THE ACADEMIC RAILROAD TO THE PHD: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC AFRO-TRINIDADIAN ORAL STORY

by

AJ de Coteau

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education

Summer 2023

© 2023 de Coteau
All Rights Reserved

THE ACADEMIC RAILROAD TO THE PHD: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC AFRO-TRINIDADIAN ORAL STORY

by

AJ de Coteau

Approved: ____

Steve Amendum, Ph.D.
Interim Director of the School of Education

Approved: ____

Gary T. Henry, Ph.D.
Dean of the College of Education and Human Development

Approved: ____

Louis F. Rossi, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Graduate and Professional Education and
Dean of the Graduate College

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed: ____

Eugene Matusov, Ph.D.
Professor in charge of dissertation

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed: ____

Robert Hampel, Ph.D.
Member of dissertation committee

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed: ____

Lynnette Young Overby, Ph.D.
Member of dissertation committee

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed: ____

Jajuan Johnson, Ph.D.
Member of dissertation committee

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I feel deeply grateful to have completed this dissertation and for the people who helped make this possible. Firstly, I would like to thank my dissertation chair and research advisor, Dr. Eugene Matusov for all his time, guidance and wisdom. He challenged me to grow as a researcher while supporting my exploration of unconventional methodologies. To my committee comprising Drs. Bob Hampel, Lynnette Overby, and Jajuan Johnson, you each offered thoughtful insight throughout my research process that shaped a dissertation of which I can be proud. Within my department and college, I thank Christina Johnston, David Hannah, and Courtney O'Brian for seeing me through various non-curricula processes of my doctoral journey. To my fellow members of the educationalist club of the University of Students, thank you providing a safe and supportive research space for testing new ideas. To my family, I thank you for your patience, love and kind support throughout my long hours of research.

PRELUDE

On February 29th, 2020, two weeks before the first confirmed case of coronavirus in Delaware, I attended the book launch of 'They Carried Us: The Social Impact of Philadelphia's Black Women Leaders' written by two African American authors and activists, Allener M. Baker-Rogers and Fasaha M. Traylor. In recognizing that much of Black history month focuses on the contributions of African American men, they sought to highlight contributions of African American women. The book chronicles the lives and far-reaching impact of 95 Black Philadelphia women starting with "Black Alice" in 1600's. In this work, the authors center and uplift the leadership and legacy of both historical and contemporary Black women activists in Philadelphia. They highlighted women who contributed to 9 main areas: community building and movement activism, civic institutions and business, education, faith, journalism and media, medicine, law and government, sports, and the arts.

As I sat listening to Baker-Rogers speak on the women who carried her during her lifetime, starting with her mother and other women in her family, many thoughts crossed my mind. I began thinking about the women who carried me, firstly through life and secondly, through my academic career. With these thoughts percolating, Baker-Rogers invited her nieces to close the event with a vocal performance of "Stand Up" by Cynthia Erivo, a piece written for the 2019 film Harriet. The lines, "I do what I can when I can while I can for my people" and "stand up, take my people with me" stayed with me for a long time.

In the days that followed, I found myself mulling over my doctoral journey and all the people, particularly the Black women who carried me to that point. Then it dawned on me "Dr. Proffitt was like Harriet Tubman in an academic sense, she chose to stand up and take me and many other Black people with her across the river to the doctorate, as the song suggested?

Further reflection led me to wonder about the academic journeys of other Black students. Who carried them, I pondered? Who planted the doctoral seeds in their minds and who nurtured those seeds?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT……………………………………………..…………………………vii

Chapter

1 INTRODUCTION 1

Overview…...………………………………………………………..………2

Early childhood in Trinidad during the years of primary schooling……..……2

Rationale and Statement of the Problem………..………………………….……5

Purpose of the Study……………..……………………..…………………7

Why Afro-Trinidadian Oral Storytelling……………………...…………..……8

Research Questions………………………..……………………...……10

2 REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH 11

Introduction…………………………………....…………………..……11

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework……………………..………..……..11

The Underground Railroad……………………………….………….……12

Theoretical Frameworks……………………..……………………14

Black Trans Feminist Thought…………………………..……15

Otherparenting…………………..……………..…………………..18

Quare Theory……………………………………………………21
Review of Literature………………………………….......……..…….21
Contemporary Barriers to and through the PhD for Black Students.....22
Financial Barriers to Higher Education…...……..…………..23
Racism as a Barrier to Higher Education……………..………24
Psychological Barriers to Higher Education………………..…27
3 METHODOLOGY 29
Introduction…………..…………………………..………………..……29
Methodology………......…..……………….…………………...………..30
My Methodological Journey……………….……….....…………….……35
Afro-Trinidadian Oral Storytelling…..……………….………………36
Role of the Djembe (Drum) ……………………………..…38
Autoethnography……………………..……………………….……………39
Research Design………………………………...……….………………41
Collection of Data…………………………………….……………41
Personal Memory Data…………….………………….………42
Self-Reflective Data……………………………….……………42
Analysis of Data ……………………………………….……………..43
Limitations………………………..……………………………………..43

4 AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC DATA 44

Once Upon a Time…………………………………………………..………..44

Reflection……………………………….…………………………45

Early Education and Family/Early Education and Music…………………..…45

Reflection………………………………………….………………46

My American Dream…………………………………..….……………….46

Reflection……………………………..……………….……………46

Who's That Little Girl in That Mirror There? /When Will My Reflection Show Who I am Inside………..…………………………………………….……….47

Reflection…………………………..…………………………………47

Girls Who Want Boys, Who Like Boys to be Girls, Who Do Boys Like They're Girls, Who Do Girls Like They're Boys……………………………50

Reflection……………………………………………….………………51

Time to Get a Degree! Third Time's the Charm!...51

Reflection……………………………………………….….………52

Master of One…………………………………..…………………………52

Reflection…………………………………….………………………52

We're Moving to Denver!..53

Reflection……………………………………………………………53
Dr. AJ de Coteau……………………………………………………53
Reflection……………………………………………………………53
5 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS 55
6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION 57
Overview……………………………………………………………57
Reflections……………………………………………………………57
Reflections on the Process of Autoethnography…………………...58
Discussion……………………………………………………………59
Theoretical Implications ……………………………………………59
Recommendations for Higher Education…………………………61
Application Process for Graduate Programs……………………..61
Non-curricula…………………………………………………62
Conclusion……………………………………………………………63
REFERENCES…………………………………………………………65

ABSTRACT

Sharing the stories and experiences of Black and African American students is becoming ever more important here in the United States. Increasingly, scholars express the need for a methodological approach that centers the voices of Black students. With this critical autoethnography, I investigated Black students' determining factors for pursuing terminal academic degrees and highlighted the various support systems that aid these students during their journey and towards completion. More specifically, I explored my own doctoral journey as Black trans student-parent from Trinidad and Tobago using critical autoethnography informed by Afro-Trinidadian oral storytelling. I analyzed my experiences through the lenses of Black trans feminist thought, Otherparenting, and Quare theory. I found that to in order to enroll and complete my PhD, the support of family of origin, my created family, my church community, several Black women both in and out of academia, and institutional support which included my doctoral advisor.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The following is a brief story based on my memory of a conversation between an African American classmate and myself about being racially profiled on the campus of a predominantly white institution in the northeastern United States:

I arrived at Music Theory class 20 minutes early as I always did, giving myself time to decompress and be ready to learn. I never had much of a poker face, so it came as no surprise that my facial expression attracted concern.

Classmate: “AJ, is everything ok?” she asked, sitting in the empty chair next to me.

Me: “You will not believe what happened last night on my way home from the grocery store.”

Classmate: “What’s that?” she enquired, leaning in a little closer.

Me: “I was waiting for the campus shuttle with my daughter, and when it came, it didn’t stop!”

Classmate: “Wait, did they see you?”

Me: “Yes, the driver looked right at me and I waving my arm to flag him down like a taxi.”

Classmate: “Oh, one of those. Hmm! So what did you do, wait for the next one?”

Me: “Well, I called the transportation office and told them where I was and that I’m a student and ah here with meh daughter and the campus bus didn’t stop and I know he saw me. Then she [phone operator] said she’ll call and let dem know that I’m

a student and that the driver probably thought I stopped there by mistake ‘cause a city free bus stops there too. So how she could know what the driver thought if she didn’t even talk to him yet?”

Classmate: “So you don’t know what happened? You’re a Black woman with a child and groceries waiting at a bus stop. You got profiled. Why are you acting so shocked? Oh right, I keep forgetting, you’re not from here. So, I guess you’re newly Black.”

Overview

In this chapter, I highlight the need for higher education researchers to authentically capture the nuances of the Black doctoral journey in order to better recruit and retain these students until degree completion. I offer my own experience to and through the PhD as rich data and performative critical autoethnography embedded with Afro-Trinidadian oral storytelling as a method for analyzing the multiplicity of salient identities of students on the cusp of various marginalized populations. I lay the foundation for using Afro-Trinidadian oral storytelling by explaining its historic and cultural roles within Trinidadian society and give my personal history with the artform during childhood, adolescence and adulthood. I share with you my stories of recognizing and developing my salient identities while negotiating various stages of my PhD journey. My stories become the data.

Early childhood in Trinidad during the years of primary schooling

Offering context for my past identity negotiations is crucial to building an understanding of my current unified sense of self as a Black transmasculine PhD

student-parent from Trinidad. During my formative years in Trinidad and Tobago, I lived primarily in Morvant, a small community (homogenous) on the outskirts of the nation's capital. My world at that time comprised my immediate and extended family, school, church, and music learning at my grandmother's music school. My relationship with music began before I can even remember. Before my entry in primary education, I had learned to read music and could play various instruments. When I was 5 years old, I performed Amazing Grace on the steel drum for a solo performance at my Kindergarten graduation. Coming from a musical family with a grandmother who received national and international accolades for her contributions to music and culture, adding value to the family name was tied to my sense of self and worth. On some level my 5-year-old self-understood that, and my music therefore became a point of pride and self-worth.

During primary schooling, I belonged to a homogenous peer group, both in terms of race/ethnicity and socio-economic standing. While I was not aware of it at that time, many of the families in my community lived below the poverty line. It was not until I entered secondary schooling that I became fully aware of the economic diversity of Trinidad and Tobago. The post-colonial nation comprises mainly Afro-Trinidadians, the descendants of enslaved Africans, and Indo-Trinidadians, the descendants of indentured workers who originated from India. When Britain abolished the enslavement of Africans in Trinidad, these newly emancipated Africans sole reward was their freedom. In contrast, at the end of their service of indentureship, Indians chose between land or money as payment for time worked and either returned

home to Indian or remained in Trinidad. Even in their absence, Britain still shapes the economic landscape of its former colonies. My classmates of Indian descent were the offspring of businessmen and landowners who lived in homes owned by their parents, while my classmates of African descent were primarily of a lower SES, living in rental properties with their families. By visiting the homes of classmates, my eyes were opened to luxuries and amenities, the likes of which I had never seen before in person such as cable TV, air-conditioning, bathtubs, and even waffle makers. It was access to cable TV at a friend's house that first introduced me to the 'American dream'. When I entered secondary school at age 11, I didn't have a career path or clear future course of study in mind beyond wanting to be an inventor.

Secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago are equivalent to middle and high schools here in the United States; they serve 6th through 12th grades. For the first three years, sixth through eighth grades, students study a wide range of courses including Mathematics, English, French, Spanish, Science, Geography, Social Studies, History, Music, Visual Arts and Physical Education. Students' grades (GPA) in eighth grade determine which 7 subjects they are eligible to pursue in nineth and tenth grades. I chose mathematics English, French Additional Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, and Physics. Grades eleven and twelve are optional and most often pursued by students who intend to attend college or other types of post-secondary academic institutes of higher education. For those two years I studied math English literature and French. The culmination of 12th grade at that time was the Cambridge Advanced-Level Examination. Universities in Trinidad and across the Caribbean

determine entrance into various programs of study using the points students earned from those Advanced-Level examinations.

Several of my peers in 6th grade already knew which degree they wanted to pursue in college, and as such, they discussed which subjects they should emphasize in 8th grade to better their chances at their seven subjects for grades 9 and 10, that would then lead to their four subjects for grades 11 and 12, and how many points they needed to score and the A-Level examination to secure their place and their college degree program of choice. Though I always performed at or near the top of my classes academically, I felt apprehensive for the future. This was the first of many instances where I felt that my peers had insider information about the academic space that I inhabited.

Rationale and Statement of the Problem

After conducting extensive research on the historical underpinnings of the systematic exclusion of African Americans from educational spaces which led to few Black doctoral holders in the United States for my Socio-Cultural Approaches to Education specialization exam, it seemed prudent to examine contemporary experiences of Black doctoral students. This current project started with my desire to amplify the voices of Black and African American students as they navigate their varying paths to terminal academic degrees in a way that authenticates their experiences without comparison to the dominant culture or white culture. Too much of the research surrounding the experiences of Black and African American students in

higher education, particularly in predominantly white institutions, compares these experiences to those of their white counterparts.

A substantial amount of the limited research that does center Black experiences paints the trope of the struggling Black student who faces many hurdles and is more likely to drop out (Aronson et al., 2002).

Black is not a monolith! To consider those words is to consider the full breadth of the human experience; Black people don't move as one, but rather move in all directions, towards and away from each other. Black Americans represent 13.4% of the population, and with more than 40 million people who identify as Black, this community represents a diverse array of backgrounds, expectations, political views, music, culinary taste, and perspectives. (*Black Is Not a Monolith - Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion*, n.d.)

African Americans and other Black persons living in America represent various nationalities, ethnicities, religions, and cultures. Though united by the color of their skin, each Black person in America has their own unique lived experience. Similarly, Black students are not a monolith, nor is the way they navigate academia. Predominantly White Institutions' inability to adequately support and retain students continues to be of concern in academia in the U.S. Black and African American students' struggles and experiences of microaggressions and systematic racism has become the single story (Adiche, 2009) of the Black and African American PhD journey. This picture is not necessarily inaccurate, but rather, it is incomplete. Black higher education students do face many challenges; however, they also experience

support and feel joy during their courses of study. Scholars ought to continue to highlight these injustices and document Black students' negative experiences while pushing for anti-racism efforts across higher education institutions. Equally as important is that researchers examine Black students' support systems and triumphs. Institutions of higher education ought to invest time and resources to uncovering the varying persons, organizations, and systems that strengthen and aid the academic journeys of Black students.

When I finally decided to tell my own story, another dilemma arose: which story should I tell? Perhaps my academic story, since after all this is the story of my PhD journey. Should it be that of the Trinidadian steel drummer musician who became a music educator who journeyed to the United States as graduate study in their field was not available in Trinidad and Tobago? Or the undergraduate student who opted to have a baby before completing their BA and then moves to Delaware as an international student and single parent to pursue graduate education and build a better life for their child? Or do I tell the story of the closeted trans child who visited Internet Cafes as a teenager to use Yahoo and Lycos in search of colleges in the United States, situated within states whose laws protect gender non-conforming rights?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the determining factors for Black students to pursue terminal academic degrees and to illuminate the various support systems that aid these students during their journey and towards completion. More specifically, the goal is to use my own experience to uncover the impact that support

and mentoring from Black women can have on the lives of PhD students. The vast majority of inquiries on Black students at PWIs have focused on negative academic experiences, while those that do highlight positive experiences tend to examine HBCUs. Hence this research also intends to fill the gap in the literature concerning supportive experiences and mentoring Black students receive at PWIs.

Why Afro-Trinidadian Oral Storytelling

Trinidad and Tobago is my country of origin. After the abolition of African slavery there, British colonizers outsourced labor to India with indentured laborers. Upon completion of their time of service, the East Indian indentured laborers who chose to remain in Trinidad and Tobago received money and/or land as payment for their services. In examining disparities between Afro-Trinbagonians and Indo-Trinbagonians, understandably, the central focus is on the economic inequalities. However, for much of my life, I grew with the perception that I was absent of culture. All my primary and secondary schoolmates of Indian descent carried the names and spoke the languages of their ancestors. They also ate foods, celebrated cultural festivals such as Diwali, Eid-Ul-Fitr, and Phagwa, and partook in traditional celebrations including weddings and birthdays in a manner that my classmates of African descent and I could not. This undeniable void is experienced by the descendants of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade across the Americas. By its very definition, a diaspora is a large group of people with similar ancestry who have been displaced from their homeland. In the case of the African diaspora, though attempts were made to maintain cultural identity throughout enslavement, cultures were not

able to survive intact (Hudson, 1997). In describing the effect of African slavery in America on cultural identity, Scott (1991) describes slavery as "an institution that had completely erased the African identities of the slaves" (Scott, 1991, p. 271).

Growing in a postcolonial nation, one can become very aware of loss and absence and noticing all that is present, enduring is less straightforward. Though material aspects of African culture were lost during years of enslavement, Trinbagonians rose out of this despair in two main ways. Firstly, we forged anew. Trinidad and Tobago is known as the birth place of the steel drum, an instrument formed out of the void left by the African drum. Seeing that African people used drumming as part of their communication system, colonizers prohibited drumming to limit connection. After decades of trial and error, the steel drum emerged. Secondly, several intangible aspects of African culture could not be silenced; most remarkably to survive was our ability to tell stories.

I am a storyteller. It is acknowledged that storytelling is as old as time itself and intricately woven into the fabric of cultures and society (More 2012, Simpkinson & Simpkinson, 1993). Stories are a means of preserving our history and traditions, and a tool for passing them to future generations (Booker 2004, Cronon, 1992, Ritchie, 2014). For centuries, cultures around the world have used storytelling to document and transmit experiences (Dyson & Genishi 1994). Storytelling, whether through folklore or the artform itself, is one of the unifying aspects of culture for members of the African diaspora particularly across the Americas. Here in the US and the Caribbean, stories of Anansi the Spider and other animal figures appear in several folktales, as

they do throughout the Americas. These stories derived from West Africa, are shared within communities and among family members to entertain and teach life lessons. For members of non-dominant cultures, it is even more crucial to establish identity by using their voices to carve their own narratives (Etter-Lewis, 2021, Williams et. al, 2019).

Research Questions

Giving breath and voice to my own lived experience as a Black, queer student who started graduate school as a single parent, I will use my experiences of being guided, supported, and mentored to explore the following questions:

1. Who were the “conductors” on my academic railroad and what blueprint did they offer to aid my PhD journey?

2. What role did Black women play in my decision to attend and complete a doctoral degree?

3. What do my experiences as a Black, queer, doctoral student reveal about the role of Otherparenting in the doctoral success of Black students?

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the existing literature on Black and African American students' PhD attainment here in the United States, the types of barriers these students face, and the supports students have received to mitigate these obstacles. To strengthen my use of Black feminist thought and Otherparenting as theoretical lenses and the underground railroad as a conceptual framework, I also explore the use of these theories in making meaning of Black experiences in academia.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

In an effort to provide the sociohistorical lenses necessary to understand my own experiences as a Black queer student on my path to doctoral completion, I wrestled for some time before arriving at the most suitable framework. As a member of more than one historically marginalized population, I struggled to decide on centering my queer identity or that of my Blackness. This is because these identities at times compete for center stage in my life and other times, they intersect into something entirely different. Being a Black genderqueer scholar who was assigned female at birth, my lived experiences most align with that of Black women. While queer theory does offer some grounding for my experiences, I decided to employ Black feminist thought (BFT) and Otherparenting as the theoretical underpinnings of my inquiry. Applying these frameworks will enable me, as the researcher, to provide

rich introspective analyses in terms of how I negotiate intersecting identities during my scholastic pursuits. Additionally, these critical lenses allow for my voice about my own experiences to take precedence over Western (White/colonist) thought and practice, which researchers have normalized as the conventional perspective to which all others are compared (Few, 2007).

The Underground Railroad

The conceptual framework unifying my inquiry is that of the Underground Railroad. Throughout African enslavement in the United States and particularly near the end of the US Civil War, several enslaved Africans sought their freedom through acts of self-emancipation. These attempts to escape bondage were not without dangers and many who attempted were met with punitive consequences if caught. After finding their way to safety, some of the freedom seekers, including Harriet Tubman, returned to plantations to aid others who were still in bondage to make their way to freedom. “I was the conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can't say — I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger.” (Harriet Tubman, 1896). The Underground Railroad itself included when and where to travel, safe places to rest, and people along the way who could be trusted. For the purposes of this study, I use the concept of the Underground Railroad to depict my journey to doctoral admission and completion.

In recent decades, Black scholars have been using the concept of free Blacks steering enslaved Africans towards freedom in 19th century America to describe the

role of Blacks in academia in mentoring and nurturing the success of other Black academics. One such work is Castellanos et. al. (2022), *Riding the Academic Freedom Train: A Culturally Responsive, Multigenerational Mentoring Model*. This book chronicles the mentoring system known as the "Freedom Train" created by Dr. Joseph L. White. With the Freedom Train, he honors Harriet Tubman and her role in the Underground Railroad by offering himself as a mentor to others who seek success through education. Inspired by the strength and resilience of Black people who banded together to navigate freedom, Dr. White found that mentoring was the key to academic success of historically marginalized populations of students if offered by those of similar background who possessed the capital of academia. The longevity and success of Freedom Train is due largely to its mentees becoming mentors to the subsequent generations of scholars which ensures the continuation of sharing tools to navigate both the spoken and unspoken rules of academia (Castellanos et. al., 2022).

Cooper (2001) explored the experiences of nine Black women faculty at varying stages of the tenure process at various institutional types to document the struggles of African American women in academia. The author dubbed the relationship between women faculty "Sista' Network" and likened this relationship to the relationship between and among African American people trying to escape slavery on the Underground Railroad in the late 18th century and into the 19th century. Cooper (2001) further explains the Sista' Network helps African American women successfully negotiate the lone and treacherous road to tenure and by extension financial security in a similar manner to the map to freedom that the underground

railroad provided (Cooper, 2001). Sam (2020) used narrative inquiry to discover the Underground Railroad concept or other pathways Black women have used for successfully securing administrative positions in higher education. The author interviewed 19 participants via Zoom to understand the experiences of Black women administrators in higher education who serve at predominantly white institutions (Sam, 2020).

Some may ask if escaping chattel slavery and pursuing a PhD is a fair comparison and while the concern would be warranted, my journey goes beyond academic pursuit; my story is one of survival. I was raised in Trinidad and Tobago, a nation that legally prohibited same-sex relationships until May 2016. There I was met with physical violence based on my sexuality and gender presentation, and pursuing graduate studies outside of Trinidad and Tobago became my refuge.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical structure includes interwoven principles that govern and navigate a researcher's analysis. According to Merriam (1995) and Tisdell (2016), a theoretical framework is the underlying structure, scaffolding, or frame of an analysis. For my theoretical framework, I utilize Bey's (2016) Black trans feminist thought which developed in response to Collins's (2009) Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and the way it informs Otherparenting in conjunction with 'Quare' theory. Together, they establish a framework that enables me as the researcher to explore my own doctoral

journey and the roles of those who have aided and supported me along the academic Underground Railroad.

Black Trans Feminist Thought

Being a Black feminist scholar who was assigned female at birth, I gravitated towards Black Feminist Thought as a way to make sense of my lived experiences since I'm most often perceived as a Black woman and as such, my experiences may most closely align with those of Black women. Black feminist thought is a field of knowledge produced by Black women that focuses on clarifying the value, ideas, and experiences of Black women (Collins, 1991). The term was coined and developed by African American scholar and sociologist Patricia Hill Collins in the early 90s. Collins (2002) detailed four assumptions laced into the definition of Black feminist thought epistemology. The first is that race, class, and gender cannot be separated and the second claims only Black women can produce Black feminist thought (Collins, 2002). The third acknowledges that Black women hold other points of identity such as class, age and sexual orientation that result in a range of experiences that often have unifying themes and fourth, that the onus is on Black women to help other Black women to make sense of their experiences using Black feminist thought (Collins, 1991). That is to say that though others may document Black feminist thought, Black women possess a distinctive perspective of their experiences and those of other Black women (Collins, 1991). Clemons (2019) provides a methodical analysis of Black feminist thought and its varied applications in qualitative research. After first reviewing the dimensions of

Black feminist thought, Clemons discusses the connection between positionality and Black feminism and suggests that using this theory or method is in itself a political stance. To stand in one's own positionality as a Black woman is to remove the anonymous veil of an unknown author and to acknowledge aspects of identity such as gender, race, ability, and sexuality and find comfort in this vulnerability. According to Clemons, Black feminist thought, when used in qualitative research analysis in education, produces critical reflection and can reconceptualize social inequalities within higher education. The author further explains the role that Black feminist thought holds in controlling the narrative and perception of Black women in higher education (Clemons, 2019).

Using this framework comes with some reluctance, possibly due to the often-misunderstood meaning and purpose of feminism. I find myself simultaneously wanting to claim Black feminism and Black masculinity in ways that one does not negate the other. Though masculinity and feminism are not mutually exclusive, Phillips and Rogers (2021) found that in an attempt to authenticate their masculinity to cis men, trans men and trans masculine persons can be overprotective of their developing manhood and masculinity in ways that subjugate women or are overtly sexist (Phillips & Rogers, 2021). More recently, researchers are examining the intersection of feminism and trans identities (Hines, 2019), Black feminism and transness (Green & Bey, 2017; Lundy-Harris, 2022) and more specifically, Black trans masculinity (Jourian & McCloud, 2020).

Researchers are desperate for ways to make meaning of the experiences of Black trans men and other masculine centered individuals. Bey (2016) devised Black trans feminist thought (BTFT) as a way to challenge the oft-times transphobic Black community and to disrupt the cisnormativity within Black Feminist thought (Bey, 2016). Though proposed as a framework for centering the voices of Black trans or genderqueer women, Black trans feminist thought is sometimes used to help make meaning of Black trans men and non-binary trans masculine individuals (Jourian & McCloud, 2020; Snorton, 2011). Bey (2016) echoes Snorton (2011) view that Black feminist scholars, in their rightful critique of patriarchy and misogyny, ought to focus on socialized masculinity rather than biological masculinity to accurately depict and include Black trans experiences in navigating gender roles (Bey, 2016; Snorton, 2011).

Though neither Black feminist thought (BFT) nor Black trans feminist thought (BTFT) was intended to center Black trans masculine experiences, Green (2015) used a Black trans feminist approach to process the experiences of Black and Asian American transgender men and masculine presenting queer women in public bathrooms (Green, 2015). The author argues that Black feminism is politically androgynous as it challenged both Black men and white women to consider the narrow, exclusionary view of their individual plights (Green, 2015). Due to limited research on the ways Black trans masculine students explore and make meaning of their racial and gender identities, Jourian & McCloud (2020) used “Quare” theory and Black trans feminist thought to investigate how these students “understand and

re/de/construct Black masculinity at the intersection of gender and race" (Jourian & McCloud, 2020, p.734).

Otherparenting

In the various cultures and communities through history, another woman would help meet the needs of a child in absence of the child's biological mother. This concept of non-biological mothering can be traced back to Africa and is found today throughout the African diaspora. In family life, surrogate mothering may occur, not only due to loss or absence of the biological mother but only in multigenerational family structures where a grandmother or aunt may share in child-raring tasks. During the time of African enslavement in America, Othermothering occurred when women provided emotional or other support to children who separated from their parents due to auctions, punishment, or death (Collins,2000; Flowers et al., 2015). These enslaved women cared for these orphaned children as though they were their own which in many cases helped these children to survive (Collins,2000; Flowers et al.,2015). Often seen as an informal yet highly respectable member in African American communities, these othermothers are generally at least forty-plus years, having garnered enough life experience to develop a sense of the community's tradition and culture (James, 1993). In recent decades, scholars have been describing the maternal roles assumed primarily by Black women teachers. The terminology may vary but the experience is the same. In educational settings, children are away from families for many hours during the day. Some of these children come from home where their parents or guardians are

unable to meet their basic needs. Others simply thrive better with the familiarity of a motherly figure. The juxtaposition of maternal instinct and the desire for racial advancement result in Black women caring about far more than the academic needs of the students in their charge. Some teachers offer themselves as surrogate mother figures to their students and nurture them during their time at school. O'Reilly (2004) describes Othermothering by teachers as "a sharing of self, an interactive and collective process, a spiritual connectedness that exemplifies the Afrocentric values of sharing, caring and accountability" (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 8).

Black women in academia being viewed as nurturers can have both negative and positive connotations for these scholars. On the negative side, there is an expectation of self-sacrifice in support of the success of others. This can be likened to a modern version of the stereotypical trope of the Black woman as "Mammy" which emerged during slavery. Though the academic "Mammy" is of help, particularly to some Black students who thrive with additional nurturing, this additional labor weighs on Black women. According to Hills (2019) "As a feature of gendered racism, academic mammying constructs a rigid architecture of Black womanhood within the classroom and along the general terrain of academia" (Hills, 2019, p. 9). For Black women in the academy, this added labor often lessens their productivity and work/life quality which can impact their opportunities for tenure or promotion. Also, Black women are often asked to provide additional unpaid labor such as joining or leading diversity committees and initiatives on their respective campuses (Hills, 2019).

Despite the possibility of these burdens, many Black women continue to situate themselves as othermothers to their students. Sernak (2004) used caring and racial uplift to build a theoretical framework to examine the impact of race and culture on Black women's leadership values and styles that foster caring in schools. As the child of a retired Black woman principal, I saw firsthand many of Sernak's findings on the care extended to students. Black women principals view the school community as extensions on their own families and rather than through obligation, they cared about the wellbeing of their students and often provided meals, clothing, toiletries, and other types of support (Sernak, 2004).

McCallum (2020) interviewed African American pre-candidacy doctoral students to discover the role of Othermothering on their decision to pursue doctoral degrees. The author found that faculty-student relationships at both HBCUs and PWIs possessed attributes of Othermothering and that these relationships influenced students both to enroll and persist in doctoral studies (McCallum, 2020).

While Black women provide nurturing support to Black students, other persons nurture the academic paths of Black students. Mercer (2016) examined author Toni Morrison's use of masculine othermother figures in her works and found that both men and women offer Othermothering support by transmitting African American cultural values while challenging mainstream racialized and heteronormative notions about what encompasses a family (Mercer, 2016, p.73). Intent on highlight the positive role of Black male teachers in South Central Los Angeles, who are sometimes met with fear and suspicion by other teachers and parents, Lynn (2006) discovered

that that the culturally responsive teaching and guidance transcended the classroom and mirrored that of a nurturing family dynamic. The author described the caring dynamic as "Otherfathering" to underscore the value of Black men in the teaching profession, which is raced and gendered in favor of white women (Lynn, 2006).

Williams (2018) established a caring framework for investigating the culturally relevant teaching by Black school educators and suggested "Otherparenting" as a term for the types of care they provide to their students. There are two benefits of using the gender-neutral term of parent in place of mother or father. First, researchers can more easily transfer knowledge and findings on the previous Othermothering or Otherfathering research. Second, non-binary and gender non-conforming educators who provide nurturing support to their students can have an accessible framework for making meaning of their experiences.

Quare Theory

Johnson (2001) addressed the absence of race and class in queer theory and proposed "Quare" theory as a means to acknowledge and challenges the marginalization of people of color within queerness. Quare theory embodies the resilience of people of color in the face of white supremacy and racism and presents performance as a "moment of self-reflexivity that has the potential to transform one's view of self in relation to the world" (Johnson, 2001, p. 11). This performance, much like that of self-preservation theory, is a theater analogy used to describe the various

ways in which people present themselves in public spaces and the roles they inhabit versus the private self at home or in familiar company (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014).

Review of Literature

Contemporary Barriers to and through the PhD for Black students

Students are especially vulnerable at transition points in their academic journeys (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Hlinka et. al., 2015; Morales & Trotman, 2004; Russell & Atwater, 2005). With the impact of inequitable access to high-quality education compounding over time, fewer Black students are transitioning to the next levels of academia (McClain & Perry, 2017, Nitardy et al., 2015). Based on these finding, the authors suggest that fewer Black students complete levels of education than those that start and in turn, a smaller number of Black students enter subsequent levels of academic institutions.

Educational research has had a long history of examining the barrier to education that African American students face. Carey (2019) utilized an ethnographic study at a high school in a low-income community to uncover the college-going dilemmas of Black and Latino adolescent boys. The author found that students faced both internal and external dilemmas. Internally, the students doubted their academic and social abilities to succeed in college based on self-doubt and anxiety, not on their true academic performance, while externally most believed that they could not afford college based on their assumptions about the cost of college and the amount of financial aid they could receive. African American participants' perceptions of

affordability of college and their likelihood to succeed was at the root of both external and internal dilemmas (Carey, 2019).

To better understand the contemporary factors impacting the doctoral attainment of Black and African American students, I consider college access and attrition by examining the literature on the cost of higher education and African American students' hesitation and fear of debt, the psychological and mental health difficulties associated with higher education for African American and Black students and the role of racism, institutionalized racism, and other structural barriers.

Financial Barriers to Higher Education

Though many African Americans view education and attending college as a means to securing financial stability in adulthood, attending college is not a reality for all those who aspire to attend. Nettles (1989) examined the variation in entry-level debt burdens among white, Hispanic, and African American students who enrolled in doctoral programs. He found that 46% of African Americans and 43% of Hispanics compared to 36% of Whites had taken out loans to finance their undergraduate education. According to Lancaster & Xu (2017), African American and Hispanic families feared debt and as a result were hesitant to borrow money. This resulted in very high interest rates on student loans for African American participants in this study since almost fifty percent of them were independent borrows (Lancaster & Xu, 2017). The authors also found that some African American students opted not to enroll in college as they did not understand the long-term economic investment of college

and found it preferable to secure employment immediately after completing high school.

For rural, African American students, there are additional challenges in considering college. Means et al. (2016) conducted one of the few case studies of rural, African American students' aspirations to attend college. Through semi-structured interviews, the researchers found that being part of a small, tight-knit community provided students with added emotional support in their desire to attend college, but most of them felt unprepared and unsupported to complete college applications (Means et al., 2016). Additionally, students held misconceptions about the cost of attending college and, through their overestimations, they believed college to be unattainable. Some participants were also concerned that their grades and academic performance would not match students who attended city schools (Means et al., 2016).

In individual disciplines, African American students also face financial barriers to attending and completing college degrees. Mingo (2008) found that in nursing, only fifty percent of students received financial aid education on applying to their programs, and one result was feelings of financial uncertainty.

Racism as a Barrier to Higher Education

Instances of Black and African American students facing racism in colleges and universities across the US are well documented. At inception, most institutions now characterized as predominantly white institutions did not allow Black students to

enroll until they were legally forced to do so. In recent years, though conditions have greatly improved, Black and African American students are still met with racism at many institutions of higher learning.

Affirmative action in education was implemented in response to racist policies and practices that prevented and deterred African American students from entering college (Johnson, 1992). By using strict quotas and numerical goals in college admission processes, the effects of racial discrimination were partially mitigated, leading to a rise in Black college enrollment in the 1970's. By the early 80's, though exact quotas were no longer used, universities continued to use race as an additive factor in admission decision making which helped increase Black enrollment (Crosby et al. 2003, Lehman 2004). Soon white families rallied against what they consider to be preferential treatment in favor of Black students and by the mid 1990's Affirmative Action was banned (Crosby et al., 2006). The ban on Affirmative action caused the largest decline in Black college enrollment in decades (Gaye et al., 2005). The decline was noticeable across disciplines (Dennis, 2001; Smith et al., 2009), and within a few short years, extended to a decline in Black and African American doctoral enrollment (Thompson, 1999).

Thornhill (2019) sought to determine evidence of racial discrimination by white admissions personnel at predominantly white institutions. The researcher conducted an audit of 517 white admissions counselors, employed at the same number of institutions, who received inquiry e-mails from fictitious Black high school students who appeared to be more or less racially salient. The author created fictitious Black

student applications and 900 white upper-middle college students were asked to guess the race of each name. Some of the fictitious Black names included Lakisha Lewis, Shaquana Coleman, Tanisha Richardson, Destiny Brown, Jamal Jackson, Tyrone Reid, Quashawn Williams, and Keshawn Grant. By submitting applications with these names, the author found that white admissions counselors are more responsive to Black students who present as deracialized and racially apolitical than they are to those who appeared more concerned with issues of racism and racial justice (Thornhill, 2019). Thornhill (2019) included questions to admission counselors on campus events dealing with environmental stability, antiracism efforts or racial unity to portray political or racialized viewpoints. These findings provide convincing support for the theory of racial discrimination and gatekeeping in the admission process of predominantly white institutions.

For Black and African American students who survive the admission process, additional racially charged barriers await. Black and African American students face many types of racism during their time in higher education, mostly at predominantly white institutions from the less threatening instances of bias and microaggressions to outright acts of racial violence (Feagin et al., 2014). According to Solorzano et al. (2000) microaggressions are subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously. Solorzano et al. (2000) investigated the impact of the small but frequent acts and found that they create negative campus climates for Black students (Solorzano et al., 2000). In addition to college access and admission, and negative experiences while enrolled, racism

contributes to high rate of attrition for Black and African American students (Banks & Dohy, 2019).

Psychological Barriers to Higher Education

For many students, college is a time fraught with new academic, social, and cultural experiences. These experiences, though exciting for some, have the potential to be overwhelming. Historically excluded populations of students, such as African American and Black students are more likely to experience psychological barriers to attending college such as alienation, isolation, and self-doubt (Lett & Wright, 2003). Unfortunately, African American students across the U.S. experience these psychological barriers to attending college. Freeman (1997) examined the barriers to African Americans' enrollment and participation in higher education across a range of cities, schools, and family circumstances and discovered that some students believed college was not an option, while others had desire to attend but thought the pursuit was hopeless or too intimidating (Freeman, 1997).

Self-doubt or imposter syndrome is a recurring theme in Black and African American students' psychological barriers to higher education. Peteet et al. (2015) define imposter syndrome as "a psychological experience of performance inadequacy and exists outside the reality of one's actual performance" (Peteet et. al., 2015, p. 155). These researchers aimed to fill the gap in the literature on experiences of Black students feelings of imposter syndrome by first establishing a connection between self-esteem, imposter syndrome, and psychological distress in college students. They

utilized 112 self-identified African American undergraduate students from various college and universities and across differing areas and levels of study. Data was collected when participants completed a specific order of surveys “the Clance Impostor Scale (Clance and Imes 1978), the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al. 2002), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965), and demographic questions” (Peteet et. al., 2015, p. 159). The authors were not surprised to find that there is a direct link for African American students between self-esteem, imposter syndrome and psychological distress (Peteet et. al., 2015).

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In my review of literature, I have uncovered a plethora of determining factors for the doctoral pursuits of Black students who experience life at the intersections of various identities. Each reason is valid, mine included. There is something saddening about my experiencing part of my life through performing several personas, and my process of recalling, investigating, and retelling this period of my life through an academic lens has been one of grace, humility, and vulnerability. I have exposed truths that I hid within myself and faced up to realities that I knowingly shied away from. For instance, through this research, I was reminded that as a child, my first thought when I was introduced to a family friend, Dr. Mallard, was how lucky she must be that no one calls her Miss or Mrs. At that time, I had no understanding of what earning a doctoral degree entailed, where one could even go to find one, or how long it took. What I do know now is that erasure, ambiguity, or concealment of gender first piqued my curiosity in obtaining a doctoral degree. This process has also been a very reflective one, as I find myself pondering on my hesitation to acknowledge this truth. Somehow, admitting this thought from over 25 years ago, in my mind, detracts from my current doctoral pursuit. This feeling that resembles shame feels like a regression to my previously mentioned compartmentalization of my salient identities, where here in conversation with myself, I feel compelled to protect the separation between my

scholarly achievements and my transness. My research and professional interests and other academic endeavors and successes fail to bolster this perception possibly since as I approach completion of doctoral study, the reward of a gender-neutral honorific is something I eagerly await.

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the reasons why Black and African American students pursue doctoral degrees and the types of support these students experience throughout their doctoral journeys. Because I inhabit multiple historically marginalized populations, I chose to glean rich data from my own unique experiences as a Trinidadian native, Black trans student-parent pursuing a PhD in Education at a predominantly white university in the northeastern United States. My lived experiences may be unique, but Black students simultaneously navigating terminal degrees and multiple marginalization are not. According to Palmer and Scott (2013) Black women share similar college experiences based on shared intersectional racial and gender identities save for those who are first generation students. Noting that Black women graduated from historically Black colleges and institutions at three times the rate of Black men, Palmer and Scott (2013) explored the multiple social identities of Black male students at historically black colleges and universities. More particularly they investigated the intersectionality of race, gender and socioeconomic status intent on informing campus staff, faculty, and administrators about the experiences of low-income Black males at these institutions (Palmer, & Scott, 2013). The authors found that income level created significantly different college experiences

within the population of Black male students attending HBCUs and concluded that additional institutional-led support including alumni mentorship and study groups are important for the success of this population of students (Palmer, & Scott, 2013). In recognizing the distinctiveness of my intersecting identities, with this current research I investigate the types of support I received in my journey to and through PhD completion.

Methodologically I am drawn to the fringes, the borderlands (Anzualda, 1987), the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) found both in my own experiences and those of others. During my master's thesis study and at the start of this project, I tried to stand behind the veil of research. The invisibility of the unknown author has been my safety net for several years. For this project, however, I stand not just in my own positionality but also in vulnerability by putting my own experiences under a microscope. More specifically, I investigate my own doctoral journey using the methodologies of critical autoethnography and Afro-Trinidadian oral storytelling. I also examine these experiences through the three lenses: Black trans feminist thought, Otherparenting, and quare theory. The research questions guiding this inquiry are:

1. Who were the "conductors" on my academic railroad and what blueprint did they offer to aid my PhD journey?

2. What role did Black women play in my decision to attend and complete a doctoral degree?

3. What do my experiences as a Black, queer, doctoral student reveal about the role of Otherparenting in the doctoral success of Black students?

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) suggest that "the overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives…" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 15). They go on to describe the value of using qualitative methodologies to understand participant experiences and perspectives within natural situations and unique contexts. One of the main draws to qualitative research is that it does not center the perspective of the researcher but that of the participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Creswell (1998) offers guidance to researchers who deem qualitative research appropriate for their inquiries, such as the researcher's role as the primary instrument, the importance for asking questions of how as opposed to those of why, and the need to be "an active learner who can tell the story from the participants' view rather than as an 'expert' who passes judgment on participants" (Creswell, 1998, p.18).

Within academia, much like the wider American society, the dominant rhetoric is controlled primarily by white, cisgender, heterosexual men. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) offered a strong and impactful critique of the role of racism in education. Though their research initially centered on using critical race theory (CRT) to make meaning of the experiences of students in elementary and secondary schooling, the framework was and remains applicable to other educational settings, namely higher education. With critical race theory (CRT), the researchers urged educators to ask questions, acknowledge and confront racism, and disrupt the dominant narrative by using counter-storytelling (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Viesca et. al. (2014) sought to disrupt the dominant discourse on race and teacher education. To do so they examined the role of race and racial identity of students in teacher preparation programs in shaping their approach to teaching and learning. The authors utilized critical race theory to help these teacher candidates understand the role of race and other forms of oppression in education and society. Some participants were also guided to reframe their thoughts on being lucky with an understanding of their own white privilege built on systematic racism. They found that many of the white teacher candidates in their study ascribed to dominant notions that race has no impact on one's experiences in society and, by extension, no impact on education (Viesca et al., 2014). Opposingly, teaching candidates of color demonstrated the impact of race on their teaching and were able to disrupt the dominant narrative.

In 2004, DeCuir and Dixson demonstrated how CRT can be used to examine the experiences of African American students at a predominantly white high school. The authors highlighted the counter-stories of two African American students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds to highlight the impact of racism on these students' high school experiences (DeCuir, & Dixson, 2004). By uncovering subtle racist practices and policies, and also highlighting more overt acts of racism, the authors hope that educators, families, and communities will be better equipped to counteract racism.

More closely related to my areas of interest, Wallace & Ford (2021) used a critical race lens to explore the experiences of Black first-generation doctoral students at predominantly white institutions. In 2015, 30 percent of doctoral recipients

indicated that they were first-generation students and roughly half of Black doctoral students are first-generation students, so the authors focused their research on this population of students to uncover types of support that can aid in their success. With this scholarship, Wallace & Ford (2021) created space and opportunities for Black doctoral first-generation students to voice their past experiences. These counter-narratives illuminated four main themes of challenging experiences: “1) unvalued knowledge as intensification of imposterism, 2) feelings of invisibility, 3) deficient institutional support, and 4) self-made community as survival.” (Wallace & Ford, 2021, p. 134) The authors included participant quotes to center their voices in an attempt to maintain authenticity. Both in data collection and analysis Wallace and Ford (2021) compare Black student experiences with those of their white counterparts. This unintending othering, in my view, diminishes the very experiences they seek to center.

Delgado (1989) coined the concept of counter-stories in exposing inaccuracies about marginalized groups of people and highlighting systematic racism. Delgado emphasized that these stories can also “help us understand when it is time to reallocate power” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2415). The author further purported that both telling and hearing counter-stories benefits groups that have traditionally been marginalized and oppressed in the United States. These benefits include the following: “gain healing from becoming familiar with their own historic oppression and victimization; realize that they are not alone; that others have the same thoughts and experiences; stop blaming themselves for their marginal position; and construct additional counter-

stories to challenge the dominant story" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2437). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told," including people of color, women, gender and sexual minorities, and those living below the poverty line (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26).

My Methodological Journey

Counter-narratives are necessary and serve an important role in academic discourse. They are intended to disrupt and dismantle racism and bias while challenging deficit narratives about historically excluded populations. My hesitation in using counter-storytelling to investigate my doctoral journey is that counter-narratives by design are comparative. They acknowledge and name the dominant perspective, be it whiteness, classism, or heterosexuality, before situating the marginalized perspective. Such models fail to capture the nuances of multiple marginalized salient identities in an authentic manner. Like many other researchers seeking to find methodologies to capture Black intersectionality, I examined new and emerging approaches to making meaning of experiences education and society at the nexus of intersecting identities.

After much reading, reflecting, and writing, I arrived at Afro-Trinidadian oral storytelling as a viable decolonizing methodology for gaining knowledge about the PhD journeys of Black doctoral students. I initially failed to recognize that

decolonizing methodologies much like critical race theory are unequivocally tethered to the same dominant colonial discourse that they aim to reject.

Afro-Trinidadian Oral Storytelling

In West African tradition, the griot, also known as the oral historian, was a position of much esteem. According to Ebine (2019), the role and importance of the griot is not one that should be underestimated. The author further explains that the people of West African societies relied on their griots "for the safeguard of the oral tradition, music and poetry, because the society depends on them for the oral narration and performance, conservation and transmission of their history and other oral works from one generation to another… In the traditional community, they play the roles of counselors, community historians, story tellers, singers, as well as mediators in family and tribal feuds" (Ebine, 2019, p. 5).

In Trinidad, the people who assumed the role of telling stories were first called Chant Wells which later evolved into the musical artform known today as Calypso. Davies (1985) acknowledged the use of Africa as a motif in Caribbean literature and used similar models in exploring the relationship between Africa and the art form of Calypso. The author refers to the griot tradition as the inspiration for modern day Calypso. Fergus (2014) describes calypso as a "griot-chantwell tradition" which evolved from the West African griot tradition. The author further explains that three musical artforms--Trinidad Calypso, Jamaica's Mento, Guyana's Shanto--all derived

from griot. Their creation and existence are “mantras in the repertoire of resistance to enslavement and colonialism” (Fergus, 2014, p. 2).

Trinidadian Calypsonians are more than merely entertainers. They offer social commentary and, whether intentionally or inadvertently, these social commentaries have kept a historical account of the nation. One pertinent example is that of *Rain-O-Rama* a 1972 Calypso written and performed by Lord Kitchener. The lyrics tell the story of the only other time beside the Covid pandemic where Trinidad’s annual Carnival celebration was postponed from its regular Monday and Tuesday that preceded Ash Wednesday in the Catholic calendar. Trinidad was in the midst of a polio outbreak and for national safety, Carnival masquerade of bands and the steel drum festival, Panorama, were postponed from February to May. Festivities on the new date were dampened by torrential rains, typical of May in Trinidad and as the refrain said, “rain come and wash out Mas in May”.

During my primary schooling, oral storytelling, Calypso writing and performance were parts of our unwritten curriculum. Students entered their creations in an annual Calypso writing competition. I recall one year writing a calypso, *Walk Away* in which I wrestled with whether I should intervene when other students were fighting.

> Long ago when you see a fight
>
> You could step right in and make things all right
>
> Today when you see a fray, you just can't get into their way
>
> The safest thing for you I say is to walk away

At age 10, I unknowingly added it to the stream of oral history on the happenings of my then primary school. Furthermore, I may not be able to recall many specific incidents during my years in primary school, but I do recall the lyrics to many of the Calypsos written and performed by other children during those years. These songs hold the school's history written and told from the perspectives of the students during our time there.

For the purposes of this research the Afro-Trinidadian oral stories will be included in an audio/visual format to preserve authenticity.

Role of the Djembe (Drum)

Afro-Trinidadian oral stories can be told either with or without the accompaniment of African drums. This decision is up to the storyteller and their creative needs for a particular story. To create harmony or tension based on the content of the story, I made artistic choices in the drumming tempo and style. For moments of discord, I used patterns that moved against the pattern of my speech and similar to convey resolution or excited, I used patterns that flowed in sync with my speech.

I chose to incorporate the djembe as both storytelling and that drum are cultural artifacts that survived African enslavement in Trinidad and Tobago. Drumming and storytelling are mine and were my ancestors'. In my desire to tell my story authentically, I merged part of what is traditionally considered academic, writing, with elements of my cultural ancestry, drumming and storytelling. In

considering which drumming patterns to utilize, I first explored rhythmic patterns affiliated with specific West African tribes that are believed to have genetic similarity with many Trinidadians. As I do not know my West African genetic genealogy, using any of these patterns without permission felt akin to cultural appropriation. As a result, I opted to improvise my own patterns for use in this dissertation.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography has been described as a type of qualitative research where the author uses self-reflection and autobiographical writing and research to explore personal experiences that connect to a wider cultural, social or political trend (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004). This type of research design allows the researcher to make sense of past or current experiences through reflection. Additionally, scholars have suggested that autoethnography has the unique ability to amplify single instances to macro implications that serve to disrupt dominant narratives (Starr, 2010). With this methodology, I can critically reflect on my experiences that led to the decision to pursue a doctoral degree as well as the role of Black women in shaping these decisions and supporting my journey.

There are various types of autoethnography, differing by how much prominence is given to the viewpoint of solely the researcher or that of others with whom the researcher may interact (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography lends itself to critical storytelling and is often used to highlight counter-narratives to disrupt dominant culture perspectives (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). The charge to share

experiences through critical storytelling, though more popular in Anthropology and Communication Studies, is gaining traction in education research (Ellis, 2004; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). To examine my lived experiences toward and through my PhD in Education as a Black queer student attending a predominantly White institution, I will employ critical autoethnography. Critical autoethnography 1) blends theory and storytelling together, 2) bridges material and ethical practice by linking analysis with action, and 3) reveals ways of embodying change (Holman Jones, 2016). This form of autoethnography is also used to examine first-hand accounts of discrimination and difference (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Madison, 2005).

With greater frequency, researchers are looking to critical autoethnography to help engage multidimensional identities such as race, gender, nationality, sexuality and class that do not neatly adhere to existing binary or fixed categories (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020). To acknowledge the multiplicity of identities is to acknowledge their intersections, interactions, dynamism, and fluidity in my personal, social and academic lives. Much like Boylorn & Orbe (2016) "race is always there" but other facets of my identity, some visible some not, ebb and flow and are guarded or exposed in a particular moment. "Performative autoethnography calls for inserting the bodily flesh and its many positions as ways of knowing (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016, p.83). To examine my lived experiences along my academic journey to the PhD is to examine the performances from different perspectives of the "I" to understand them within the context of space and time. "I" the Black Trinidadian musician, "I" the Black single

parent, and "I" the Black closeted transmasculine student as they lead to "I" the Black Trans PhD of education student who is a parent.

Research Design

This multimodal study will be conducted utilizing a critical performative autoethnographic approach informed by the methodology of Afro-Trinidadian Oral Storytelling. When used as a methodology, storytelling centers the voices of the participants whose stories are being told. Data can be collected through interviewing, focus groups or observations and the researcher who assumes the role of the griot would then use the art form to analyze and interpret these experiences before retelling them in the African oral tradition storytelling form.

Collection of Data

Through processes mainly involving self-reflection, I used my memory of my life experiences to supply rich data. Furthermore, I kept a reflexive journal throughout my doctoral program and these entries, though sporadic, share snapshot accounts of more challenging obstacles I faced in dealing with health ailments, maintaining enrollment status, and retaining employment. Additionally, after experiencing a period of memory loss in my late teens, I began the practice of sending emails, texts, and messages through social media to myself as a safeguard if ever a problem may arise in future. Though not the most conventional form of journaling, since these messages are dated, they provided rich data and helped authenticate the timeline of various events which strengthened this research. I also pulled data from voice notes I recorded to vent

frustration about disappointments. I found that talking is helpful when overwhelmed and have made it a practice to speak these frustrations into recording even before speaking to a friend, family member, or my therapist. And lastly I used reflective prompts to assist in recalling experience from my earlier years.

Personal Memory Data

According to Chang (2008), personal memory data is a useful source of obtaining data in autoethnographic research (Chang, 2008). In the same vein, I created a timeline of events pertinent to my path towards doctoral studies, including obstacles I faced and the roles of my various sources of support in helping me to navigate these challenges to glean personal memory data.

Self-Reflective Data

Through self-reflection, I chronicled my memory of childhood experiences regarding my family life, gender identity exploration and education to uncover detailed events and associated emotions. Careful analysis and understanding of who you are and what you are results in self-reflective data (Chang, 2008). Chang (2008) suggested that the data collected through this introspection can be further bolstered by text data as these documents can add context and added perceptions. Letters, poems, newspaper articles, and journal entries are examples of text data that can be included to strengthen autoethnographic data. To enhance my data, I found value in reviewing my journal entries, emails, and text messages as these shed light on obstacles and

support I experienced through doctoral study. Since data used did not include the thoughts and opinions of another person, IRB approval was not required for this study.

Analysis of Data

Data were coded for emerging themes and the experiences then analyzed through the frameworks of Black trans feminist thought, Otherparenting, and Quare theory. The resulting analysis took the form of Afro-Trinidadian Oral Storytelling. At this stage of the research, I recognized that my oral stories served as processed autoethnographic data and I required deeper analyses to make meaning of this information. Through another round of coding for themes related to support, I uncovered the specific persons who aided my doctoral success.

Limitations

This inquiry, though grounded in theory, is shaped largely by my own viewpoint to examine my experiences to generate data. Those around me, including family members, other PhD students, advisors, professors, and friends are privy to part of my doctoral journey that I may not be cognizant of. Be that as it may, the findings and themes may be meaningful and applicable in other settings, leading to the potential for increasing the number of Black and African American students who pursue and complete doctoral degrees and greater support for these students throughout their academic journeys.

Chapter 4

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC DATA

The purpose of my study was to investigate the types of support systems needed by Black trans student-parents to navigate their doctoral journey, as well as to identify the determining factor for them to pursue such study. My research questions were:

1. Who were the "conductors" on my academic railroad and what blueprint did they offer to aid my PhD journey?

2. What role did Black women play in my decision to attend and complete a doctoral degree?

3. What do my experiences as a Black, queer, doctoral student reveal about the role of Otherparenting in the doctoral success of Black students?

The data presented in this chapter were collected through self-reflecting prompts and my experiences depicted through Afro-Trinidadian oral stories. The included selections are introduced mostly chronologically, starting on the cusp of my master's and doctoral degrees before going back in time with accounts of my early family and musical life and other identity negotiations during my elementary and secondary schooling, then culminating with post-secondary scholarly pursuits.

Once Upon a Time

This Afro-Trinidadian oral story is presented as a digital audio file that is part of my dissertation. See here.

Reflection

As I listen to my own story, I hear my desire for guidance and support in deciding on which PhD I should pursue. I had already made the decision to stay the course through a doctoral program. Personally, I had already tasted the freedom of not being harassed daily because of my gender presentation and sexual orientation and was prepared to exhaust all options to legally remain in my newly found haven. My curiosity was piqued to explore ways to make education more accessible and equitable to marginalized students. After noticing LGBT erasure in the music history textbooks that detail the personal lives of straight composers and omit those of queer composers and observing the musical confidence of queer music students in affirming music classes, I was ready to change the world for the better through curriculum design and advocacy.

In the absence of that much needed guidance, I was flying blind into a world I knew nothing about. I came quite close to not being able to financially afford a necessary component of the PhD application, and unnecessarily put myself into further debt to pay for an exam that, with the right information, I could have received a fee waiver for. I lacked the knowledge and familiarity to experience an easeful doctoral admission process. Additionally, my scholastic pursuit was oppressed.

Early Education and Family/Early Education and Music

These Afro-Trinidadian oral stories are presented as digital audio files that are part of my dissertation. For Early Education and Family, see here, for Early Education and Music, see here.

Reflection

In this part of my story, a few main ideas are evident. Firstly, it demonstrates that older Black women were my first caregivers and teachers and explains in part why I continue to look to them for guidance and mentorship. Secondly, these recollections set the stage for my low sense of self that was pervasive throughout my schooling. It shows the start of seemingly benign or playful comments that exacerbated my gender dysphoria and in turn my self-esteem. The favoritism my grandmother showed to my sister through our childhood and adolescence is at the root of my need for approval and feelings of inferiority.

Additionally, my salient identities begin to take shape and I focus on those that can give me the most familial approval, while suppressing other parts of myself that I feared would lead to further ostracization. At an early age I found saw my value and worth in my musical and academic identities.

My American Dream

This Afro-Trinidadian oral story is presented as a digital audio file that is part of my dissertation. See here.

Reflection

In my childhood perceptions of Trinidad, ethnic origin often impacted one's life trajectory. From what I had seen on television, I believed the Unites States to be a place where success what built on merit and not race or ethnicity. I saw my academic ability as a path to secure a financially stable future on par with East Indians in

Trinidad. Scholarships would pay for my education, and I would then use those credentials to pursue something I enjoyed, culinary arts, somewhere that I would not have to be closeted, cruise ships sailing around the world.

I don't take lightly how blessed I was to survive a car crash that left two vehicles destroyed. My academic pursuits at that time were thwarted but that feels trivial as I lived to try again. Both at the time of the accident and three years later when I had memory lapses, I was derailed from my path to a professional trade and found myself on an academic journey. I also see my resilience to recover from substantial injuries to my brain and stay determined to complete post-secondary schooling, despite doctors' pessimistic predictions.

Who's That Little Girl in That Mirror There? /When Will My Reflection Show Who I am Inside

These Afro-Trinidadian oral stories are presented as digital audio files for my dissertation. For Who's That Little Girl in That Mirror There?, see here, for When Will My Reflection Show Who I am Inside, see here.

Reflection

Bernstein was a composer whose music I heard often through my childhood. I misheard some of the lyrics from *I Feel Pretty* and sang 'who's that little girl in that mirror there' instead of the actual lyrics, 'see the pretty girl in that mirror there'. Each time I heard the song, I'd ask myself who that girl was that I saw in the mirror, because she wasn't me. Wrestling with my gender identity at a time when I

had no idea what it was or thought I was the only person in the world who felt that way was the loneliest experience in my lifetime. The song Reflection from the animated motion picture Mulan also provided me comfort. Neither song is intended to demarcate the trans experience, but the lyrics voiced my feelings in ways that I could not articulate at the time.

Look at me

You may think you see

Who I really am

But you'll never know me

Every day

It's as if I play a part

Now I see

If I wear a mask

I can fool the world

But I cannot fool my heart

Who is that girl I see

Staring straight back at me?

When will my reflection show

Who I am inside?

I am now

In a world where I

Have to hide my heart

And what I believe in

    But somehow

I will show the world

What's inside my heart

And be loved for who I am

    Who is that girl I see

Staring straight back at me?

Why is my reflection

Someone I don't know?

    Must I pretend that I'm

Someone else for all time?

When will my reflection show

Who I am inside?

    There's a heart that must be free to fly

That burns with a need to know

The reason why

    Why must we all conceal

What we think and how we feel?

Must there be a secret me

I'm forced to hide?

I won't pretend that I'm

Someone else for all time

When will my reflection show

Who I am inside?

When will my reflection show

Who I am inside?

My gender has influenced more aspects of my life than I had realized before embarking on this autoethnographic exploration. Though my relationship with isolation and alienation eventually led to depression and anxiety, they also led me to creative outlets that were solo activities: various types of visual arts, reading, poetry and other creative writings, and my gadgets and inventions. This resilience and ability to find the positive in each source of adversity continues to serve me as I persevere in my doctoral journey.

Through those years, I suppressed not only my gender identity but my voice. I learned not to verbalize my needs and wants and found it difficult to trust myself. I recall being very outgoing and playful as a young child but during this time, I grew increasingly cynical and bitter towards those closest to me.

Girls Who Want Boys, Who Like Boys to be Girls, Who Do Boys Like They're Girls, Who Do Girls Like They're Boys

This Afro-Trinidadian oral story is presented as a digital audio file that is part of my dissertation. See here.

Reflection

This story was a particularly difficult one to tell. It details the point at which teasing turned to verbal threats and physical violence. Though I don't go into much detail, in my late teens, these types of experiences occurred every time I left my home. I tried desperately to blend in and erase the parts of my identity that attracted violence. It became clear to me that I needed to leave Trinidad and Tobago as I started to fear for my safety.

I struggled a lot with depression and continued to teach music and perform primarily on the steel drum. Such attempts to revel in things I did well and keep my spirits lifted were always short-lived as threats were relentless and my feelings of unsafety persisted.

Time to Get a Degree! Third Time's the Charm!

This Afro-Trinidadian oral story is presented as a digital audio file that is part of my dissertation. See here.

Reflection

I was 23 years old when I received the charge to earn a PhD and 31 by the time I enrolled in my current PhD in Education program. But before I could start a doctoral program, I first needed to earn a bachelor's degree. I was eager to leave Trinidad but felt very apprehensive because of my brain health and the cost of financing my studies. Pursuing a bachelor's degree in Trinidad was most feasible and during this time I negotiated identities and found that my gender identity influenced

which aspects of my musicality I developed. Seeing various options for gender identity while applying for graduate school opened my eyes to the possibility of combining my salient identities and roughly at this juncture I made the decision to start a family.

Master of One

This Afro-Trinidadian oral story is presented as a digital audio file that is part of my dissertation. See here.

Reflection

I embraced graduate school whole-heartedly and did not foresee the difficulties ahead. It was not long before I experienced microaggressions and other more overt instances of racism. Unexpected childcare costs soon led to financial struggles. As we lived in student housing, my rent was paid on my student financial account, and I paid all of childcare and some of rent for some months. I misunderstood the system and was of the belief that having an unpaid bill was similar to student loans--something that I could repay over time. This was not the case, and I ran into issues with registering for courses on more than one occasion.

Academically, I enjoyed my coursework and teaching assistantship, and began to grow as a researcher. I also experienced periods of isolation and alienation and health challenges that were as a result of previous injuries sustained in a car accident when I was eighteen years old. I was determined not to allow the same incident to continue to wreak havoc in my life and persisted even when it seemed impossible. My

degree took 3 years to complete while I was only funded for 2, compounding my financial instability and damaging my mental health.

We're Moving to Denver!

This Afro-Trinidadian oral story is presented as a digital audio file that is part of my dissertation. See here.

Reflection

This story highlights my determination to enroll in doctoral studies in the midst of setbacks. I felt dejected that my academic strengths were not enough to secure admission to my school of choice. A chance meeting with a Black woman administrator gave me the confidence to use my voice and ask questions.

Dr. AJ de Coteau

This Afro-Trinidadian oral story is presented as a digital audio file that is part of my dissertation. See here.

Reflection

In this final autoethnographic oral story, I share that I started my doctoral program with feelings of imposter syndrome as though I had barged my way into a space that did not want me. Being ill in the first semester felt like confirmation that I was not capable of success, and I received suggestions of taking medical leave as a professor trying to get rid of me. I learned just how willing people in my life were to help if I needed and if I asked. I leaned on friends, my church community, my

therapist, and my advisor for support and practiced using my voice to be my own best advocate.

Chapter 5

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This study sought to understand the reasons Black students pursue terminal degrees and the types of support they receive during this pursuit. Based on my analysis of my Afro-Trinidadian oral stories on my academic development, I found that I experienced a variety of challenges towards and through my doctoral journey. Multiple marginality provided the conditions for me to be on the receiving end of micro-aggressions, physical and cultural isolation, intellectual oppression, and benign neglect. I discovered that as a Black, trans Trinidadian-born student-parent, I faced traumatic experiences that could have curtailed my doctoral journey had I not received support.

First, I listed the individual challenges that I faced, including those presented in my oral stories and similar experiences uncovered in the commentary and analysis of each account. Following this, I took a more wholistic view of my doctoral journey, encompassing my numerous challenges, then I reflected on the support that I required to circumnavigate my array of challenges, and finally I analyzed them to create five new Afro-Trinidadian oral stories of support and success which went as follows:

(1) 'We Did It' which tells the story of my familial support that gave me strength and kept me motivated,

(2) 'The Best way over is around' the story of a teacher helped me work around dyslexia,

(3) ‘It takes a village’ the non-familial support that helped through moments of crisis,

(4) ‘You’re Kind of like an Auntie and a Granny’ the story of the Black women educators who saw invested into my success, and

(5) ‘You taught me How to Mentor You’ my story of finding mentorship and learning to ask for advice.

Though not named overtly, woven throughout several of these stories is institutional support. Non-teaching university staff largely have more expertise in navigating non-curricula hurdles in academia than faculty members. I found support from staff in my campus disability services office, international student center, campus library. Within my college and the wider university, administrative assistants and advisors also contributed their time and knowledge to understanding the nuances in higher education.

Chapter 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Overview

The findings from this autoethnographic study highlight instances of micro-aggressions, physical and cultural isolation, intellectual oppression that presented significant obstacles to my doctoral journey as a Black trans student-parent from Trinidad and Tobago. My main key to success was the support I received from my family of origin, my created family, my church community, several Black women, and my esteemed doctoral advisor. A 'Delta' gave me the charge to purpose a PhD and it took several years to even understand what it meant. My doctoral journey started with an escape, and at that time, a PhD was not on the horizon, not as a destination and not as a waypoint to a better life. When you're escaping, where or what you are running from is much more important than where you are heading; the destination is the least of your concern. In this chapter, I offer my reflections on the process of autoethnography informed by Afro-Trinidadian oral storytelling and my discussion of my autoethnographic data and analyses. I also suggest implications for improved policy and practice to better support Black trans intersectional students and finish with recommendations for future research.

Reflections

I fear that this project may be too different, or not good enough. So much of this research is me and its reception or rejection can only be personal. I had

conditioned myself so much to blend in that I never imagined submitting an unconventional dissertation. When you've had traumatic experiences tied to being different and standing out, sameness because an understandable goal. I started this research intent on giving Black queer intersectional students a platform to share their personal accounts of their doctoral journeys. I aspired to learn when they first set out on their pursuit and who were the people who guided and supported their academic journeys. Being cognizant of the surfeit of literature on the challenges Black students in academia, I endeavored to change the narrative by contributing the supports I experienced on my own path to and through my PhD in Education.

Reflections of the Process of Autoethnography

I utilized Afro-Trinidadian oral storytelling as part of my autoethnographic methodological process to give an authentic account of my doctoral journey and the supports I received. It felt necessary to use my voice to tell my experiences in a way that written text cannot capture. This experience of autoethnography was cathartic and exposing as I share not only my challenges and most vulnerable moments but my associated thoughts and fears.

Throughout this process I felt torn between my desire to create authentic decolonized research and wanting my findings and dissertation as a whole to be considered as academic enough and worthy of PhD I am on the verge of earning. This dilemma influenced many areas of my dissertation. I sought committee members whose expertise I believe will lend credibility to my non-traditional process and

bolster my claims and arguments. I also feared that my unorthodox dissertation format, which I initially intended to be purely spoken to reclaim the power of African oral tradition, would not be accepted. As a result, I created a hybrid format with traditional dissertation chapters, and utilized oral and visual components within some of the chapters. My first three chapters, introduction, review of literature and methodology, are solely written. My autoethnographic oral stories are the main parts of my fourth and fifth chapters where I uncover my support system through understanding the ways I overcame obstacles. I still utilize text to share brief reflections on each story to support the readers'/listeners' understanding of my reasoning for including each story as part of my doctoral journey. I close the dissertation with a written discussion, though an oral discussion may have been more applicable.

Discussion

Embedded in my research questions and conceptual and theoretical frameworks, my search for guidance is evident. I endeavored to find the "conductors" on my academic railroad and discover ways that they aided me on my PhD journey, the Black women played in my decision to attend and complete a doctoral degree and the role of Otherparenting in the doctoral success of Black students. I uncovered the strength and stability my family provided to me, both financially and emotionally. I would not have been able to manage illness, loss, and grief, and be able to thrive academically without my family. Teachers who go the extra mile, who otherparent like Mrs. G perhaps gave me unrealistic expectations of educators. Just as with my

mother and grandmother, such experiences blurred the line of teacher and parent as she gave of her lunch periods to teach me at almost 18 years old to read and write with fewer errors. Two pivotal moments in my doctoral journey were facilitated by Black women educators. The first was the idea to pursue a PhD and the second, the idea to use my voice as ask about my rejected application. I do not know whether they, as educators, share such advice with all students with whom they interact. What I do know is that their words influenced me because of my prior relationship with Black women as nurturers and educators.

In my escape from physical violence based on my gender identity, I utilized the underground railroad as a means to describe my perilous journey to my freedom. I was so fixed on the role that others played that I did not recognize my own involvement in charting my course away from harm and towards educational success. Perhaps my most unexpected finding was my own strength and perseverance. I faced more challenges than I had even realized and telling my story and then hearing my story illuminated my determination that I was oblivious to. Black women gave me wonderful ideas and I followed through. Though not intended to be of note, my intrinsic motivation becomes apparent in my oral stories. I am one of the conductors on my academic railroad and I aided my own journey by never giving up.

Theoretical Implications

There are too few Black and African American students with doctoral degrees. Black students are motivated to pursue doctoral degrees by educators who they trust, admire, and view as familial. This connection aligns with existing research on

Otherparenting. As such I conclude that Otherparenting can be a useful strategy for encouraging more Black student to pursue doctoral degrees. With this in mind, Black students need various systems of support to ensure their success including their family, chosen family, and trusted mentors.

Many Black queer and trans students do not have the support of their families of origin and may be apprehensive to building the type of trusting relationships that are necessary in mentoring. Quare theory and Black trans feminist thought are useful in investigating the experiences of Black queer and trans students with other intersecting identities. However, further expansion of both theories could better inform other salient identities of Black queer and trans students such as parent, international, and disability identities.

Recommendations for Higher Education

Though my path to and through doctoral study was fraught with various hurdles, I remain a strong proponent of higher education in providing Black intersectional students with opportunities for academic and in turn career success. With this in mind, I use the knowledge gathered through examining my rich data to offer recommendations for amendments to policies governing graduate students' experiences and for various stakeholders within academia.

Application Process for Graduate Programs

While some master's and doctoral applications explicitly instruct applicants to include the faculty member who they would like to serve as their research advisor

based on aligned research interests, this practice is not universal. Omitting crucial information from application instructions benefits those with the social and cultural capital in navigating academia. Graduate programs ought to provide all necessary information and steps to avoid inequity and bias. Another area of the application process that requires augmenting is the content of a graduate school rejection letter. These letters should include contact information if rejected applicants have questions or concerns about rejected applications. This type of transparency is an additional step that can safeguard students from prejudice.

Non-Curricular Support

My data exposed the need for better support for Black doctoral students, beyond matters of curriculum. The intersection of immigration status, parent identity and LGBT identity created increased financial scarcity. My doctoral journey could have been insulated from unexpected crises with better financial, childcare and immigration support. The typical graduate student stipend is designed to financial support a single student who would most likely live in shared housing with one or more roommates. The amount of money is not adequate for a student-parent to maintain an entire apartment. Since it is unlikely that students with dependent children will share housing with other students, graduate students who are financially reliant on an institutional stipend are at risk of financial hardship without additional sources of income. International students are limited in the number of hours they are permitted to work while taking courses. This means that international student-parents cannot seek

additional employment beyond their research or teaching assignments on campus to support their families better financially.

LGBT international student-parents face an additional barrier. U.S. International students' immediate family members, namely spouses and dependents, are eligible for visas to accompany the student through their course of study. Since same-sex marriages are not legal or recognized in many countries, including my own Trinidad and Tobago, an LGBT international student-parent would be forced to pursue graduate education without the parenting assistance of a spouse of other family member. Students belonging to other non-heteronormative nuclear family structures such as extended families that live in the same household are similarly negatively impacted by this immigration policy. This supplementary childcare need further financially impacts LGBT international student-parents. Amendments to immigration policies on issuing visas to immediate family members of LGBT students is a potentially solution to this childcare and financial instability.

Conclusion

While presenting research at the 10th annual Black Doctoral Network conference, one of the presenters described Sankofa, a popular African cultural symbol. The depiction is the body of a bird facing forward while the head looks backward. What it implies is that the past shapes the future. As we continue to examine the academic experiences of Black and African American students and work towards increasing the number of Black and African American PhD holders, it is not only appropriate but necessary to take stock of the historical events and policies that

have shaped this current phenomenon. African Americans have faced an almost insurmountable journey to achieve higher education success. Allen and Jewel (2002) suggest that the fraught battle facing Black African American students in higher education is "an apt metaphor for the larger Black struggles for citizenship, self-determination, and personhood in this society" (Allen & Jewel, 2002). What is at stake for many African American goes beyond personal betterment but towards the advancement of their race.

Armed with the knowledge of the past, the onus is on higher education administrators, faculty, and researchers to uncover the ways to better support Black and African American students on their journey to Ph.D. Examining the experiences, both positive and negative, of Black and African American doctoral students can shed light on better practices that can support students academically, psychologically, financially, and culturally. Additionally, research ought to examine the experiences of Black students in ways that do not compare these experiences to those of the dominant white experience. Further research is also needed on the role that Black and African American doctoral holders play in paving the way, whether directly, such as through mentorship, or indirectly, namely through inspiration, for Black students to pursue terminal degrees. Additionally, the experiences of students who, though interested, do not pursue terminal degrees or may begin but not complete these programs. These lived experiences can provide rich insight into contemporary barriers to doctoral achievement of Black and African American students.

REFERENCES

Adams, T. E., & Holman Jones, S. (2011). Telling stories: Reflexivity, queer theory, and autoethnography. *Cultural Studies? Critical Methodologies*, *11*(2), 108-116.

Adichie, C. N. (2009). The danger of a single story.

Akos, P., & Galassi, J. P. (2004). Middle and high school transitions as viewed by students, parents, and teachers. *Professional school counseling*, 212-221.

Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands: The new mestiza = La frontera*. San Francisco, CA: Spinsters/Aunt Lute.

Aronson, J., Fried, C. B., & Good, C. (2002). Reducing the effects of stereotype threat on African American college students by shaping theories of intelligence. *Journal of experimental social psychology*, *38*(2), 113-125.

Asimeng-Boahene, L. (2010). Counter-storytelling with African proverbs: A vehicle for teaching social justice and global understanding in urban, US schools. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *43*(4), 434-445.

Banks, T., & Dohy, J. (2019). Mitigating barriers to persistence: A review of efforts to improve retention and graduation rates for students of color in higher education. *Higher Education Studies*, *9*(1), 118-131.

Berger, R. J., & Quinney, R. (Eds.). (2005). *Storytelling sociology: Narrative as social inquiry*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Black is not a monolith - Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion. (n.d.). https://diversity.utah.edu/black-is-not-a-monolith/

Booker, C. (2004). *The seven basic plots: Why we tell stories*. A&C Black.

Boylorn, R. M. (2014). From here to there: How to use auto/ethnography to bridge difference. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, *7*(3), 312-326.

Boylorn, R. M., & Orbe, M. P. (2016). Negotiating more,(mis) labeling the body: A tale of intersectionality. In *Critical Autoethnography* (pp. 81-95). Routledge.

Carey, R. L. (2019). Am I smart enough? Will I make friends? And can I even afford it? Exploring the college-going dilemmas of Black and Latino adolescent boys. *American Journal of Education*, *125*(3), 381-415.

Castellanos, J., White, J. L., & Franco, V. (2022). *Riding the Academic Freedom Train: A Culturally Responsive, Multigenerational Mentoring Model*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Cedillo, C. V., & Bratta, P. (2019). Relating our experiences: The practice of positionality stories in student-centered pedagogy. *College Composition and Communication*, *71*(2), 215-240.

Chang, H. (2013). Individual and collaborative autoethnography as method. *Handbook of autoethnography*, 107-122.

Chavez, M. S. (2012). Autoethnography, a Chicana's methodological research tool: The role of storytelling for those who have no choice but to do critical race theory. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *45*(2), 334-348.

Clemons, K. M. (2019). Black feminist thought and qualitative research in education. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of education*.

Collins, P. H. (2000). Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment. New York, NY: Routledge.

Collins, P. H. (2002). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. routledge.

Cooper, T. L. N. (2001). *The sista'network as the new underground railroad: African American women faculty successfully negotiating the road to tenure*. University of Massachusetts Amherst. *Railroad Concept: Black Women Navigating Barriers in Higher Education Administration at Predominately White Institutions* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Louisiana at Lafayette).

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241-1299.

Creswell, J. W. (2002). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative* (Vol. 7). Prentice Hall Upper Saddle River, NJ.

Cronon, W. (1992). A place for stories: Nature, history, and narrative. *The journal of American history*, *78*(4), 1347-1376.

Crosby, F. J., Iyer, A., & Sincharoen, S. (2006). Understanding affirmative action. *Annual review of psychology*, *57*, 585.

Davies, C. B. (1985). The Africa theme in Trinidad calypso. *Caribbean Quarterly*, *31*(2), 67-86.

Dennis, G. C. (2001). Racism in medicine: planning for the future. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, *93*(3 Suppl), 1S.

Dyson, A. H., & Genishi, C. (1994). *The Need for Story: Cultural Diversity in Classroom and Community*. National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801-1096

Ebine, S. A. (2019). The Roles of Griots in African Oral Tradition among the Manding. *International Journal of Research Development*, *11*(1), 1-10.

Enríquez-Loya, A. (2021). His/Stories, Pedagogies, and Bodies: Resisting Historical Erasures and Dehumanization through Storytelling Practices. *College English*, *84*(2), 220-233.

Etter-Lewis, G. (2021). From the inside out: survival and continuity in African American women's oral narratives. In *Unrelated Kin* (pp. 169-179). Routledge.

Feagin, J. R., Vera, H., & Imani, N. (2014). *The agony of education: Black students at a White university*. Routledge.

Fergus, C. (2014). From slavery to Black power: the enigma of Africa in the Trinidad Calypso. *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, (16), 1-26.

). Beyond the call of duty: An analysis of the effects of othermothering at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). *Journal of African American Males in Education,6*(1), 59–73.

Freeman, K. (1997). Increasing African Americans' participation in higher education: African American high-school students' perspectives. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *68*(5), 523-550.

Gaye, Z. Z., Enwefa, S. C., Enwefa, R., & Williams, S. (2005). Affirmative Action in the United States: Issues and challenges for the 21st century. In *NAAAS Conference Proceedings* (p. 449). National Association of African American Studies.

Green, K. M., & Bey, M. (2017). Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet: A Conversation. *Souls*, *19*(4), 438-454.

Hills, D. D. W. (2019). “Admirable or Ridiculous?”: The Burdens of Black Women Scholars and Dialogue in the Work of Solidarity. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, *35*(2), 5-21.

Hines, S. (2019). The feminist frontier: On trans and feminism. In *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Feminism* (pp. 94-109). Routledge.

Hlinka, K. R., Mobelini, D. C., & Giltner, T. (2015). Tensions impacting student success in a rural community college. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *30*(5).

Hudson, J. B. (1997). The African Diaspora and the" Black Atlantic": An African American Perspective. *Negro History Bulletin*, *60*(4), 7-14.

James, S. M. (1993). Mothering: A possible Black feminist link to social transformation? In S. M. James, & A. P.A. Busia (Eds.), *Theorizing Black feminisms: The visionary pragmatism of Black women* (pp. 44-54). New York: Routledge.

Johnson Jr, A. M. (1992). Defending the Use of Quotas in Affirmative Action: Attacking Racism in the Nineties. *U. Ill. L. Rev.*, 1043.

Johnson, E. P. (2001). " Quare" studies, or (almost) everything I know about queer studies I learned from my grandmother. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *21*(1), 1-25.

Jourian, T. J., & McCloud, L. (2020). " I don't know where I stand": Black trans masculine students' re/de/constructions of Black masculinity. *Journal of College Student Development*, *61*(6), 733-749.

Jury, M., Smeding, A., Stephens, N. M., Nelson, J. E., Aelenei, C., & Darnon, C. (2017). The experience of low-SES students in higher education: Psychological barriers to success and interventions to reduce social-class inequality. *Journal of Social Issues*, *73*(1), 23-41.

Lancaster, C., & Xu, Y. J. (2017). Challenges and supports for African American STEM student persistence: A case study at a racially diverse four-year institution. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *86*(2), 176-189.

Lett, D. F., & Wright, J. V. (2003). Psychological Barriers Associated With Matriculation of African American Students In Predominantly White Institutions. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, *30*(3).

Leyva, L. A. (2021). Black women's counter-stories of resilience and within-group tensions in the white, patriarchal space of mathematics education. *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, *52*(2), 117-151.

Lundy-Harris, A. (2022). "Necessary Bonding" On Black Trans Studies, Kinship, and Black Feminist Genealogies. *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *9*(1), 84-100.

Lynn, M. (2006). Education for the community: Exploring the culturally relevant practices of Black male teachers. *Teachers College Record*, *108*(12), 2497-2522.

McClain, K. S., & Perry, A. (2017). Where did they go: Retention rates for students of color at predominantly white institutions. *College student affairs leadership*, *4*(1), 3.

Means, D. R., Clayton, A. B., Conzelmann, J. G., Baynes, P., & Umbach, P. D. (2016). Bounded aspirations: Rural, African American high school students and college access. *The Review of Higher Education*, *39*(4), 543-569.

Mercer, N. (2016). Masculine Expansions of Othermothering in Toni Morrison's A Mercy, Jazz, and Beloved. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*.

Millett, C. M. (2003). How undergraduate loan debt affects application and enrollment in graduate or first professional school. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *74*(4), 386-427.

Mingo, A. D. (2008). Barriers and Facilitators Affecting African Americans Continuation into Graduate Programs in Nursing. *ABNF Journal*, *19*(2), 51.

Morales, E. E., & Trotman, F. K. (2004). *Promoting academic resilience in multicultural America: Factors affecting student success* (Vol. 29). Peter Lang.

Nettles, M. T. (1989). *Comparing the backgrounds, educational experiences and outcomes of Black, Hispanic, and White doctoral students.* College Park, MD: National Center for Postsecondary Governance and Finance.

Nitardy, C. M., Duke, N. N., Pettingell, S. L., & Borowsky, I. W. (2015). Racial and ethnic disparities in educational achievement and aspirations: Findings from a statewide survey from 1998 to 2010. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, *19*, 58-66.

Peteet, B. J., Brown, C. M., Lige, Q. M., & Lanaway, D. A. (2015). Impostorism is associated with greater psychological distress and lower self-esteem for African American students. *Current Psychology*, *34*(1), 154-163.

Pham, D. T., & Gothberg, J. E. (2020). Autoethnography as a Decolonizing Methodology: Reflections on Masta's What the Grandfathers Taught Me. *The Qualitative Report*, *25*(11), 4094-4103.

Phillips, M. Y., & Rogers, B. A. (2021). Brotherhood and sexism as manhood acts for trans men in the Southeastern United States. *Sociological Spectrum*, *41*(4), 322-337.

Ritchie, J. (2014). The affordances and constraints of mobile locative narratives. *The mobile story: Narrative practices with locative technologies*, 53-67.

Russell, M. L., & Atwater, M. M. (2005). Traveling the road to success: A discourse on persistence throughout the science pipeline with African American students at a predominantly white institution. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, *42*(6), 691-715.

Sam, R. B. (2020). *Successful Pathways in the Underground*

Scott, D. (1991). That event, this memory: notes on the anthropology of African diasporas in the New World. *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, *1*(3), 261-284.

Sernak, K. S. (2004). Slaves No More: The Caring Power of African-American Female Leaders. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly*, *2*(3), 71-97.

Simkinson, C., & Simpkinson, A. (1993). Sacred stories: A celebration of the power of story to heal and transform.

Smith, S. G., Nsiah-Kumi, P. A., Jones, P. R., & Pamies, R. J. (2009). Pipeline programs in the health professions, part 2: the impact of recent legal challenges to affirmative action. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, *101*(9), 852-863.

Snorton, C. R. (2011). Transfiguring Masculinities in Black Women's Studies. *The Feminist Wire*, *18*.

Solorzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro education*, 60-73.

Soyini Madison, D. (2006). The dialogic performative in critical ethnography. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *26*(4), 320-324.

Starr, L. J. (2010). The use of autoethnography in educational research: Locating who we are in what we do. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education/Revue canadienne des jeunes chercheures et chercheurs en éducation*, *3*(1).

Stinson, D. W. (2008). Negotiating sociocultural discourses: The counter-storytelling of academically (and mathematically) successful African American male students. *American Educational Research Journal*, *45*(4), 975-1010.

Thompson, G. L. (1999). What the numbers really mean: African-American underrepresentation at the doctoral level. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *1*(1), 23-40.

Thornhill, T. (2019). We want black students, just not you: How white admissions counselors screen black prospective students. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, *5*(4), 456-470.

Williams, K. L., Burt, B. A., Clay, K. L., & Bridges, B. K. (2019). Stories untold: Counternarratives to anti-Blackness and deficit-oriented discourse concerning HBCUs. *American Educational Research Journal*, *56*(2), 556-599.

Williams, T. M. (2018). Do no harm: Strategies for culturally relevant caring in middle level classrooms from the community experiences and life histories of black middle level teachers. *RMLE Online*, *41*(6), 1-13.