Being Uprooted
Autobiographical Reflections of Learning in the [New] South

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I encountered battles in the long-standing war for recognition of my Black womanhood. Yet the fights were unfair because I was ill equipped. I didn't speak the language. I didn't know the rules. I couldn't see the barriers. Months went by before I realized I was asking for admittance to a socially exclusive club called the academy. I thought I was getting an education. I was. But not the kind I thought I was getting. And thus the battles played out. (Berry, 2004, p. 52)

WHEN WE ENROLLED in a doctoral program in 2004, we entered the university with the belief that we made it. We were excited about attending graduate school but did not know where or how to fit in. We felt isolated. We knew nothing and no one. So we sat in our first class together and copiously took notes, occasionally glancing up at one another in search of a silent confirmation of sisterhood. Although neither of us recalls the specifics regarding how we became friends, it seems that at some point during that semester, we made eye contact and all knew that we had to forge this connection in order not to be alienated while we pursued our graduate studies. We realized that we had to come out of our shells, look up from the pages during class, and connect with other students. This is when we met and befriended one another.

We have maintained our friendship and sisterhood since our first meeting in class. Together, we have shared our experiences with the births of children, divorce, engagements, blossoming careers, etc. Yet, we still have not forgotten the experiences that bonded us initially. Over the years we have had a number of conversations about our experiences in graduate school. These conversations prompted our reflection of what it meant to be Black female doctoral

students matriculating in the Atlanta paradox (Sjoquist, 2000). Initially, we discussed several important events that placed us in marginalized positions in our doctoral program. Specifically, this article started as a presentation where we discussed the ways in which we fought to acquire some sort of "citizenship" in the academy. Chateauvert (2008) suggested, "At its most basic level, citizenship defines a person's relation to the State" (p. 149). During our many reflections on our graduate school matriculation, we discussed how the academy rarely welcomed us as citizens. Our relation to the State (academy) was marginal; and, had we not utilized our voices, our relation would have remained marginal. To negotiate our citizenship, we challenged and resisted White privilege and male domination as we attempted to confer our rights as students and future faculty.

Our resistance is rooted in the voice that we give to our experiences, our stories. Therefore, this is our counternarrative (Souto-Manning & Ray, 2007). We use our counternarrative to explore our experiences through critical race feminism (CRF). Specifically, we explore how we, three Black women from diverse regional and socioeconomic backgrounds, faced similar experiences of silenced places in the South. We also explore how we resisted the academy's attempt to marginalize us by forming a critical friends group (CFG) and being resilient. Our counternarratives or scholarly personal narratives (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005) explore our experiences as we attempted to de-center majoritarian stories of Black women in the academy. Yosso (2006) suggested that counternarratives exist in three forms: autobiographical, biographical, and composite. Autobiographical counternarratives are those that provide first person accounts of challenges to racial, dominant, hegemonic, heteronormative, etc. thought. We utilize autobiographical counternarratives in this article as these stories present a challenge to the majoritarian stories that are often used to represent the experiences of marginalized groups. The concept of utilizing counternarratives to explore our experience is especially important for us as raced, gendered, and classed individuals. Collins (2000) suggested that Black women create knowledge and facilitate empowerment as we share our experiences. In addition, McCorkel and Myers (2003) maintained the following:

> As Collins (2000), hooks (1984), and Harding (1991) point out, white, heterosexual feminists have not only left the experiences of women of color and lesbians out of feminist scholarship, but their own class and status privileges often prevent them from seeing how this research often follows from racist, heterosexist, and classist assumptions. When such researchers do problematize inequalities, they risk commodifying people's pain to further their own careers. (Collins, 1998, p. 203)

Thus, the counternarratives presented in this article are presented as a resistance to the commodification of the Black female experience in the academy. Our counternarratives complement our theoretical framework as CRF supports the use of narratives as a way to expose and eradicate social injustices. Our stories are not just *our* stories. Chang (2008) suggested that, "self-narratives focus on the author, [but they] often contain more than self" (p. 33). Our stories focus on our individual experiences; however, they contain experiences that may reflect the experience of other Black women in similar settings. So, in some ways, *our* stories are *Our* stories.

It is our hope that these narratives will succeed in creating knowledge regarding the experiences of Black women graduate students. Further, we hope that these stories will be empowering for other Black women graduate students as we attempt to demonstrate our

resiliency in the face of a matriculation marred by attempts to marginalize us. Williams, Brewley, Reed, White, and Davis-Haley (2005) contended that, "For Black female graduate students, sharing their graduate school experiences has the potential to empower them as they navigate through graduate work" (p. 182). Through our connection as critical friends, Black women, and graduate students, we have been empowered through the telling of these stories and hope that Black women with similar experiences may also be empowered.

Autobiography of Place

The South is arguably one of the most contested spaces for *and/or* dichotomies (e.g., Black/White; male/female; Christian/other). Although the region has moved – publicly at least – beyond the days of separate and inherently unequal, cross-burning, lynching, sit-ins, etc., the "power of place" (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991, p. 167) continues to impact the experiences of those who live, work, and are educated here. Conceptualization of place in the South reflects location and/or region, subjectivity, and social identity (Casemore, 2008). As such, explorations of curriculum of place in the South consider ways in which traditional notions of Southern curriculum support historical perspectives deeply rooted in experiences of White patriarchal hegemony (Casemore; Whitlock, 2006). Nevertheless, the "others" have utilized counternarratives to challenge the Southern sense of place as a staple of White male hegemony (Falk, 2004; hooks, 2009; Whitlock, in press). For example, Casemore contended that Southern counternarratives "expose unconscious dynamics of the white male Southern subject" (p. 76). Therefore, counternarratives can be used to redefine the "traditional" Southern experience. Southern counternarratives are important contributions to the growing body of literature reflecting examination of place in the South.

We utilize our counternarratives to explore our conceptualization of place as raced and gendered doctoral students in a predominantly White institution (PWI) in the South. As three female African American doctoral students attending a PWI and attempting to transition into the complicated space of academia, we experienced a sort of double jeopardy in that we were cultural outsiders both as students and as future professors. Historically, the curricula, teaching style and services offered in a PWI were designed for White students (Taylor, 1989). Moreover, according to Allen (1988), individuals who are not male, white and middle-class are at an immediate disadvantage in higher education. Given the fact that only one of us grew up in the middle class, and that we could certainly never be White or male, we began our graduate school journey in a contested space. We were in last place in a race that we did not know we were running. Thus, before we entered the "three-ring circus" of academia – namely, teaching, research and service (Toews & Yazedijan, 2007, p. 113). As faculty members, we first had to juggle the unmapped territory of being African American doctoral students at a PWI…a PWI in the [New] South.

To further situate our counternarratives in place, it is important that we provide background information on the geographic location where we attended graduate school – Atlanta, Georgia. Popularly known as Hotlanta, the "A", and ATL. Atlanta is also referred to as the "New York of the South," although it lacks many of the amenities that are found in New York City. Another distinction that the city has is its population of Black residents, leaders, and business people. According to the U.S. Census Bureau "State and County Quick Facts" (2012), the population of Atlanta in 2010 was 420,003. Fifty-four percent of those residents were Black

and 38.4% were White. In addition, there were 50,970 businesses recorded in Atlanta in 2007. Black business owners accounted for 30.9% and women accounted for 33.4% of those businesses. The political scene is also reflective of Atlanta's Black residents. Like Birmingham and Selma, Alabama, Atlanta also played a significant role in the Civil Rights Movement. Particularly, it served as home to one of the Movement's most prominent figures, Martin Luther King, Jr. The state of politics and representation in Atlanta has changed vastly since then. This transition started with the election of the first Black mayor, Maynard Jackson, in 1974. Since that time, Atlanta has only had Black mayors such as Andrew Young (1982-1990), Maynard Jackson (1990-1994), Bill Campbell (1994-2002), Shirley Franklin (2002 – 2010), and Kasim Reed (2010 – present). Similarly, five of the last seven Atlanta City Council Presidents have been Black. Therefore, Atlanta's representation of Black leadership is inevitable. Atlanta, the "Black Mecca" is the Atlanta we had read about and seen on televisions. This was the Atlanta that we expected. We were not prepared for the paradox.

Sjoquist (2000) suggested that the Atlanta paradox represents the fact that "the city too busy to hate" (p. 2) has been busy – structuring racial and economic inequality. Sjoquist further commented that the façade of Atlanta as a city with racial harmony does not address the city's "contrasting mosaic" (p. 1) where wealth, mansions, and limitless luxury exist alongside an expansive Black poverty rate, housing projects, and limited access. Atlanta's paradoxical nature makes it representative of the *and/or* dichotomy previously mentioned. Atlanta is often heralded by those not living in the city as the place to be, particularly for Black people. The aforementioned Black leadership, business ownership, popular media, etc. all have supported this image. Conversely, Clayton, Geller, Patram, Patton and Sjoquist (2000) indicated that race has always played an important role in sustaining racial inequality in Atlanta. The political, social, and economic landscapes have been shaped by interest convergence (Bell, 2004). In other words, when it matters to Atlanta's White residents, it *matters*. This is the Atlanta that we have come to know. However, it is not the Atlanta that we expected prior to moving here. We knew it was the South, but we did not think it was *the South*. It was Atlanta – the culturally diverse, economically advantageous, city where positive Black representation was visible at every turn. Even with so much visibility of Black leadership, the curriculum of the [old] South still pervades the experiences of many who engage in K-12 and higher education arenas. This was our experience.

As doctoral students at a large university in the South, our conceptualizations of place were challenged and redefined due to experiences that reminded us, the "New South" is not so new. Two of us identify as Yankees, hailing from New Jersey and New York, respectively; while the other identifies as a Southern Belle from Alabama. Our geographical roots as Yankees and a Southern Belle informed our autobiographical roots as we brought those foundations to Atlanta. It is also these roots that nurtured us as critical race feminists as we attempted to make sense of the façade of Atlanta and the reality of the paradox.

Whether it was the paradoxical Atlanta or the realistic Atlanta, we were ATLiens (Outkast, 1996) ready to be educated and nurtured as scholars. We were among the small percentage of Black females that enter doctoral programs each year and believed we had arrived. However, we quickly learned that our perceptions of our place at the university were not as solidified as we thought. For us, the sense of belonging (hooks, 2009) was not granted simply because of our acceptance to the program. We were raced and gendered individuals in an establishment where the scholarly hierarchy for Black students was quite obvious – our predefined place was nonexistent. Had we not challenged the place assigned to us, our place as

Black women in the academy would have remained invisible. We refused to be invisible or misunderstood.

Commenting on her matriculation in a private institution, Berry (2004) wrote that her journey as an "African American female doctoral student was full of missedunderstandings for those who attempted to guide [her] along the way" (p. 51). Those "missedunderstandings" existed as confusions about her Black womanhood and led White faculty and students to adopt deficit assumptions about her intellectual ability, rigor, and belonging. Berry contended that by trying to homogenize Black womanhood and attempting to identify commonalities instead of appreciating and honoring their differences, the White faculty and students tried to "put [her] roundness into their squareness" (p. 52). Thus, their vague attempts at including Berry were not at all inclusive. White faculty and students tried to make her "fit" by contextualizing her Blackness and womanhood through their lenses, exploring ways to "attach themselves" to Berry's middle-class upbringing, her educational background, etc. In order to be accepted, there had to be some way that she could fit into *their* world. Thus, Berry's experience as a raced, gendered, and classed doctoral student was inundated with challenges that – without her resistance – might have forced her further into the margins.

The battles Berry (2004) fought are representative of the battles fought by many females of color in doctoral programs as we attempt to find our way in the academy. For example, Souto-Manning and Ray (2007) maintained that their doctoral experiences were cloaked by "tokenism, stigma, stereotyping, and related racism" (p. 288). Similarly, Anderson-Thompkins, Gasman, Gerstl-Pepin, Hathaway, and Rasheed (2004) contended that their experiences as graduate students and faculty of color were plagued by similar aspects of stereotyping and racism. For example, their scholarly ideas often were challenged, "not based on their content or the arguments used to support them, but on their subject matter – race, gender, and class" (Anderson-Thompkins et al., p. 233). In sharing research plans, one of the authors was told, "You could do more than race" (Anderson-Thompkins et al., p. 233); thereby suggesting that race was a secondary factor to consider when, for women of color, race simultaneously intersects with their other identities as a basis for marginalization in the academy.

Black women have to challenge their marginalization as they try to find their "place" in the academy. hooks (1989) theorized that Black women face an unfortunate trajectory in the academy as racism, sexism, and classism act simultaneously to situate us in positions of inferiority where we suffer from an "invisible presence" (p. 60) where we are seen, but our voices are not heard. For example, hooks (1984) commented that:

> As a group, Black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but also our overall social status is lower than that of any other group. Occupying such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression. At the same time, we are the group that has not been socialized to assume the role of exploiter/oppressor in that we allow no institutionalized "other" that we can exploit or oppress. (cited in Berry, 2004, p. 50)

Thus, the position of Black women in society is unique in that we must deal with multiple intersecting forms of oppression.

Research on the experiences of Black women in graduate programs is limited. Yet, research that does exist identifies several ways in which Black women survive in the academy as doctoral students and faculty. Establishing relationships for mentoring (both peer and faculty-

student) (Evans & Cokley, 2008; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Gaston-Gayles & Kelly, 2004; Williams et al., 2005) and bonding through Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) or "sister circles" (Ross, 2003) are among those suggestions for improved experiences. The formation of these networks help Black women become empowered when the academy fails to encourage and empower us (Holmes & Rivera, 2004). Still, researchers have called for more studies that view the interlocking nature of race and gender oppression and the ways in which they simultaneously impact the higher education experience for Black women (Fries-Britt & Kelly; Gasman, Hirschfeld, & Vultaggio, 2008; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Williams et al.).

Transcending Boundaries: Critical Race Theory and Black Feminism

"Black women deserve a theoretical framework that combats racial and gender oppression from multiple standpoints" (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p. 19). For us, that theoretical framework is critical race feminism (CRF). CRF is an extension of critical race theory (CRT) in that CRF draws from the central tenets of CRT. CRF acknowledges (1) racism as an integral part of American society, (2) the social construction of race, (3) utilization of narratives, (4) a varied approach to scholarship, and (5) a praxis of critical race (Berry, 2009). However, CRF also acknowledges that the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995) of the identities of women of color and the resulting oppression have been insufficiently explored by CRT and mainstream feminism. Wing (1997) suggested that scholars of CRT have addressed various issues related to racial discrimination against and inclusion for people of color, albeit from the male perspective. In addition, traditional feminism pays attention to the experiences of White women and middle/upper class women, assuming that those experiences are also the experiences of women of color (Evans-Winters & Esposito). Thus, inasmuch as CRF draws from CRT's central tenets, it also calls for theory, research, and practice that address the simultaneous racial and gendered oppression of women of color (Alexander-Floyd, 2010; Berry; Evans-Winters & Esposito). Therefore, CRF also accepts that even as women of color operate within our spaces of commonality, our multiplicative identity (Wing, 1997) renders that we construct anti-essentialist notions of selves. The process of determining the theoretical lenses for our work was organic. We drew on our experiences as three Black women with unique backgrounds, but familiar experiences as raced, classed, and gendered individuals. We primarily were concerned with how our race and gender manifested "structural bases of domination and subordination" (Collins, 1991, p. 232) in our doctoral program. Our experiences as Black women in the academy are inherently different from our White counterparts, male or female, because of the inherent racism in the academy and society (Bell, 1992). However, as many race scholars have argued, race is just one system of oppression. We enter the world as raced, classed, and gendered. As we mature, these socially constructed categories become interlocking systems of oppression that create specific life experiences (Coates, 2004; Collins, 1991, 1998; Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lorde, 1984; Lynn, 2004; Sleeter, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Walker, 1983). As Lorde argued in her unforgettable piece "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," ultimately, "racism [and] sexism … are inseparable" (p. 110). While our exposure to oppression is not unheard of or atypical, CRF provides a lens through which we can intellectually deconstruct our experiences as Black women in the academy from a perspective that grapples with feelings of exclusion, injustice, White supremacy, anti-essentialism, etc.

Critical Friends

Living in Atlanta, we were accustomed to being around successful Black women. However, we never thought we needed other Black women to be successful. We were used to doing things on our own. When we entered into a PhD program we thought if we just worked hard and got nothing but "A's" we would be a success. But we quickly found that our success depended *on each other*. Despite going to school in, what is known as the 'mecca' for Black people, we consistently felt ostracized and ignorant to the ways in which doctorate students functioned in this new society. We were left in the margins. We were othered and needed to form a sorority of encouragement and togetherness. We found it comforting to negotiate the margins together. As we started to research, write, and make our presence known, we learned that we were unaware of the opportunities our university and department afforded graduate students. We joined forces to navigate the unspoken, un-posted, departmental jobs, opportunities, and funding that were *given* to our White counterparts. While the White students seemed to know about graduate assistantships, forms, directed readings, independent studies, travel, conferences, workshops, leadership opportunities, publications, etc we knew NOTHING. We were unaware of all the professional growth opportunities available to graduate students, and unaware of how essential these professional growth opportunities are to someone entering the world of academia. For example, at the end of our first semester, we overheard a professor telling a white student about a teaching assistant position. This position was not advertised through the department or through the college. We wondered why that information was not presented to the entire class. It was always a selected, handpicked few of White students with all the information. We were so new to the program. We had yet to choose an advisor yet some were given opportunities at the expense of others. No one told us anything and no one pointed us in the right direction. Sadly, the ignorance that we shared is what unified us. And that unity is what helped us to become critical friends to one another.

We argue through our shared experiences as Black female doctoral students that academia's socialization process of "grinding and making anew," as one professor told us, was an ideological, epistemological, and pedagogical overreach for our African-centered cultural identities and communities. Thus, we found ourselves not only learning in a discriminatory place that professed to be equitable, but also in a space where bodies of knowledge and epistemological understanding did not reflect who we were/are as Black women learning and conducting research within the academy (Collins, 1991; Dillard, 2000). This sense of learning as a nomad in a foreign land ignited an organic friendship that became our Critical Friends Group (CFG). According to Bambino (2002), CFGs are the work of "…friends who share a mission, offer strong support, and nurture a community of learners" (p. 26). Traditionally, CFGs have been a catalyst for educators seeking to transform the culture of their classrooms, schools, and learning communities (Bambino; Curry, 2008; Fahey, 2011). Curry suggested that CFGs offer a specific type of school-based professional community centered on improving student learning and instruction. In the last decade, CFGs have become more common as educational practitioners find ways to collectively respond to high stakes accountability testing and top-down mandates on educators (Curry; Dunne & Honts, 1998; Dunne et al., 2000; Fahey; Massumura & Steinberg, 2002).

Through our counternarratives, we hope to expand, and perhaps transcend, the formal definition of CFGs and link it to our survival and triumphs as Black female doctoral students and faculty members within higher education. We depart from CFGs prescribed description by the

fact that we did not set out to create a group focused on improving student learning or instruction as it pertains to formal schooling; however, we did form a group to gesture towards enriching our learning and instruction as Black women in the academy. Our CFG was a source of daily conversations centered on disrupting and affirming the intersectional oppression and the denial of institutional and educational access we sustained. As we accepted our "outsider-within" (Critchlow, 1995) status, we developed a CFG, which provided a foundation for us to navigate a path to become Black female scholars. Furthermore, our CFG served as a formal and informal academic support group that encouraged us to decontextualize our deeply raced and gendered experiences. It became an increasingly important element as we entered uncharted intellectual Atlanta soil, filled with flowers of racism, sexism and, at times, insecurities of one's place in the academy.

Through the framework of CFG, we addressed the institutional betrayal (Weis & Fine, 2004) we experienced and utilized our friendship as a space of critique and support. Moreover, our CFG represented our choice to resist education's notion of success through minority exceptionalism, individualism, and meritocracy. American narratives of achievement are rooted within the doubled-edged tropes of neo-conservative bootstraps models. The bootstraps model is grounded in the belief that marginalized groups accept the norms and values of the dominant culture, especially in regards to success, despite systematic oppression (Omi & Winant, 1994). Our CFG was our foundation for resistance. Through our group, our community, we supported one another and maintained a sense of self.

Ladson-Billings (1994; 1995) argued that Black students achieve greater success through a sense of community and identity in education. Although her statements referenced students in grades P-12, our experiences demonstrated that her arguments are applicable even during the acquisition of a terminal degree. The community we formed for and with each other was a vital aspect of our growth as scholars. This bond was what we needed to become informed, to sustain one another. We were more than friends. We were critical friends that supported one another when we were not supported by the University.

So as the academy attempted to marginalize us by failing to communicate information, we used our bond as underdogs to form a friendship that has been the foundation for our continued movement through the academy – first as doctoral students and now as faculty. Through our connection, we learned the mechanics of the department and then focused our attention on eradicating our invisibility and obtaining an insider status. Fries-Britt and Kelly (2005) suggested that the bonds we form as Black women are integral to our success in the academy as these bonds challenge the "historical ways we have been devalued and denied access" (p. 236) and provide support for us as we survive. As such, our CFG became more than a way to navigate graduate school. It became what we know will be a lifelong friendship because our focus was not only on providing information to one another. Our focus was also on uplifting each other.

Academic Resiliency in Response to the Dream Team

Howard (2001) argued that one factor contributing to the underachievement of Black students is the "cultural incongruence between African American students and their teachers" (p. 181). Many Black students enter classrooms where the cultural mismatch between them and their teacher is so wide that student learning is undermined (Howard, 2001). Villegas (2007)

contended, "…Black students tend to receive less attention, less encouragement, less praise, less time to respond, less eye-contact, and more verbal and nonverbal criticism (especially Black boys)" (p 375). Sadly, we entered hostile learning environments that resembled the very classrooms we entered graduate school to learn how to disrupt. We found ourselves learning from the margins. We were overlooked because of the intersection of our race and gender. Moreover, some of our professors who taught classes centered on social justice, equity, diversity, and multiculturalism not only ignored us, but also overtly gave preferential treatment to a group of White students that we named the "Dream Team".

The Dream Team was comprised of two White females and one White male. They entered the program at the same time that we did. However, each of them within their first or second semester had teaching assistantships and conducted research with professors in the department. The Dream Team was comfortable and relaxed within the space of academia. They called professors by their first names, dressed in casual clothing, and moved within the space of higher education as if they inevitably belonged there. On the other hand, the three of us were more procedural in our interactions, unsure of our academic prowess, and dismayed by the hierarchical structure that attempted to marginalize our efforts. We were moving through the program with goals of being faculty members in the near future, but with no clear understanding how to position ourselves as academics. We experienced a lack of university knowledge and self-doubt combined with an awareness of classroom racial discrimination. Despite growing up in different geographic locations, we always heard the same message: "You have to work harder. You have to demonstrate that you're as smart or smarter than the White students." In K-12, that message was loud and clear, but as former public school teachers, we never thought that we would have to do the same in a graduate program in Atlanta, Georgia. After all, Atlanta had Black leadership; NFL, NBA, and (at the time) NHL teams; and some public transit. Many of the Black people we knew moved to Atlanta to "make it." Yet, we realized that even in graduate school, we still had to work harder. We were at the crossroads of competition where we had to demonstrate our intellectual rigor in comparison to White students. We did not consider this an insurmountable challenge as we had been doing it since elementary school. However, it was a challenge to demonstrate that with all the social capital that existed in graduate school, we still possessed as much intellectual capacity and rigor as it was suggested that the Dream Team possessed. We did more with less access and information. Our resilience as women, our strength as Black women prompted us to forge a bond and foster a resilient attitude that forced the University to take notice of us. We refused to be invisible. The Dream Team provided us with the framework to navigate higher education and united us. We knew that they were being mentored and groomed to become scholars; thus, if we could shadow the path reserved for them we could vicariously be mentored too. Furthermore, we wanted to prove that we were just as capable as the Dream Team, if given the chance. Achieving in response to racism drew us closer and fostered our academic resiliency.

Resiliency is a broad term, but is defined as a person's ability to recover from or adjust to problems, difficulties, and stress (Evans-Winters 2005; Miller 1999; O'Connor 1997; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). In terms of educational resiliency, there have been a number of studies that suggest Black students' awareness of discrimination can foster achievement (Anderson, 1988; Bogle 1990; Edwards & Polite 1992; Gayles 2005 2006; Miller 1999; Sanders 1997; Winfield 1994). Sanders suggested students respond positively to racial discrimination "in ways that are conducive rather than detrimental to academic success" (p. 84). Sanders argued similar to Bogle that Black students yearn to "prove" themselves in the face of racism and

discrimination. After coming to understand the challenges we were facing, we knew we had to prove ourselves.

It had taken us two years, but we finally realized who the key players were so we attacked that department like bees to honey. We had an advisor who, although untenured, was courageous enough to fight for us and serve as our advocate. We also had access to established Black faculty members that were supportive of our desire to become more knowledgeable about the academy and its processes. We considered ourselves to be in direct competition with the Dream Team as our very existence and right to be in the academy was challenged. However, our resiliency and friendship enabled us to "take down the Dream Team" by becoming involved and becoming a force on campus. We held prominent positions of power as president, vice president, and secretary in a college organization called "Doctoral Fellows". We presented at multiple conferences. We published. So much so that we were invited speakers in and out of our department. Faculty wanted and requested to work with us. People knew our names because we went to meetings without an invitation and were extremely adept in our skills and knowledge. The Dream Team started to envy us. They took notice of our relationship with our advisor and we set a new standard for incoming students. We were a force to be reckoned with.

When evaluating our initiation into the academy, each of us begins from points of uncertainty. These points were further exaggerated when, like Berry (2004), we were faced with challenges to our intellectual ability, academic rigor, and belonging. Nevertheless, our beginning looked starkly different from our ending. Because we had formed a network to disseminate information and support one another, we were resilient in spite of our marginalization by the academy. We made our voices heard; and, there came a point when it was our voices that the academy wanted to hear. While we do not suggest that this meant we had gained complete access and citizenship, we do suggest that because we committed ourselves to each other and refused to not be heard, we were able to make a place for ourselves. Similar to Anderson-Thompkins et al. (2004), we refused to be casualties of war, to be devalued as scholars or excluded as intellectuals. Instead, we attacked the department like "bees to honey". We sought and obtained assistantships; we became presenters and guest lecturers; we became published authors. We redefined the Dream Team.

Questioning the Academy and Possibilities for Change

For Black women in the academy, race and gender represent two identities that are not valued (Holmes, Land, & Hinton-Hudson, 2007). As a result, we often face discrimination and are subjected to differential treatment nurtured by White privilege and historically-rooted deficit perspectives of Black women. Not only do Black women face these challenges as faculty in the academy, we also face them as students. As graduate students at a large university in the South, we became more aware of how our raced and gendered identities impacted our experiences and determined our citizenship within the academy. Ladson-Billings (2005) contended that,

> Residing in the academy is both a privilege and a burden. Clearly it is a privilege because of the attendant prerequisites, but it is also a burden because it invites a closer, less forgiving examination of one's competence. (p. 8)

The privilege and burden of residing in the academy is consistent with the privilege and burden of navigating the academy as a graduate student. Presumably, institutions of higher education are responsible for nurturing intellectually rigorous and diverse-minded individuals that will contribute to the advancement of a more democratic society; nevertheless, it is in these institutions that marginalized groups often are pushed further into the margins. Navigating the academy as a graduate student is a challenge for African Americans as a racial group and, more specifically, Black women as a raced, gendered, and classed group (Williams et al., 2005). Williams et al. suggested that, "Navigating through graduate school in pursuit of a terminal degree is a challenging endeavor for most Black women" (p. 181). For Black women, marginalization is multidimensional because of intersectional identities. Harris (2007) wrote that, "Students of color and women in higher education deal with barriers designed to impede their progress because of their embodiment of a racialized or gendered identity" (p. 55). Thus, when Black female graduate students embody radicalized *and* gendered (and classed and sexualized) identities, we constantly negotiate our graduate experiences through multiple lenses.

As faculty members, we now understand the complexity of our experiences. We understand how the game is played. For example, we understand that when universities view the potential of a student, they find ways to assist with the student's tuition through assistantships and scholarships. We understand that even in progressive departments focusing on diversity and social justice, the environment in the South still can be reminiscent of the days when Black students were provided a space in PWI but were not secure in their place. We also understand that students of color must resist the academy's attempt to "put [our] roundness into their squareness" (Berry, 2004, p. 52). Our CFG and our resilience helped us to resist the reshaping of our identities in order to fit the academy's definitions of what we should be in order to be successful.

Through the lens of critical race feminism, our counternarratives explored our "outsider within" status and problematized our dual identities as marginalized citizens with limited membership into the dominant cultural group. Our stories identify several ways we coped with challenges to our citizenship – becoming critical friends and remaining resilient. We suggest that these strategies provide a model of empowerment for Black women seeking to navigate their way through the academy. Berry (2004) adequately summarized the experiences that we shared as Black women doctoral students. She wrote:

> To enter the academy, I found I had to endure conflict, live in isolation, and give of myself in order to gain access. To get in, I had to give in – to a point. I had to learn the rules, speak the language, and play the game. I had to find allies – White, Black, male, female – to help me to gain access to the tools I needed to gain entry. I had to be willing to explain me, over and over again. But I didn't give up on my work. That was the proverbial line in the sand. In return, I am now one more African American woman living in the crossroads in the academy. (p. 56)

In closing, it is also important that universities begin to restructure how they determine who gets and does not get assistantships. For example, in many cases assistantships are determined by the research interest of faculty members. Typically, faculty members prefer to work with students who are concerned with their areas of expertise. This unwritten, yet established practice can leave many deserving students without faculty mentors and assistantships. It also stifles new doctoral students who could potentially have new and

innovative approaches to education. We are not advocating that assistantships be given to students of color because they are students of color, but because they are smart, motivated, and thoughtful students of color who deserve that same mentoring and intellectual cultivation as their non-Black counterparts. Moreover, many universities do not have a teaching population that is representative of their diverse student body. By ensuring that graduate teaching assistants have diverse backgrounds, students will benefit greatly from learning from doctoral students who bring new perspectives to the classroom. Lastly, while many universities boast about their high graduation rates of Black students, we must ask the question of preparedness as to whether a degree means anything if students are not nurtured to be successful in their field of study. The move from being a doctoral student to a professor is complex. A newly minted doctoral student must understand how to navigate the space of higher education and its culture that may vary by institution. Doctoral students must learn how to juggle scholarship, teaching, and service, along with institution, college, and department cultures. The knowledge base to successfully function in academia is not learned by just being a doctoral student or taking classes. A student must be mentored into this world. Too many doctoral students of color are part-time students because they cannot afford to quit their full-time jobs. If assistantships were offered, many students, no matter their race, could participate fully in the doctoral experience. As students, we did not understand what it meant to be a doctoral student completely until we all quit our jobs and went to school full-time. However, we did not make this transition until our second year because we were not offered teaching assistantships, opportunities to conduct research with faculty, or to present at conferences until our second year.

On the surface, our suggestions will not fundamentally change a department or university at its core. Real change will come by asking faculty to be more mindful regarding how they support and mentor their students of color. As faculty we have taken several steps to support and mentor our students of color. On our respective campuses, we attend new student orientation sessions and interact with students; we share knowledge with students regarding any assistantships, scholarship, presentation, and publication opportunities; we work with our students to nurture them as professors; we encourage and sometimes facilitate students as they engage in critical friends' support/writing groups. We are visible and active with our students. We are the reminder that there is color in the Ivory Tower. And we welcome this responsibility in an effort to increase graduate school enrollment and completion of students of color, particularly Black women. Although we matriculated graduate school in a contested space, we use those experiences as reminders of what we do not want any student to endure. We endured our conflict. Nevertheless, we were supported by one another in our efforts to gain access, learn the language and play the game. While we do not claim to have won the war, we will not accept being casualties. We will continue to fight small battles, for us and other Black women in the academy.

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