continue high levels of productivity wrecked havoc on the lives of many but for Keisha it was her work that allowed her to remain rooted and grounded in joy. As she researched her interests and prepares to defend her dissertation proposal in the coming months, she talked about how her dissertation topic has and will sustain her during this unprecedented time in history.

> And I was like, it was more important for me to listen to myself. Like I knew that was a change that I needed to make. Um, and now I'm going to be focusing on like my studies around pleasure and I think that's gonna bring me a lot of joy. And I'm glad, especially like in a pandemic that I did. Like, I didn't know the pandemic was coming at that point or I wasn't like really thinking about it, but I'm like, especially glad that I listened to that. Cause I was like, you know, studying pleasure over the next couple of years will be something that will continue to sustain me and bring me a lot of joy… So yeah. Committing to myself, committing to community and then seeing like, you know, honoring what work comes out of that I think are the primary ways.

Keisha's work provided an outlet for a reimagining of Black women's pleasure and what it could be going forward. Her research served as a hopeful place that provides a sense of stability in a time that was uncertain in terms of global health, high racial tension, and grave economic impact. The trifecta of joy found in self, in community, and in the work being done by Keisha and other Black women a part of the study continue to be important to understand.

The Connection Between Persistence & Joy

Despite having a nuanced understanding of what joy is and how it is experienced, joy continues to allow for these women to take a moment to celebrate their presence in the Ivory

Tower – a place that historically has been quite chilling toward Black and brown bodies considering its historical origin. Because the women who participated have a unique experience within graduate education based off of the intersecting identities of race, gender, and age, Black joy must be named and understood to be a persistence mechanism so as to conquer program benchmarks, or what some may call obstacles, to make it to graduation.

For example, Dominique discussed that joy allows her to recognize that "that getting through a doctoral program doesn't have to be painful" and creates the opportunity for pressure to be taken off while releasing some of the anxiety away. The ways in which she pursues and channels joy is one that challenges the trauma responses that Black bodies experience when they are constantly re-exposed to trauma. By having a level of freedom associated with her joy, it opens the possibilities of accessing joy through one of the ways joy is experienced by Black female doctoral students. There is the reminder that her identity is not wrapped up or engulfed in her performance and that thoughts of inadequacy can diminish. She went on to say:

> It allows you to be free enough to make a mistake and also free enough to write how you feel and to really be into the work.

Erica, a sole Black woman in her STEM PhD program, also mentioned that joy's properties of deep embodiment creates a sense of aliveness which sustains Erica that much more beyond burnout, imposter syndrome, and other graduate school barriers. Joy allows for the space for persistence to enter. That space allows for a place of comfort and relief while trying to unpack and decompress from feelings of frustration, stress, and disappointment arising from the graduate process. When talking to Erica, she said:

> I think joy contributed to my persistence. I think what be like being joyful reminds me, um, the fear and anxiety that would be coupled with me not performing and like the

> source of that fear and anxiety is it's it's I don't want to say gone, but it's, it's reduced a lot because my identity is not wrapped in my performance. So like when I'm joyful and I'm happy, it's, it's just calmer. It's easier to work. It's easier to stay focused. Um, the like thoughts of inadequacy and things like that, they kind of, they diminish significantly.

For Jasmine, a counseling psychology doctoral student, and Morgan, a doctoral student in political science, one important piece of joy being a part of persistence is that joy counters the deficit, racial under & overtones of graduate education. Both women simply state that joy allows her the opportunity to bring the attention to back to her rather than focusing on the racism that is embedded within her department and campus. Turning inwardly to herself, her community, and her work resist the breakdown of the women's spirits so that she can become a doctor within her respective field. Jasmine said:

> I had to check in with myself and start really connecting with like the inner joy I had. And so that was a process. But once I started doing that, I was able to persist in the sense of, "I'm not going to let you know racist experiences I have make me have a horrible next five years. Like this is too long." So by tapping into that, that's allowed me to persist and then trying to tap into it and then grow it and cultivate it more… But I think I've been able to persist by holding onto my joy, because I think racist things, sexist things, I wish they would change, but some of those things are going to still be there for a long time.

Complimenting Jasmine's observations, Morgan echoes similar sentiments when describing how she pushes back against the internalization of gendered racism within her department. She articulates here that she refuses to bear the burden projected by white and non-Black classmates and faculty and allow it to weigh her down. She shared:

> So joy has allowed me to be able to give joy to other people, but also give joy to me, present me and past me of, "Hey, some of the shit that happened really wasn't your fault." I mean, not your fault for people being assholes and racist bigots. You can't take that cross up. And I told God plenty of times, "If there's something else, anything, if there's anything else you want me to do, please let me know. Please Lord, just help me. And I would go do it…" And I'm still here.

By experiencing joy through the three different avenues of self, community, and work, Black women who transitioned directly from their undergrad resist against multiple barriers within their graduate experience.

Conclusion

Black feminist Audre Lorde stated, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." Lorde's quote directly ties to the acts that the women dream of should they have 30 minutes within their busy days to carve out for joy so as to preserve themselves. Daydreaming, as a cognitive activity, allows for "thinking for pleasure" and can initiate innovation and improve overall wellbeing (Westgate et al., 2021). To close out each of the focus groups, each woman responded to the question of: "Suppose that you had 30 minutes of your day to do/see/experience something joyful, what would that look like?" These acts included:

> But my, my top two would be like having 30 minutes of just like hanging out with my mom with both of us, like not doing work. My mom's also an educator. So 30 minutes of me hanging out with my mom, just like doing nothing, being silly or like watching TV or something, something like mind numbing so that we don't really have to, you know, like something just relaxing. And then like 30 minutes of me and my partner doing the same

things. Cause I, I, I really love quality time and I realized that quality time with these people helped me to be able to continue and do what I do.

- Morgan

For me... So I love music a lot and I like making playlist a lot. So, and I've been thinking about getting like a turntable, but it'll be 30 minutes uninterrupted listening to music, making whatever makes, making whatever playlist. Um, because music is typically my space for joy and joy making.

- Eboni

I would say a good kiki, I think I'm personally real funny. And when I get with my friends, we get ignorant, honey, and it's just a great time. And when you laugh from a deep place and it's like, oh, this is actually the physical manifestation of joy. And like recently, especially now that I've moved abroad, but even still with COVID like not being able to have that physical connection and see them and do all of our stuff, like even via a FaceTime call, like just cackling over the phone and like that's something that I think I would do if I could.

- Monique

If I was in Chicago and it was like a regular school day and I had 30 minutes, I would really like to be around other Black women because when I got to Chicago, I was like, "Where are all the Black girls at? I miss having sisters. Like where is the community?" So if I had 30 minutes of lunch with other Black women, I would look forward to that all day. Like that would make my day.

- Princess

Honestly, if we're being real on this call, like I just want to hug, it's like very lonely here. Like if I could just get 30 minutes to be with someone, like whether it's platonic or romantic, like my best girlfriend or like someone who I know really cares about me just wants to hold me for a second and just to be like, "You're good. Things are going to be fine." Like even if it was my mom who's like states away, just like, I would love that. Just like real connection, like communication, being seen, like in affirmation, that's like what would bring me immense joy for sure.

- Tiffany

Get a massage. Always try to get those monthly. And I think any kind of spa is my favorite way to intentionally relax.

- Keisha

Yeah, I would go for a walk and maybe be able to turn my phone off and nobody email me or ask me anything. Just a half hour of peace and quiet.

- Maya

I think for me it would be something outdoors, maybe not now because it's a little hot but just walking or just being outside or going to the park or something because that's the only time, like Kendall is saying, it's really hard to turn your mind off sometimes but I just feel like when you're outside and in nature, I guess it's a little bit easier.

- Jaime

I think an impromptu hang out with a friend is always fun, actually to have that today, one of my best friends, Derek, just came and picked me up and we went to essentially a happy hour and then we got shakes and Sonic on the way back and it was just unexpected but we're always excited to be around each other and I think those

moments recharge me faster than having to say wait for a whole community game night because it's just more schedules. So I think that's fun. Any time we get to just indulge and sit with each other, we like to sing a lot together. Go outside or things like that. That's always very recharging or refueling.

- Keisha

I would be doing nothing so quiet and absolute silence. I feel like I'm thinking a lot because there's always stuff that needs to be done. So when I take breaks I'm literally just sitting still and make my mind be still and that honestly makes me really happy.

- Erica

I think for me since I do this, it's part of my self care time. It's usually meditation and music where I am journaling or just focusing on me and affirmations are a big part of that, manifestations things that make me feel good and remind me of who I am.

- Jasmine

Yes. I also like traveling and I like to go to the beach, but I'm not going to the beach right now, but I do enjoy the beach. I enjoy the water. I like pools. Water is my thing… Going to restaurants is something that I like to do, trying different things, different places. I was just saying today, like, "Oh, I want to try Lebanese food." I like shopping, however, there is a budget and so maybe we'll continue that later, but those are things that I do get joy of. I also get joy out of being with my family. That is something that I really get joy from, is being with them, hanging out with them, laughing with them, just seeing them. There's always jokes. There's always a jovial type of energy and mood. And so I really like that. And I think that the family piece is really critical to me, because they love me regardless.

- Dominique

Because traveling and turning off my phone/turning off emails, that's what brings me joy. So that's why I said, is this reasonable? Anyways, but yeah, so ideal world, what would bring me joy, would be traveling with my friends. I go to a school really far from family and my close friends. I'm from the East Coast and I'm in school in Texas. So even my partner, I'm really far from him, it's long distance. So just having them all in one place, and traveling somewhere and having my phone off, even if it's Hilton Head, I just need somewhere that's just an escape from it. And I don't want it to feel like I'm trying to escape. I want to find that within the program.

- Asia

So one of my favorite things to do, is to play video games. So ever since I was what? Maybe 11 or 12, that's when my younger brother and we started playing video games together. So since I've been home, that it's been a major thing that I've spent a lot of my time doing. So if I had 30 minutes to my day, I would, I don't know, I really like Christmas music. So I would play, I don't know, just random blank jazz version of some Christmas music. And then I would play whatever games that we have for that 30 minute timeframe. But just to simply take my mind... I'm the type of person, that in order for me to reset, I have to physically remove myself from the situation. If it's not playing games, I'm the type of person that I also reset by taking showers. So if I'm really stressed out, or if I have a really big test, in order for me to fully reset and relax, I also take showers.

- Marie

For myself, 30 minutes of true joy includes being near a large body of water relatively close to such as the Puget Sound back in Seattle with my immediate family or being in Daytona Beach with my grandfather and aunts. I feel calmest when near water as water represents a

stillness that I am not usually able to experience due to my graduate and work schedule. Water serves as a salve that provides soothing and represents new beginnings and rebirth. Couple water with the presence of my family, immediate or extended, provides the greatest joy to me.

Joy, for the participants and I, whether that be through self, relation, or work proves to be necessary for the continuation within doctoral programs. Whether the moments be temporary or sustained for periods of time, embodying joy creates space for Black women within doctoral programs to rest, rejuvenate, and replenish spirits and bodies that may have been weary from the ways of the world. The expectation to "produce or perish" transcends the disciplinary boundaries and is felt by many doctoral students. But, with the presence of joy in the lives of Black women who have a unique educational experience such as transitioning directly from their undergraduate institution into PhD programs, there is greater room for persistence, and ultimately, degree completion.

Chapter 5: "This Ivory Tower is Real Ivory": Black Women Joyfully Disrupting Academia

"And I know that's really what my work is about. How, how can we, how can we bring people to a better state of life, a better state of being, um, and overall just make like our ourselves and our communities happier and healthier. And I think I do that. So really nothing's going to stop me as long as I feel like I'm in pursuit of joy to some capacity." - Tiffany

"Not to add to the questions, I'm actually just happy that you're doing this study. I think it's really important. And I am thankful that you're emphasizing like strategies of like survival and thriving within the space because it is true. Like, you know, we read the same literature. Like it's always like...You know it's academic trauma porn. Right? Let's also focus in on the strategies that people have been creating to get through." - Eboni

You might wonder why I picked these two quotes to conclude the dissertation. The stories presented throughout this project illuminates the necessity to amplify the experiences of Black women like myself, Tiffany, and Eboni who are trying to fight for their presence and research to matter in their respective academic departments. The Ivory Tower is not a place where Black women have been known to thrive as seen in the literature and these experiences shared within this dissertation. When thinking about the literature and conversations surrounding Black women in graduate school, Eboni is absolutely correct in that it is academic trauma porn. The consumption of Black pain and struggle is rampant in academia because it allows space only for the exemplary and feel good to exist which excuses the harm that was placed upon the Black graduate student body. As Eve Tuck (2009) would say, academic research on Black female graduate students is "damage-centered" research meaning that the research is intended to document folks' pain in order to hold systems and people accountable for their oppression. However, Tuck (2009) argues that this approach is flawed and actually "reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of these people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless."

However, this dissertation asks us to pause, reexamine these experiences and interject a complexity in understanding how thriving and celebrating can and does occur. Us embodying

racial, gendered, and youth aged identities informs how we experience the tribulations but also the joy while pursuing our doctoral degrees. We often pursue these degrees to benefit our communities just like what Tiffany mentioned. For myself, my work associated with this dissertation is to increase the betterment of life for Black people, Black women in particular, and my healing has been a byproduct of this work. Graduate education has been incredibly difficult for me to process and experience. I faced housing insecurity, food insecurity, imposter syndrome, death of loved ones, sparse mentoring, tense socializing interactions with faculty and peers, COVID-19 and mental health challenges throughout my graduate journey. It was important for me to create greater understanding to what was happening to me in terms of my academic and socialization acclimation. I needed to figure out what had to be addressed in order for a shift toward a joy framework to happen.

Project Beginnings

Then I began to question how are other Black women navigating graduate school if they never had a masters degree, took time off or worked for a bit before returning to grad school. Is there even a mass of Black women who had only their summer months after their undergraduate graduation to prepare for such a great undertaking like a PhD like I did? How am I sill here despite my family being thousands of miles away, limited funds, and no prior graduate experience? Grappling with these thoughts swirling in my head created the overarching research question of what are the lived experiences of Black women who transition directly from their undergraduate to a doctorate program at a predominately white institution (PWI)? From there, I understood that deeper questions such as the following had to exist in order to disrupt the fetishization of damage and toward a joyful praxis of understanding. I found that although there are many contributing factors to persistence, my contribution to the body of research dedicated to

Black female doctoral students is through joy which informs my subquestions. They are as follows: How do Black women emotionally respond to their experiences in doctoral education? How do Black women conceptualize and experience joy within a doctoral context? When, where, how, and with whom do Black women n doctoral programs experience and sustain their joy? To what extent, and in what ways, does joy inform persistence and resistance among Black women pursuing doctorates at PWIs? It was my hope that by centering the joy of Black women in doctoral programs at PWIs that there is transformative discourse about experiences of this population and about this unique transition.

Overview of Chapter Findings

Overall, this study has worked alongside Black women who transitioned directly from their undergraduate degrees into a doctoral program to understand their lived experiences and how Black joy can be understood as a persistence mechanism for this population of women. The dissertation began with my positionality statement and how I enter the project as a Black woman who underwent the same transition as my informants. I continue to set the stage with quantitative data to understand the magnitude of Black women's presence in doctoral education because of lower representation in comparison to other racial and gendered groups. I also include the study's contributions and definitions of key terms associated with the dissertation - Black or African American, predominately white institution, joy, and Black joy. From there, I review literature concerning Black women and higher education and outline Black feminist thought as the theoretical framework utilized for the dissertation project. Closing chapter one is the methods and methodology, outlining the rationale of using narrative analysis as the chosen methodology and individual interviews and focus groups as the chosen method of data collection.

Chapter two through four provide an analysis of the participants' stories with chapter two dedicated to understanding the profiles of the women who participated and provided such rich recollections of their life histories. In this chapter, I not only summarize the primary reason similarity and difference between the participants; the similarity is participation in formal graduate education pipeline programs such as the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program and the primary difference was the undergraduate institution type. The graduate preparation programs benefited many of the women who participated within the study as the programs increased access and simulated graduate research. The difference between all of the women was undergraduate institution type which has proven to be challenging when defending themselves and their HBUCs. In the middle of the section, I outline two primary reasons for a Black woman to undertake a doctoral program which are full funding in comparison to lack thereof for master's degrees and career limitations with only a master's degree. These two reasons fueled the why for the women involved within this dissertation study and that led to the findings surrounding academic and social transition. Key findings associated with both transitions include struggling with the course load and structure, associating hyper(in)visibility with their Black female bodies, and anticipating struggle with advising relationships.

For chapter three, I discuss barriers to graduate success that are present within the lives of Black women who have transitioned directly into a doctoral program. I found that while there are multiple barriers, three distinct barriers are delved into thoroughly within the capacity of this project - age as a salient identity and its contribution to maturing, mental health challenges feeding into the imposter phenomena, and debilitating perceived and real pressure. Through the narratives of the women, I found that it is important to consider age in conjunction with race and

age because of the material effects that present itself through interactions with faculty and staff presuming incompetence. Being read as younger also contributed to faster onset of burnout and a maturation process which mirrored to what the women experienced as Black girls. By researching the second barrier of mental health challenges feeding into imposter syndrome, I found that 1. a lack of care evoked by departments equated to a form of hazing for many women, 2. multiple negative emotional responses such as lack of belonging, confusion, and frustration commonly exist amongst Black doctoral women, and 3. constant labor to push against imposter syndrome contributes to exhaustion, depression, and anxiety. The third barrier understands how pressure, albeit being perceived or real, from external or internal forces creates a level of paralysis. Internally, Black women within this study were found to hold the pressure of being "the only one," indicating the pressure of representing Blackness at a high standard and of remaining authentic to the person and work they embody rather than assimilate to graduate culture. This assimilation process can be done through language/speech, posture, research topics/methods, and dress. Externally, community pressure by trailblazing a new path associated with earning a doctorate is a heavy yoke to bear. The weight of earning this degree for many women means that oftentimes this degree is not solely for them but for their communities.

The last findings chapter is chapter four which reveals how Black women in doctoral programs push back against the barriers of graduate school through the understanding, conceptualization, and experience of Black joy. I argue and found that joy does in fact present itself as a persistence mechanism and is understood in three avenues - through the self, work, and community. In terms of joy in self, this is seen though the practice of self-care and its relation to self-replenishment when depleted from the trials of doctoral education. When I talk about joy in work, I found that there is a high level of satisfaction in knowing that the research, clinical hours,

and other scholarly contributions will directly benefit the communities they are a part of. Joy is also found in engaging in communal practices and as a result reduced the level of isolationism and increased sense of belonging. The increase of belonging then contributes to a greater level of persistence because there is a level of accountability present. I close the chapter with drawing on each participant's desire of what 30 minutes dedicated to joy looks like so as to ignite daydreaming. According to research, daydreaming as a cognitive activity can improve wellbeing and increase pleasure thinking.

Study Impact for Everybody

This dissertation can actually be useful to the following populations of people - everyone. The research provided here can serve as a roadmap to greater understanding on how to serve and advise this special population of Black female doctoral students. Faculty advisers, department chairs, directors of graduate studies, and even deans can benefit from understanding how to improve the experience of Black women in their doctoral programs. This project has the possibility to inform advising training or a creation of a formal departmental support structure such as a mentoring program. Another population of people that is impacted by this study are graduate pipeline program directors at the undergraduate level. There is the possibility that this dissertation study can contribute a joy framework to be embedded into curriculum so as to begin building multiple persistence techniques much earlier than graduate arrival. Another group of folks who would benefit from this research are loved ones of Black women in graduate school. There is a blanket of secrecy shrouding the doctoral experience so as to not worry those who have invested resources into the student. The study and its' findings can illuminate the experiences and relieve pressure off of the shoulders of the student. As a final point, I would even argue the impact on other Black women in graduate school would be immense. To be able

to read yourself in a study such as this, it is my hope that other Black women find the answers that I earnestly sought and that no, you are not alone in the pursuit of a PhD.

Next Steps - Future Research

Having said all of this, for future study directions looks bright as this is the first study that has looked at this population of Black women in doctoral programs at predominately white institutions. I believe this dissertation has served as a foundational study for those going forward as more research needs to be completed to understand the experiences of Black women who transition directly from their undergraduate into a graduate program.

One future study direction that arose out of this dissertation can look at the effectiveness of graduate pipeline programs utilized in undergrad through doctoral degree conferral. Participation in programs such as the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Program or Summer Research Opportunity Programs (SROPs) occur for a short stint of time ranging from a few weeks to a couple of years. However, many of the women articulated that once they transitioned into doctoral education there was limited to no connection to their undergraduate program thus graduation data may not be compiled when self-reported. Data needs to be collected qualitatively and quantitatively as both data sets will give a holistic picture of the success for this unique group of Black women.

Another future study that may be completed with this dissertation serving as its base is explicitly looking at HBCU alumnae in doctoral programs at either other HBCUs or PWIs. The conversation around HBCU alumni in graduate and professional degree granting programs typically circulates around those within the STEM, medicine, and law fields. Research can be broadened to include those who are in the social sciences, humanities, and education. I also believe that future research can critically examine the impact of whiteness on the graduate

experience of the Black graduate students who are not only in the STEM fields but other academic disciplines as well.

Conclusion

In October of 2022, I visited my grandfather in Florida for his 80th birthday and had the opportunity to visit the ocean with him and my two aunts. When I told her that I was deeply exhausted from this journey, she assured me that if I let go that my family had me and could carry me to rest. With the conclusion of this dissertation, I look forward to the day that the PhD invites a restful space for Black women so as to not have high levels of anxiety, frustration, depression, and lack of belonging in the academic and social transition into doctoral education. Instead, it is my hope that the joy found in the self, work, and community continues to be present and actively serving as a persistence mechanism. Ultimately, this will increase the number of Black doctors across academic disciplines.

Appendix A

Participant Chart - Individual Interviews & Focus Groups

All names have been anonymized to protect the identities of study participants.

Participant Name*	Undergraduate Designation	Graduate Program Classification	Graduate Program	Graduate Program Location
Dominique	PWI	Humanities	American Studies	Maryland
Tiffany	HBCU	Humanities	Africana Studies	Rhode Island
Keisha	PWI	Humanities	Rhetoric & Literature	Kansas
Princess	HBCU	Social Sciences	Human Development	Illinois
Alexis	PWI	Social Sciences	Clinical Psychology	Illinois
Asia	PWI	Social Sciences	Clinical Psychology	Texas
Jaime	PWI	Social Sciences	Clinical Psychology	Oklahoma
Monique	PWI	Social Sciences	Sociology	Michigan
Jasmine	HBCU	Social Sciences	Counseling Psychology	Florida
Morgan	HBCU	Social Sciences	Political Science	Indiana
Marie	PWI	STEM	Bioengineering	Maryland
Maya	HBCU	STEM	Biochemistry	Texas
Erica	HBCU	STEM	Engineering	Florida
Eboni	HBCU	Education	Educational Policy & Leadership	Maryland

Focus Group #1	Focus Group #2	Focus Group #3	Focus Group #4
Asia	Maya	Princess	Eboni
Dominique	Keisha	Tiffany	Morgan
Marie	Erica	Monique	
	Jasmine		
	Jaime		

Appendix B

Personal Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your undergraduate experience?

2. What influenced your decision to apply to a doctoral program?
    a. Were there specific individuals who inspired/influenced your decision?
    b. Were you involved in any programs that may have influenced your decision?

3. Why did you choose a PhD program compared to a MA program?
    a. When did you decide the PhD rather than the MA?

4. Can you elaborate on your transitionary first year from undergraduate to graduate program?

5. How have you navigated through your doctoral program?
    a. In what ways has your race shape your doctoral experience?
    b. In what ways has your gender shape your doctoral experience?
    c. In what was has your age shape your doctoral experience?

6. What were some of the emotions that you experienced while in your PhD program?

7. When I say joy, what does this mean to you?

8. Specifically, how do you define and think about joy?
    a. Do you think self care is a part of joy? Are they separate or one in the same within the doctoral context?

9. How were you able to experience/produce joy while in your doctoral program?

10. Can you elaborate on if you have seen joy manifest within your doctoral experience?

11. How has joy allowed you to persist if at all?
    a. If not, why did you believe it didn't? Could you provide examples of individuals you knew who may have experience joy as a persistence tool?
    b. If yes, could you elaborate upon your idea.

Appendix C

Focus Group Questions

1. Think back over the year(s) you have been enrolled in your doctoral program. What went particularly well? What has gone poorly? What do you think you needed for those things to have gone better?

2. What does your relationship look like with your advisor? How important do you find that relationship to be? What do you believe the role of an advisor is? Is this person different than a mentor/sponsor?

3. Many of you alluded to the notion of maturity - the idea that you needed to develop quickly beyond your age. How and why did you undergo the maturation process? Did you feel this was a necessity for you?

4. One of the themes that showed up in ya'lls individual interviews was how joy is attached to pain/trauma (that they run parallel to each other). Is that necessarily true or not? Why or why not?

5. Suppose that you had 30 minutes of your day to do/see/experience something joyful, what would that look like?

6. Describe what your end goal is professionally and personally.

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