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Being Black:

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BEING BLACK: 
EXPLORING MY CARIBBEAN DIASPORA IDENTITY THROUGH PURPOSEFUL 
LIVING, EDUCATION, LEADERSHIP AND A DIVINE PLAN

A Dissertation Presented

by

Learie C. Nurse

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of

The University of Vermont

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Specializing in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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ABSTRACT

Many Black scholars have researched and written about their experiences as Black students at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Most of their successes were built on the support they received from their families and friends. More importantly, their personal commitment to being numbered as successful Black students was the impetus for which they were willing to challenge the paradigm that Blacks can indeed succeed in higher education. As a Black Caribbean Diaspora student enrolled at a PWI, I have experienced what it is like to be Black through purposeful living, education, leadership and a divine plan. I have also utilized my Black identity as a vehicle to garner success amidst the challenges I faced being the only Black in academia, readjusting to college life and discovering my own Blackness.

It is with this backdrop that I use the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) methodology to write this dissertation and highlight my experience as a Black Caribbean student at a PWI. The research and stories explored during this dissertation were examined through several questions: What is the experience of a Black Caribbean Diaspora student who carries multiple identities at a PWI? What differs, separates, divides, as well as unites, the Black Diaspora students from a racial perspective? How can PWIs communicate confidence in the ability of Black students and engage them in the campus and its academic life regardless of their racial identity? How can Black Diaspora students be retained to successfully achieve a college degree? Additionally, this dissertation focuses on a myriad of experiences and stories from other Black Diaspora students who are from different ethnic backgrounds. This helps to support and answer some of the posed research questions.

This SPN methodology includes a literature review on topics of Black Identity Development (Cross, 1978, 1972, 1971), Colorism (Harris, 2009; Reid-Salmon, 2008), and Critical Race Theory (Cole, 2009; Collins, 2007; Roithmayr 1999; West, 1993). Several themes emerged that aligned with my personal narrative and that of my Black Diaspora peers. These included parental involvement, integrative model of parenting (Darling and Steinberg’s 1993), leadership supported by the African proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child,” and purposeful living where faith for a Black Diaspora student is central to their survival.

A number of recommendations for how faculty and staff at PWIs can support Black Diaspora students in their educational attainment emerged: recognizing and acknowledging the differences among Black students; supporting, imparting, accepting and encouraging Black students in their education; and reorienting faculty and administrators in matters of race so as to understand Black Diaspora students. My personal narrative further elucidates and universalizes the notion that Black students can be successful in higher education despite the odds that are sometimes against them.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Numerous people have contributed to my success as a student during this dissertation process. The love and support that I have been given has been invaluable and I cannot help but equate support to a cauldron of fine stew or the full backing of an orchestra. As in anything that I do, there is always a synergy of music and food that is attached.

I give thanks to God who purposefully positioned me in Vermont these last few years. I never would have made it without You. I offer total praise to you. To my parents Evelyn and Carson, thank you for your prayers and abiding love. Your support of me these past few years has been tremendous. Philippe, you have had to endure countless nights of writing and studying and your understanding and patience has resulted in where I am today. Thank you for your love. To my brothers Richard and Felton and their families, my auntie Lucille, and my church family in Barbados, I cannot stress how much your prayers, love and support has made this all possible.

My heartfelt appreciation and gratitude is extended to my dissertation committee, Dr. Richard Johnson, Dr. Judith Aiken, Dr. Robert Nash, and Dr. Betty Rambur. Thank you for believing in my story as relevant subject matter for my dissertation and offering of your time and energy for the advancement of my academic goals.

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success. To my SUNY Plattsburgh family, Andrea, Sally, Dexter, EOP office and class of 2011, the PSU choir, my NECI family, and my UVM Residential Life family particularly Stacey and Kathy; this is still so surreal for me. Thank you.

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Last but not least, to anyone who I may not have mentioned but has in some way encouraged me and contributed to my success and my journey, thank you for believing in me and my ability. Blessings always.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to two of the most influential women in my life, my wonderful mother Evelyn and my grandmother Mildred “gran” Beckles who is smiling down on me. Several years ago, I never envisioned myself on an educational journey such as this. All along I was being shown that I could become greater even when I had no idea that I could be. You have both taught me how to hold onto my faith and rely on the power of pray and its ability to sustain me in my educational pursuits. Words are not enough to express my sincerest gratitude to both of you.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

*There is a road inside of you, inside of me there is one too,*
*No stumbling pilgrim in the dark, the road to Zion’s in your heart.*

* -Petra

**The Journey Begins**

Whenever I open my mouth to speak about my identity and experiences as a Black Caribbean student at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), the interest shown from my colleagues is always met with sheer enthusiasm. Sharing further that I am exploring Black/racial identity development among Black students from the Black Diaspora and comparing my experiences with those who are from Africa or those who identify as African American is often met with even more fascination and interest. These multiple responses of intrigue and excitement that I got from my peers, who for the most part identified as Black in one way or another, indicated that I should indeed pursue this topic for my research.

Researching the retention of Black undergraduate college students and their experiences at PWIs was my initial interest. I wanted to see if my experiences as a Black Caribbean student were similar to these other Black undergraduate students and possibly find some connection based on our ethnic and racial background. Not only was this research about the experiences of these college students, but I hope to use their stories to bring a greater awareness of the differences that exist among the many types of Black students at PWIs. It is with this premise that I have decided to engage my readers in this narrative about my Black Caribbean Diaspora (BCD) experience. Recognizing that I do
have a story to tell and my experience is one that black students could equate to, I will share stories and episodes of a Black Caribbean student’s life in a white world.

I believe in the compelling nature of stories and the universal themes that can emerge from stories. I also recognize that I am my best story and I am the active participant in the narrative that I would be sharing. As a result my dissertation will be told via the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) methodology. Recording artist Petra wrote a song entitled *The Road to Zion*, which speaks about a road being inside each of us. For me, my Zion is the exploration of my racial identity and being Black; your Zion maybe an identity of your choosing. As I travel this road, I hope that my story resonates with someone who may see him/herself as a *stumbling pilgrim in the dark* but who will ultimately find the Zion [a place of fortitude] in their heart. My goal and quest is to write this dissertation with the hope of finding the Zion in my heart. My expectation is that this story will be relatable and in familiar language that you will be able to embrace it, therefore finding and discovering your own story regardless of your identity. I am happy to take you on this personal road trip to Zion with me. It is my hope that as you take this journey, you will also see the road inside of you opening to endless possibilities.

Ten years ago I never envisioned myself traveling to a country whose terrain was so unknown to me. Little did I know that my travels would give me the ultimate chance to find myself as a Black man. Thirty years prior to embarking on this educational journey, I knew who I was or at least thought I knew. I knew that I was visibly Black but after coming to the United States of America (USA), I started to explore who I was based on my environment and the many conversations I had with peers and acquaintances. This
question still surfaces every now and again, did I really know that I was black? My skin color was never something that took on any special attention in the past. After all I was born into a culture and country where my ethnicity and racial identity was the dominant national identity. I did not realize the salience of my skin color until I found myself in a state of isolation and being seen noticeably as “the only one”. For the past 10 years, I have been on an informative, educational, life changing and transformative journey into my own Blackness. A journey that has been met with winding turns seasonal change both figuratively and naturally.

**The Reason Behind It All**

My journey in Vermont started off as a quest to seek more knowledge in a different environment through education. I was capitalizing on John Dewey’s words, (1897, pg. 27) “education is not preparation for life, education is life itself”. Traveling abroad for higher education was an opportunity that I could not pass up. In order to be better accepted and recruited as a Black Caribbean West Indian professional in my country, I wanted to seek out the best continuing educational opportunities and capitalize on them for my own personal and professional development. Further, in the Black Diaspora, education is seen as an integral means of social advancement economic success and racial equality. It is also a major tool that enables families to meet the responsibilities placed on them by society and it is key medium for the interaction of family and society (Billingsley, 1993). Studying abroad was not only an opportunity to further advance myself but also create a legacy within my family of educational attainment and achievement among Black Caribbean Diaspora students.
One thing that stood out for me as a Black college student in Vermont was the readied assumption that any student who appeared Black was a part of the dominant Black Diaspora group on that college campus. In this case, it was African American. I however did not identify as African American or African because all my life I was born and raised as a Barbadian and this was the fabric of my existence. Still my history classes in school taught me about my ancestry and that we were all *cut from the same cloth*; we were from the Black Diaspora. Over centuries, Black people have created, developed, and sustained a diaspora-wide identity for ourselves, which is related to the logic and the issue of race.

Having worked at three PWIs within the state of Vermont and the Lake Champlain area, I have observed many instances where all Black students were categorized as the same. Even though the Black students at these institutions possessed differences in their facial makeup, language, and culture, the tendency to group them together by the dominant group persisted. I needed to make a distinction after experiencing this grouping on a regular basis. Although I appreciated the space and solidarity provided me as an anonymous Black student, I yearned for a level of individuality in my own Black Diaspora identity. I desired to own my identity as a Black Caribbean Diaspora (BCD).

**Objectives and Themes of this Dissertation**

My objective in writing this dissertation is, via SPN, to explore, identify and compare the differences, similarities, and uniqueness that I have experienced as a BCD student at PWIs, with that of my Black Diaspora peers. My narrative focuses on a few
pertinent questions that I hope will bring a better understanding of what Black Diaspora students face at PWIs. I have embraced the following guiding research questions to help navigate my story:

1. What is the experience of a BCD student who carries multiple identities at a predominantly white institution?
2. What differs, separates, divides, as well as unites the Black Diaspora students from a racial perspective?
3. How can PWIs communicate confidence in the ability of Black students and engage them in the campus and its academic life regardless of their racial identity?
4. How can Black Diaspora students be retained to successfully achieve and complete a college degree?

These questions will enable me to process and share my story in a way that others will be able to relate or at least have an understanding and an awareness of a BCD student, but also others from the Black Diaspora. Further objectives are centered in the potential for educators at PWIs to better address the needs of Black Diaspora students. Within this dissertation, several themes will be explored to bring some clarity and understanding to my narrative. These themes are central to my experience as a Black Caribbean student but more importantly to the work that I do with Black college students from various Black Diasporas. Some of the themes that I will investigate include: 1) having a divine plan; 2) my Black identity and the concept of colorism; 3) leadership from a cultural, spiritual, and parental lens and its influence on me as a Black student; 4)
Education and the advantages and disadvantages of British colonization from an academic perspective and; 5) purposeful living. I will provide narratives and research to expand each aspect as I explore each of these teams.

Scholars such as Du Bois, Manning, McGill and Tatum, have written about their experiences as Black or that of their peers as a Black person on a college campus. Inspired by these Black scholars, I will share my story and experiences as a Black Caribbean student and what that required. I am my own research and story and the best research that I can contribute is that of myself. As Nash (2004) explains “What matters is the “large sense” of meaning that the writer [who in this case is me] is able to convey both to self and to the readers about what simply happens” (p. 28). This “large sense” that Nash refers to is the MeSearch that I unpack within myself. MeSearch according to Nash and Bradley (2007), is the intentional action of exploring oneself to extract new knowledge of one’s self and one’s place in the world. Gornick (2001) echoes similar sentiments by acknowledging that it is an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform events, and deliver wisdom. There is no definitive research that directly compares three different groups of Black students from the Black Diasporas with regard to their success and retention at PWIs. Research on comparing three different Diasporas within one Black Diaspora at PWIs is not generally talked about. Conversations happen, but little to nothing is done to bring about a greater awareness on the complexities which Black Diaspora students face. It is with this premise that I use my dissertation through narrative to highlight some of the complexities of this topic. My hope is to use my personal story and pair it with relatable
literature and stories to create a viable understanding of the experiences of not only one BCD student, but other Black Diaspora students. Many individual pieces of literature have addressed Black Diaspora groups in a variety of ways. My hope is to draw upon some of those themes that are universal in nature where individuals can reflect and hone in on pivotal moments in their own lives.

Additionally, it is also my hope through the themes of seasons to point out the various methods adopted by Black Diaspora students to successfully navigate the less than ideal systems in which they find themselves. I will share narratives about cultural and social capital, or seasons of change the intersection of Black Diaspora students’ experiences, self-efficacy, adaptation, acculturation, and retention. I will also address some of the barriers that exist for Black Caribbean students on the whole. From my perspective, this would include the immigration and visa process. Additional factors addressed include the level of parental involvement, education as social mobility, and identification specifically Black as a Black international student.

This SPN in particular explores my perspectives on what it really means to be Black. It will also shed light on issues that have been dormant for a long time. According to Bradley (2008), “I am not sharing my narrative for the sake of sharing; on the contrary, I am sharing my narrative in an effort to bring to light experiences that I purport are shared by many others throughout higher education” (p. 6). Not only will these stories be shared with those in higher education or education or student affairs as I have, but will hopefully transcend to others who have shared a similar experience in other fields. I
appreciate the opportunity to use my narrative voice to explain and dispel assumptions, stereotypes, and stigmas made about Black Diaspora students and their ability to succeed.

For students in the Black Diaspora, it is the differences among the experiences of differently situated Black people that is important, as well as, the unities or commonalities that define their peoplehood (Hines & McLeod, 1999). Reid-Salmon (2008) concurs that African Americans and Caribbean people are kins…and that solidarity or a sense of affinity exists between African Americans and Caribbean people but there is no common understanding of this relationship. My narrative in this dissertation will explore and connect these common understandings and relationships that exist for Black Diaspora students. As Roorbach (2008) posits, voice is a matter of urgency, of passion. It is the clarity of a writer’s caring. Voice is personality on the page. Through this dissertation, others will see not only my personality but theirs in like manner, pages of their lives having voice, life and personality.

**Staying In My Season: I Needed To Be Here**

*Some people plant in the spring and leave in the summer*  
*If you’re signed up for a season, see it through.*  
*You don’t have to stay forever, but at least stay until you see it-* Anonymous

“So where are you from?” The administrator asked. “Barbados,” I replied. With a pause and a look of surprise and bewilderment on her face she continued, “Oh my, this is probably a huge shock of realization and transition for you.” Gesturing with both her hands like that of a scale weighing in to make a comparison between Barbados and Vermont, she seemed marveled on how an islander like myself would transition from a warmer climate like Barbados to a freezer-like state such as Vermont. I often chuckle
when I am greeted by this response but in the back of my mind I have also questioned why on God’s earth was I here in Vermont. With a smile on my face and an affable response I said, “Oh, I guess you can call me an adventurer and an explorer. What is life without a little adventure?” We exchanged a cordial smile and chuckle of affirmation and the conversation proceeds in a different direction.

People are always surprised whenever I share with them that I am from Barbados. It is probably a rarity to see Barbadians in this part of the world and I find myself marveling about this rarity on a daily basis. When I was an employee at the Barbados Marriott several years ago, a folk chorale by the name of Sing out Barbados always began their performances with the song, “Barbados uh’ come from.” The lyrics are, “Everywhere I go, people want to know, why I happy so, why, Barbados uh’ come from.” I loved hearing them sing this particular song. They sung it with pride, confidence and believability. I was a believer. I never thought I would find myself reminiscing about this song until I was constantly posed with the question, “Where are you from?” When I answer “Barbados,” the response is nearly riddled with some form of disbelief or total disbelief, like “Really, seriously, where are you from?” People like me are motivated to migrate for a variety of reasons. These reasons can vary dramatically. Tartakowsky & Schwartz (2001) propose three distinct motivations to emigrate: preservation (physical, social and psychological security), self-development (personal growth in abilities, knowledge, and skills), and materialism (financial well-being, wealth). Out of this typology self-development was my most salient motivation although I am inspired somewhat by the two other factors. In my mind, I am always asking myself the question,
“Is it a foreign thing for islanders to travel north or is it an unusual thing for people in Vermont to see a person of color, specifically a Black man in their territory?” The U.S Census Bureau (2009) shared that Maine and Vermont have consistently traded the distinction of the nation’s least racially diverse state, and the most recent U.S. Census Bureau data show no change in that respect. The bureau estimates that 95.3 percent of Maine’s population is white, compared to 95.2 percent in Vermont. Nationally, about 66 percent of the population identifies itself as white. Whenever I think about this, I always marvel at the lack of diversity in Vermont, but then again who as a person of color would choose to move to a cold and frigid place like Vermont?

**Why Vermont? Why not Vermont?**

Dr. Fayneese Miller, the Dean of the School of Education at University of Vermont (UVM) in her remarks at a recent Pi Gamma Mu Honors society ceremony in the Spring of 2010 shared her thoughts on why people of color specifically black people, were not coming Vermont, or if they came why it was not possible to retain them. She explained that it is often stereotyped by others that “Black people do not like the cold”. Following up this point, she asked, “Don’t black people know how to dress for the winter?” With a chuckle from the audience Dr. Miller said:

I am sure that some of you present here have leg warmers and know how to prepare for the cold Vermont weather, so it’s certainly not the cold that Black people are afraid of. It simply is that there is a lack of diversity and there is a need to create a more diverse environment for others to live and feel welcomed.

This thought reaffirmed for me how important it is for me to be here. Even if I had to be numbered as a part of the diversity in Vermont specifically at UVM, I was okay with being in that number.
Although I have questioned myself over and over again followed by a barrage of questions specifically from white people and some people of color about being here, I recognize that my being in Vermont is fulfilling a purpose. I had no idea on how, why, when and where it would be fulfilled but intuitively I knew it had to be a divine purpose, one that I will delve into a little later. Discovering who I am thus far has been insightful and in retrospect, I have changed my answer. I needed to be here in Vermont. This was part of my life’s seasonal change.

Reflecting on my journey of migrating to Vermont, I am amazed by the level of my daily introspection. Since my faith is an integral part of who I am, I have learned to accept that the path my life takes is not by chance, rather it is God’s will manifesting itself to me. One of my favorite verses of Bible scripture that I live by each day Jeremiah, 29:11 (NIV): ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’. This Bible verse, coupled with one of my favorite songs from Donald Lawrence, reaffirms God’s plan for me being here in Vermont:

Oh God who knowest my beginning, though who created the plan,  
Who orchestrated my life’s journey, God, you are my God.  
God of decisions creator of answers, Thou who ordained my way,  
Through my transition helped my position, God you are my God.  
I will forever give you praise, honor and celebrate your name,  
God of the past present and who is to come, oh God you are my God  
(Lawrence, 2006).

My faith reaffirms how much my plan is really not my plan due to my faith. Many times I have questioned why I came to Vermont and why I have stayed so long. Why have I chosen to reside in a place where I was the proverbial fly in a sea of buttermilk?
Why was I challenged according to my race? Why did I not return to my homeland where I at least would not have to worry about so much documentation and paperwork to reside in a place other than my own? Why, why, why. When I reflect daily on my experiences thus far, I am convinced more than ever that my life has reason and purpose. Those reasons are being enacted and revealed each day that I spend my life in my new home and place called Vermont. Each day I realize more and more that being here was a sign of divine intervention and I was willing to trust that process. To borrow from the words of another singer Angie Stone, who has taught me another thing about seasons and the beauty of enduring seasonal change, I readily agree that:

My sunshine has come, and I'm all cried out,  
And there's no more rain in this cloud. 
Spring has come and winter's gone, my love,  
But don't look around for me, child, I'll be gone (I'll be gone, gone, gone, gone)  
Not afraid because the seasons have changed  
I'm gonna’ count my blessing then just follow the sun (Stone, 1999).

*Season with a purpose*

A season of purpose is sometimes a difficult thing to follow and comprehend. Each day I am learning to follow the leading that has brought me to Vermont. I have learned what true purpose is and with that knowledge I am walking in my purpose despite not knowing exactly what lies ahead.

**Looking Ahead With The Other Chapters**

The subsequent chapters include my expansion of the SPN methodology and why it matters to me as the ideal methodology for my dissertation. It will help the reader to understand my thought process behind using SPN and its validity in this immediate context. Following the methodology chapter, my narrative - supported by
scholarship/literature explores the differences, commonalities and uniqueness associated with being a Black Caribbean Diaspora student within the Black Diaspora on PWIs. This thread can be followed throughout the various topics addressed here further illuminating the experiences of the Black Diaspora student.

I employ foundational theories and my own narrative (1) to unpack the concept of Black Identity Development (BID), Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Colorism within the Black Diaspora and its impact on Black students’ ability to succeed or fail within a PWI; (2) to explore the salience of purposeful living and leadership and their intersection within the Black Diaspora context and (3) to highlight the importance of education as a social mobility tool for Black people and justify its importance within the Black Caribbean Diaspora.

Since my religious identity is a predominate narrative for my life, I share the importance of having a Divine Plan (DP) not only in my life as a Black Caribbean student, but its importance in the life of a Black person in general. I conclude my dissertation with possible implications for educators and administrators on not only gaining a better understanding of Black Diaspora students’ perspectives but acquiring ways to advocate and become an ally for Black Diaspora students on PWIs. From this research, I hope to acquire plans and ideas on how I can challenge student affairs practitioners, faculty, and staff on their response to making the experiences of Black Diaspora students a positive one. These implications could lend to the fostering, creating and building of communities of belonging for these students despite the differences they may carry with their black identity. My final thoughts describe my future role as a student
affairs practitioner and scholar, providing and fostering a more sustainable and cohesive environment for these Black Diaspora students.

**Definition of Terms**

**Black Diaspora** – Regards dark skinned people of African descent or persons of African descendant populations on the continent of Africa, as well as around the world.

**African Diaspora** – The origin, the dispersion and spreading of African people originally belonging to one continent and having a common culture. From the word “diaspeirein” latin for disperse; from the word “dia” and “speirein” Greek for scatter or sow; and from the word “spora” Greek for sowing or reproduction and spreading. Today’s African Diaspora is a mixture of willing and unwilling migration from the African continent. African Diaspora today involves not only migration from the African continent, but also between and among nation-states within the continent, as well as the related islands to various destinations throughout the globe.

**African American Diaspora** – In the field of Black Diaspora Studies, African Americans are identified as part of the African Diaspora. However, within this context there is no African American Diaspora. Students born in America and with strong southern backgrounds readily identify themselves as African or Afro American.

**Caribbean/West Indian Diaspora** – (used interchangeably in this dissertation) includes foreign born and persons with one or both parents of Caribbean origin. Caribbean people are also a part of the larger African Diaspora however, some individuals with roots in the Caribbean see themselves as separate from both African Americans, and African descents from the continent of Africa.
**Colorism** – is a form of discrimination by which human beings are accorded differing social and treatment based on skin color occurring within ethnic groups (e.g. differential treatment for lighter or darker tones). The preference is often translated into economic status because it affects opportunities for work.

**Immigrants** – people who leave their native land with the intention of living and settling in another country. Many immigrants move to another country specifically to get an education, earn money to send back home, retire or temporarily reside with the intentions of returning home at a later date.

**International students** – a person who is not a citizen, national, or permanent resident of the United States and who is in this country on a visa or temporary basis and does not have the right to remain indefinitely.
CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

Scholarly Personal Narrative

In his book *Liberating scholarly writing: The power of personal narrative* Nash (2004) defines SPN as the “unabashed, up-front admission that your own life signifies… your own life tells a story (or a series of stories) that, when narrated well, can deliver to your readers those delicious aha! moments of self and social insight that are all too rare in more conventional forms of research” (p. 24). What I have endeavored to do in this chapter is to introduce the reader to my methodology which is Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN). In this chapter I provide the reader with the benefits that can come from using this form of research and expound clearly why this methodology, though young in its use in academia, has the potential to be an accepted method for future dissertation writing. This form of methodology is of great importance to me and parallels other methodologies.

Scholarly Personal Narrative: Our Memories, Our Estate

In the telling and retelling of stories, they create communities of memory. I will tell you something about stories... They aren’t just entertainment. Don’t be fooled (Leslie Marmon Silk, 2000)

Storytelling and narratives have been widely used by authors, politicians, actors, educators, preachers, teachers, community members, parents, grandparents, and many other leaders for centuries. They have been a part of my life for the past four decades. Growing up with my grandmother was an opportunity to hear her share stories about the good ole’ days of the cotton crop and sugar cane harvesting. It also provided me with a front row seat to hear her share stories of the arduous required to make “ends meet” and
what it was like being black in Barbados in the days of yore. I also recall the days my grandmother reciting lengthy poems she had learned as a child. Even into her 80s she was still skillfully remembering and verbalizing those poems with clarity and adroitness.

My grandmother was a great storyteller and narrator. She had a memory that was sharper than any other person I have known. She recounted the two World Wars. Barbadians being employed to help build the Panama Canal, the 1930 riots and the 1955 hurricane Janet both of which killed several people in Barbados. Having the opportunity to hear her talk about these things - both good and bad - and to witness her excitement and enthusiasm as she talked about them was a gratifying experience for me. Her wealth of knowledge and the way in which she narrated them was a testament to the compelling nature of stories and personal narrative. It also emphasized the significance in the telling and retelling of stories and the communities that have been built through these stories. My grandmother lived those experiences and it was exciting to hear them directly from her. People from all walks of life have also shared their narrative of various events and the need for change to occur in our world. Some changes have occurred through their narratives and it is through their stories that we are able to create our own communities with new stories to share.

Dame Nita Barrow, former Governor General of Barbados, was a highly respected woman. She had a prolific career, beginning with her early days in nursing, one of the limited career options then available to women. She became Dame Nita, the first and only female Governor General of Barbados, the humanitarian, and the outspoken and articulate foe of social injustice. She was the lone female on a seven-member team of
Commonwealth dignitaries that was assigned to take a first-hand look at the system of apartheid in South Africa. She helped with the telling and retelling of stories of injustice and the need to create a sense of equity and equality for all. She was a woman who fought against injustices and advocated for women to be recognized as valued contributors to society. As an action mover with an international career that was poised equally between ideas and action, Dame Nita, the adult educator/diplomat remained convinced that neither ideas nor action can be beneficial if disjoined from the other. She believed that:

It is not sufficient for us to be able to speak each other's language or visit each other's capitals. It is far more crucial to understand how we think and why. A clear understanding of every culture's pressures, its history and the way its people view themselves and the world is essential to the maintenance of peace. Every conflict has its deepest roots in a people's view of themselves and their neighbors (National-Louis University, 2007, para. 18).

This statement was a testament to Dame Nita’s commitment about sharing and letting others know the actions needed to be done in order for change to happen in our world. She was the epitome of a leader that shared her story through activism and action. Rather than stay silent she sought to give voice and reason to the things that bothered her. Her narrative was heard and stimulated change. Leaders, such as Dame Nita are able to create change by both voicing and becoming the change agent that is needed in our world.

In the rest of this chapter, I will give further examples on the power of SPN and its credibility in the academy as a reliable methodology and the similarities that it has with more accepted forms of research methodologies.
My Introduction to SPN: Patti Cook

You can approach the act of writing with nervousness, excitement, hopefulness, or even despair – the sense that you can never completely put on the page what’s in your mind and heart. You can come to the act with your fist clenched and your eyes narrowed ready to kick ass and take down names. Come to it any way but lightly. Let me say it again: you must not come lightly to the blank page (King, 2000, p. 106).

I was first introduced to SPN writing while I was a student at The New England Culinary Institute (NECI) under the tutelage of Dr. Patti Cook. One day, Dr. Cook or Patti as she preferred to be called asked the class to take a sheet of paper and write a metaphor that we could use to describe our writing. This metaphor could be used to describe where our current writing level was, where we wanted it to go or if there was a major struggle we had with writing. Initially, I had reservations about doing this assignment since I figured my writing was good enough; after all, I was in college for the second time in pursuit of another degree. However, I quickly rescinded my thoughts and began to think of a metaphor that captured my writing ability, where it currently was, and where I wanted it to go. I also thought of struggles I may have with writing since I had been out of college for a while. I finally settled on a metaphor that encompassed two very important parts of my identity – food and Barbados: “Like a blackbird trying to get his beak into a juicy ripe mango”. This came to memory because of the huge mango tree that stood for years in the backyard of my home in Barbados. This metaphor conveyed my love for mangoes in their many forms and the sweetness that comes from them. I also remembered growing up in Barbados and seeing the blackbirds teeming around the mango trees on a daily basis. They were eyeing and coveting the mangoes with the same
intent as me. It was just a matter of who would get the first bite out of this mango. This metaphor created an instant wave of nostalgia inside of me.

Patti asked us to share the metaphor and then write why we chose that metaphor. Before she did, however, she shared a piece of her writing from her dissertation, “Composing a pedagogy of mattering: a scholarly personal narrative on what it means to matter in education”. Patti’s work was amazing, especially the section on the power in a name; her name. She explained that a name is so often taken for granted and that she had to appreciate the significance of her name and the strength she gained from knowing that her name had a lot of meaning for her. It was there that I received my taste of SPN. Patti opened the door for me to enter into SPN. She talked a lot about her advisor Dr. Robert Nash and his ability to get students deeply explore their personal narrative side. She talked about his seven aphorisms or golden rules as some would say and how he was able to get her to unpack what she was feeling inside and to write about it. It was obvious that she was trying to do the same thing with our class. Patti encouraged us get personal with our writing. “Go deep,” she would say and both my classmates and I sit dumbstruck. As stated earlier, I had some apprehension about getting personal with my writing because I did not see the relevance in anyone knowing about me. Why would they want to know about me? And fear found its place inside of my head.

As the semester progressed, I got more comfortable using this method of writing. I loved what I was able to unpack using my initial metaphor. It was a liberating and fluid movement for me. At the end of the SPN metaphor “unpacking” writing which Patti encouraged us to do, I could not help but track how far I had come and the discipline and
vulnerability that I found with and allowed myself to have and indulge in; I was pleased with the outcome. One day when Patti chose me to read my SPN out loud to the class it there and then that I was sold on SPN. SPN also gave me an opportunity to express my voice, my own style, and my personality. Her pedagogical style, aligned with Nash’s was affirmation enough, but this form of writing had a lot of potential and I was connected to the process.

My enrollment into the Interdisciplinary Masters of Education program at UVM, after meeting Dr. Robert Nash to whom I am forever grateful, was the next major step in SPN writing for me. It was at UVM that I got the chance to meet Dr. Nash, the man who I had heard so much about from Patti; the man who became my advisor for my Master’s degree; the man who fully ushered me in this genre of writing; the man who convinced me to write my thesis and my story on father absenteeism using SPN; the man who would be a co-advisor for me in my dissertation writing; the man who nashonized me. He along with Gary Margolis who I am pleased to call a friend further guided me along in this form of writing in one of my first formal classes in the subject called Leadership and Scholarly Personal Narrative Writing. Little did I know that I would become a lifetime SPN convert, especially with the writing of my dissertation. I am pleased to look back now and rather than, in the words of Stephen King (2000) “approach the act of writing with nervousness, excitement, hopefulness, or even despair,” I find myself writing on blank page thoughts that come from a mind and a heart “ready to kick ass” (p. 106).
The next sections I provide the reader with the reasons why SPN is growing, why it is a solid form of research writing, and the parallels that it has to other forms of existing research methodologies.

Why SPN

And the truth of your experience can only come through in your own voice. If it is wrapped in someone else’s voice, we readers will feel suspicious; as if you are dressed up in someone else’s clothes (Lamott, 1994, p. 199).

As important as it is to reference the scholarship of other researchers in a dissertation, there is nothing quite like SPN where you are allowed to experience your truth through your own voice. As Lamott (1994) suggests if your voice is wrapped in someone else’s, it creates a level of suspicion. At times it comforting and even acceptable to wear someone’s clothes, but nothing beats wearing your own clothes. SPN writing is just like wearing your own clothes; you get to use your own voice. According to Nash (2004):

SPN is about giving yourself permission to express your own voice in your own language; your own take on your own story in your inimitable manner…it is a grand opportunity to practice listening to the sound of your own voice…find your special sound and style, and you will find your story…lose these, and you will continue to be silenced (p. 24).

According to Diaz (2004) SPN disrupts mainstream forms of scholarship and aids in transforming White-centered theorizing spaces into something broader. I have found the use of SPN to do just that. It not only transforms but transcends boundaries that would have in the past prevented or silenced others from giving voice to their stories. As a researcher using SPN, I have realized that I am the actual subject that is being researched,
I am my best researcher. I give life to my story with the hope that it impacts someone to also share their story and become a liberated soul like me.

With the appreciation and flexibility that SPN has provided for me to write about my racial identity and experiences as a Black Caribbean Diaspora student, I stand in pride using this methodology. I share Angeletta Gourdine’s view in that, “culturally, I am a black person, and that identity comes with an unadulterated sense of pride…I just am” (2002, p. xi). I would not change who I am as a Black man. I carry that identity with pride and honor. I appreciate the many directions and forms that it can take. As Nash (2004) explains:

While it is personal, it is also social. While it is practical, it is also theoretical. While it is reflective, it is also public. While it is local it is also political. While it narrates it also proposes. While it is revealing, it also evokes self-examination from readers. Whatever its unique shape and style of communicating to readers, an SPN’s central purpose is to make an impact on both the writer and reader, on both the individual and the community (p. 29).

Such a premise speaks volumes to me and I fully support Bleich and Holdstein (2001) in that to “admit the full range of human experience into formal scholarly writing” (p. 10), can only create a stronger level of believability in SPN writing.

By using this format and method of writing and expression, I am able to go beyond, excel as well as surpass many of the barriers of research that are ever present in the land of academic writing. One of the best ways in which I find myself being able to make a connection to others is to compliment the narrative with my voice. Using the me, myself and I person helps me to advocate and strengthen the need to tell stories. Stories that can change, mend, heal and bring joy to the reader or listener.
SPN is like a personal gateway to a surreal experience where the writer can completely immerse themselves in something that they can call their own. Nash (2004) beautifully captures the idea by saying:

While you will be telling some pretty revealing and provocative personal stories about your life that will hook the reader, don’t just stop there. Use your personal story hooks as a pretext for exploring bigger educational, social, cultural and political issues….one of the reasons for going outside of yourself in an SPN is so that, at least some of the time, you can get your readers to go outside of themselves in order to see their external worlds in a different way (p. 60).

I believe that this was what Patti Cook was doing when she exposed us to SPN. She shared her story in a compelling and provocative manner. As a result my peers and I who were the readers and listeners had the opportunity to push ourselves outside of our comfort zone to see the world, our writing world from a different perspective. It paid off.

So why SPN? The mere mention of the methodology SPN to strangers usually provokes a measure of inquisitiveness to which I gladly offer my testimonial. This measure of inquiry provides me with an opportunity to once again tell and retell a story or stories even though the initial explanation to complete strangers is usually met with a look of bewilderment. It however inevitably results in the listener giving voice to a story of their own either at that moment or at a later time. This proves the compelling nature of SPN and the huge potential it has in academia outside of the University of Vermont and those who currently use it in their relations with peers and colleagues alike.
Writing the Scholarly

The inclusion of the self in research and scholarship is inescapable, even more so when writers try intentionally to excise the self from their research. The “I” voice always has a way of seeping into an “objective,” third-person text (Nash, 2004, p. 26).

Authors such as Gornick, Maisel, Lightfoot and King and many others subscribe to the SPN philosophy. Nash (2004) states that “your own life has meaning, both for you and for others” (p. 24). They put themselves, which is the “I,” into their narrative and actively participate in the stories they tell. Such stories create research and scholarship which as stated by Nash, becomes inescapable because the “I” voice always find a way of seeping back into the text. These authors, in addition to faculty and staff, are labeled as scholars based on their work in academia in some form or another. They, like Socrates, as quoted by Nash, are “lovers of wisdom” who “used their leisure time to create stories in order to help people to become wise – more virtuous, courageous, reasonable and prudent in their actions” (p. 42). So how do I, like Nash and these scholars become a scholar or define scholarship in my writing? I believe that I have the “N” and the “P” and to some degree the “S” but how do I effectively convince others and myself that I have the “S” in SPN? Nash (2004) offers some valid tenets to what a scholar and scholarship is that can bridge the gap between accepted academic writing and SPN:

You are a scholar if you are willing to play with ideas; build on the ideas of others; tell a good, instructive story; capture the narrative quality of your human experience in language that inspires others; present your story in a way that it rings true to human life; and can help your readers to reexamine their own truth stories in light of the truths that you are struggling to discern in your own complicated life story. You are a scholar if you have a passion for language and writing; if you are driven to understand what makes yourself and others tick; if you feel and think at the same time; if you are willing to allow your student and your readers to enter your heart as well as your head; if you can help your readers
and student to realize that their lives signify, that they matter more than they will ever know (p. 45–46).

I believe that I am a scholar for myself and others based on the tenets expressed by Nash. I also believe that I have included scholarship in my writing but more importantly in the various learning styles that meet the needs of the students I work with on a daily basis. Whether these learning styles are verbal, auditory, visual, or kinesthetic, scholarship is included. I get the opportunity to share and build on my ideas and the ideas of others, coupled with a narrative of passion and a story that resonates, allowing students to see the transparency in me, which in turn allows them to be authentic in their interactions with me. Although scholarship is not always in a written form, the initial conversations with the listener or reader are given a chance to marinate where s/he can reflect and come to the realization that their lives “matter more than they will ever know.” The following note from a student is reflective of scholarship finding its way into my life and my SPN:

Learie,

I can’t tell you how appreciative I am of you enough. Every day you are a source of support and guidance and without that I don’t think I would be anywhere close to where I am today both as a person and as a leader. You’ve helped me learn what it takes to be a servant leader and the importance of empowering others, not just myself. This has by far been the most memorable and challenging year for me and my development as a leader and you have been there every step of the way. It is the Students Affairs Professionals like yourself, that inspire people and students to challenge themselves by taking a step outside of their comfort zone, [which is akin to SPN writing] by thinking and recognizing that leadership is bigger than any one person by showing the importance of diverse perspectives, by showing us the door but not walking us through it, and lastly by teaching us that there is no shame in humility. Without people like you in this world I question whether I and many others would be able to appreciate life for all of its blessings and its opportunities. You have taught me what it means to be a leader and I would be lost in my old self without you. I look forward to continue working with you next year and building our relationship that will undoubtedly last a lifetime.

(R. Just, personal communication, May 15, 2010)
Although the initial relationship with this student was a very frustrating and challenging one, the ideas I was able to share, as well as build on with the student’s own, provided an opportunity for scholarship to grow. It was an opportunity for heart and head to collide and the vulnerable human side to surface. Like Behar (1993) in her question to scholars, “Why is it necessary for scholars to remove themselves emotionally from the real lives of real people?” (p. 49). I, in my tenure as a Student Affairs Practitioner, refuse to remove my emotional self from the students I work with. I am very much the subject as they are the subjects I am studying based on my supervision and advising. They are “real people” to me. They are part of my creative journey despite it being an arduous one at times. As Maisel (1999) postulates, “the creative journey is the never-ending process of giving birth to who we are…however we choose to share that with the world – through our painting, pottery or poetry – the task of birthing ourselves is always arduous” (p. 114). With this information I affirm that scholarship is alive and has its place in SPN.

**Writing the Personal**

*The writing we call personal narrative is written by people who, in essence, are imagining only themselves: in relation to the subject in hand. The connection is an intimate one; in fact, it is critical (Gornick, 2001, p. 6).*

*Deep in a wooded forest each of us is creating a path; the path is the story of our decisions, our thoughts, our fears and our hopes (Anonymous)*

The above Gornick quote speaks to me in a variety of ways. When I think of my racial identity development and the road that I have taken to discover what that means to me, I sometimes shudder at the reality of it all. It is as if I am indeed in the deep forest trying to create a path for myself. Growing up in Barbados, the color of my skin was never something that I focused on but now living in VT, more than ever; it has become an
ever-conscious thought regardless of the setting I may find myself. I realize that I have to become really personal if truth is going to reach the reader in a universal manner. Being personal is not an easy thing to do but you have to do what you have to do. I was always comforted in my racial development because I grew up in a predominantly Black society. I was accepted for me without any issues or thoughts of racial dominance or inferiority. However, was never even an issue or thought of from a racial perspective. However, my migration to a different country with an alien lifestyle, foreign culture, and prevailing racial proclivities, caused me to explore my identity from a critical yet different perspective. Gornick (2001) believes that the writing connection is an intimate one and that it is also critical. I believe that the connection comes with delving into something that is not only “deep” but is of great relevance and significance to me. My writing brings a level of boldness, courage, and intimacy. I must be realistic however sharing intimate writing can sometimes be a very difficult process. I say difficult because this kind of writing forces you to delve deeper and expose more of yourself – “bleed” more – than with other forms of writing, especially academic writing. Although there may be some generalizable themes that are addressed, those themes can also spark some controversy, especially when the subjects are of a socially or personally delicate nature.

Stephen King (2000) believes that to write to your best abilities, it behooves you to construct your own toolbox and then build enough muscle so you can carry it with you. Once you have done this, instead of looking at writing as a hard job and getting discouraged, you will seize the correct tool and immediately get to work. Over the years, I have had to construct my own toolbox and, oftentimes, build my writing based on those
things that I find easier to write. Not only was I building my own toolbox of writing but I was also building a toolbox of better understanding my racial identity and writing the personal as it pertained to my Black identity development. In retrospect, I ensured that I pack the correct tools to aid me in writing the intimate and familiar stuff that can be so heavy to offload and share. Writing about familiar territory can sometimes result in a recollection of happy, positive thoughts but at the same time it can be a memorial of a difficult journey especially when the story being shared brings with it pain, sadness and grief. Gornick (2001) theorizes that, “penetrating the familiar is by no means a given. On the contrary, it is hard; hard work (p. 9).

Penetrating the familiar can sometimes be compared to stabbing oneself or being stabbed until there is a sign of blood or a wound to say that some impact or dent of injury has been made. It can be a rather painful process but rather than become an “unsurrogated persona,” according to Gornick (2001) or even be forced to put up blinders or a screen as a protective shield or even be an instrument of illusion, probing into oneself can result in the “writer on a voyage of discovery”. This has been me; the voyager and adventurer on an exciting writing journey. A journey of understanding my racial identity and what it means to be black with my faith as an integral part of my destiny.

Using (SPN) research as my methodology is an opportunity for me to explore how my racial identity as a black man and the impact of words have become my window and looking glass to a whole new world of racial exploration and identity. It is also the opportunity for me to open closed doors and give birth to loving the process of writing about who I am and creating a better relationship with myself. Lamott (1994) provides
the following thought, “we write to expose the unexposed…when you open the closet door and let what was inside out, you can get a rush of liberation and even joy” (p. 198-199). I believe that telling our whole story, without putting on blinders, often requires an act of courage but there is an element of joy that evolves. I have purposed within myself to do just that. Stories are usually about speaking the writer’s truth. Truth, in SPN fashion is what works best for the narrator and the reader in the never ending quest to find and construct narratives of meaning, both for self and others.

Writing the Narrative

To write a personal narrative is to look deeply within ourselves for the meaning that just might, when done well, resonate with other lives; maybe even inspire them in some significant ways (Nash, 2004, p.22)

From the first day I was introduced to SPN writing, amidst the initial apprehension that encapsulated me, I found myself growing to appreciate the wonders of such a living and breathing form of writing. Little did I know that I would find myself reflecting on my childhood days, finding meaning, and writing about the various episodes of my life as it continues to unfold. From the continuation of my education in the state of Vermont to discovering the many layers of my identity, SPN found its way into my life. For me, writing my narrative seemed like an easy thing to do, but in all actuality, it was and is the scariest thing to do. It seems easy because no one can tell my story like I can; it is scary because it has the potential to reveal too much of myself to the reader. Keeping these aspects in mind, I have chosen to express my SPN dissertation writing through the narrative lens of seasons and how they constantly change.
The excerpts used at the beginning of this section are an example of where SPN has taken me and the path I continue to follow. Inspirational stories from others who have impacted my life and my own story makes the power of SPN relatable and informational and makes this form of writing even more poignant than I would ever realize. Using epigraphs to set up my writing has directed me to share the importance of this writing to me. SPN provided me with a voice to share, learn, grow and know me better. It shaped my view and interpretation of how my identity and experience as a Black man was much different to that of a Black American or any other Black Diaspora group member. As King (2000) says, “There have been times when for me the act of writing has been a little act of faith, a spit in the eye of despair…writing is not life, but I think that sometimes it can be a way back to life” (p. 249). In so many ways, writing my story gave me insight into another part of my life that has yet to be discovered. I allow the little writing act of faith to surface and “practice the art, always reminding yourself that your job is to say what you see, and then to get on with your story” (p. 180).

**SPN: Compliment the current with the personal**

*My purpose in sharing this narrative is not to fill a gap in the current research that exists, but to compliment it with my personal voice of experience.*

(Goodwin, 2005, para. 3).

*But we see ourselves in the midst in another sense as well; that is, we see ourselves as in the middle of a nested set of stories-ours and theirs.*

(Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, para. 3).

The power and complementary nature of SPN is universal among many people whether this is verbalized aloud or held in silence. Like my friend Darrell Goodwin states, my personal voice of experience is there to compliment the research that is currently in existence” (D. Goodwin, personal communication May 2005). My aim is not
to detract but to enhance research with personalized stories and narratives that can help others to see themselves being mirrored within. After all, “we bring our stories with us when we write (or fail to write)” (Maisel, 1999, p.13). Other forms of methodology breathe different forms of life into a research paper. Qualitative methodology interviews and observes individuals in focus groups or on a one on one basis and then reports the findings. Quantitative methodology is used in a similar lens but requires the use of surveys, analyzing variables, correlations, and regressions - simple or multiple - and the testing of hypotheses. SPN stories are nested, just waiting to be hatched by the storyteller and the listener who eventually gives birth to their own story. There are stories in all of these research methodologies and they are all unpacked through stories by participants to a study, or as in SPN, self-revelation. SPN helps you to find the voice that may have been long suppressed and buried amidst pain and hurt. In my situation SPN enabled me to find and shape my identity and create a way for healing to be found in my writing.

**Qualitative, Quantitative or SPN?**

When I was first introduced to qualitative and quantitative research methods - the prevailing academic methodologies in my doctoral studies, I was extremely excited and nervous at the same time. I knew that there were some similarities to each other in the qualitative approach with the interviewing aspect of getting a subject’s story through a series of questions and in quantitative approach through the method of assessment with survey questions which were then compiled and analyzed. I was not a lover of “quant,” as my colleagues in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (EDLP) would refer to quantitative methodology, but I was eager to see what I could learn from the approach
and at least be capable to analyzing data and correlations in the future. In “qual” which my cohort abbreviated for qualitative methodology, I was more excited. The idea of interviewing seemed engaging and interactive. The transcribing of interviews and focus group sessions though time consuming had its rewards of connecting with the respondents. Although quantitative methodology involved number crunching, it provided an opportunity for me to analyze the significance of numbers and how those numbers related to those questions asked via survey or questionnaire. During these two classes, I gained a better understanding of the scientifically accepted methodologies of research writing. Out of these two, however, I was drawn more to qual since it centered on the idea of the stories of the interviewees. Here I saw a similarity to SPN with the idea of stories being shared, even if it was through a formal questioning, less organic process.

Now having the understanding of qual and quant, I had to make a decision on the kind of methodology that I would use to write my dissertation. I loved what qual presented and my research topic was perfect for using this methodology. I was going with qual; qual all the way. As time went by however, I found myself shifting away from my original plan of a qualitative approach. I found myself drifting back to SPN. This was where I felt most comfortable and it paralleled beautifully with that of qualitative research methodology. My story was going to be told with me personally interviewing myself and unpacking the story I had inside. As Nash (2004) affirms, “SPN puts the self of the scholar front and center. The best SPN interview is the scholar’s self-interrogation” (p. 18). I was my own, interrogator, recorder and transcriber. I could be as descriptive about the settings or context of my story as I needed to be. I could be as close to my study
without having to feel that my relationship with the subject could influence the outcome. I was my best analyzer and could prescribe what was needed to challenge “older political or educational narratives”. The fit was perfect. With the similarity that existed with qualitative methodology and SPN, I am excited to share these parallels through the following qualitative means; narrative enquiry, oral traditions and critical ethnography.

**Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry or narratology according to Patton (2002), “provides an understanding of and illuminates the life and culture that is created” (p. 115). It is a methodological format that has been used in legal scholarship for years and has become a focus of criticism since embraced by Critical Race Theory (CRT) – a theory I will explore in a later chapter – in the 1990s (Johnson, 1994). Narrative inquiry is also the process of gathering information for the purpose of research through storytelling. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively lead storied lives. The study of narrative is the study of the way humans experience the world. They basically believe that people’s lives consist of stories and SPN is indicative of this fact. In SPN, according to Nash (2004) as he references Bruner, “the self is a distributed self, unmeshed in a net of others whose primary task is to make meanings through narration” (p. 19). This speaks about the value of meaning as it relates to the narratives that people share about their lives. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) share John Dewey philosophical ideas on education, which have remained popular to this day, as narrative inquiry being an experience that has both a social and personal meaning. McDermott (1981) echoes John Dewey (1981) who
believes that there is a level of continuity and the experiences shared are from previous ones that will shape subsequent experiences. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) also believe that with narrative inquiry, as difficult as it is to maybe tell a story, the more difficult more important task is the retelling of stories that allow for growth and change. That is where SPN is parallel to qualitative technique.

SPN writing thrives for universal themes to evolve and help create change for the story teller, reader, listener and researcher. Patton, Connelly and Clandinin affirm the power and commonalities that exists between the SPN and qualitative methodologies. There is the common link of stories and the need to tell them; like Patton (2002) posits, “it provides an understanding of and illuminates the life and culture that it created” (p. 9). SPN illuminates the life stories that are created by the story teller whether the story is current or past. The act of telling and retelling stories makes the research more credible and acceptable and is the ideal correlation between these two methodologies. (Anzaldua, 1987), hooks, (1990), and Williams (1991) admit that narrative inquiry gives them permission to insert their voice directly into the text and “name my own reality.” Nash (2004) says, “Don’t risk losing something vital and special to your humanity: your own gritty and beautiful, hard-won voice” (p. 27). This further validates the essence of SPN and the parallel of its use with other research methodologies such as qualitative in dissertation research writing. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) believe:

We imagine, therefore, that in the construction of narratives of experience, there is a reflexive relationship between living a life story, telling a life story, retelling a life story, and reliving a life story….. within the inquiry field, we lived out stories, told stories of those experiences, and modified them by retelling them and reliving them…participants lived, told, retold, and relived their stories (p. 5).
Harding (1987) argues that the ideology and experience of the researcher is an important contribution to the research, especially if the researcher was able to identify with it. I agree with Harding in that my SPN is an important piece of literature that not only adds to the research but will continue to inspire others to write their stories. This is done either through telling, retelling, or reliving personal narratives, creating a legacy – a collection of narratives and a community of storytellers.

**Oral Tradition**

*It is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story . . . that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us* (Achebe, 1987, p. 114)

Oral Tradition is considered the oldest form of storytelling and is defined as “passing on wisdom, knowledge, and culture through the spoken word” (http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/homer/f/OralTradition.htm). Anthropologists, psychologists, and historians believe that storytelling has been with us since the beginning of our existence. They also argue that storytelling is that which defines our humanity and for thousands of years, as people struggled to survive, they passed through stories what wisdom and knowledge they accumulated (http://www.callofstory.org/en/storytelling/history.asp). In qualitative research, oral traditions are used to understand on historical events, skills and ways of life or cultural patterns (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). It is also an opportunity for people to talk about their lives, experiences, or understandings. In SPN, the writer is called to narrate the story in an open-ended way and by doing this, “it might help the reader to see the world a little
differently” (p. 63). SPN is also analogous to oral traditions in the form of “understanding our histories, shaping our destiny, developing our moral imaginations and giving us something truly worth living and dying for” (p. 4). Oral stories have been passed from generation to generation through various cultures, mostly strongly in Native American and African American cultures.

People from the African American Diaspora or in my context from the BCD appreciate the beauty of stories despite the pain that so often comes with telling and sharing these stories. As mentioned earlier, my grandmother was an amazing story teller who passed on wisdom, knowledge, and culture through her stories. She left a legacy of stories, passing them first to my mother, then from my mother to her sons. Hopefully, her sons will continue the legacy and tradition with their children. Although some of these stories are lost with the passing of elders, “one primary purpose for oral traditions is to preserve memory, helping those of subsequent generations to understand from where they come and what they can accomplish” (p. 197). Writing my SPN is my attempt to preserve my family’s memories and traditions. Through stories, memory is kept alive and SPN is a sure route to guaranteeing this.

Susan Baur (1994), author of Confiding: A Psychotherapist and her Patients Search for Stories to Live By, suggests that when we express our interpretation of the past we open up new paths for the future. She goes on to say that listening to others tell personal stories of their trials and triumphs helps us in recovering from our own traumatic experiences. This is the generalizable and universalizable tenet of SPN. SPN helps. It heals. It is a reclamer of a silent voice just as oral traditions maintain a legacy of culture
and knowledge. Through the emotion that is experienced - trauma or triumph - there is an opportunity to recover from those painful experiences when you take the risk to tell your story. Having experienced what it is like to find healing in telling a story, I can attest to the power of oral traditions and SPN having these identifiable characteristics. Every life is a story and each story is a gift.

**Critical Ethnography**

We should not choose between critical theory and ethnography. Instead, we see that researchers are cutting new paths to re-inscribing critique in ethnography.

*George Noblit, Susana Y. Flores, & Enrique G. Murillo Jr. (2004)*

Critical Ethnography is research that “provides opportunity for the studied participant to engage in dialectical interactions of action and reflection in relation to both the research and their situation, thereby transforming those situations” (Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996, p. 246). This form of research opens opportunities for varied levels of communication to unfold, as well as areas of reflection to exist, especially in areas where critical ethnography was not allowed before. Critical ethnography research also provides opportunities for transformation to occur through dialogue, action and further self-reflection. SPN encourages a similar method of action but in a more intimate setting. Reflections are done through conversations with peers, something that I have done prior to deciding on my topic of interest. They helped to shed light on my experiences by also reflecting on theirs. Nash (2004) shares that we do not live our lives cut off from others…our stories overlap with others…telling our stories will inevitably implicate others whether we like it or not. This statement in some way can create an ethical dilemma between “protection and privacy of those who inhabit your narrative or vice
versa” (p. 136). SPN writing is all about taking the risk and sharing your narrative and story.

Critical ethnography as hypothesized by Madison (2005) begins with an “ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain. Critical ethnography also takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions” (p. 5). Similarly, SPN gives the writer the right to go on what Gornick (2001) describes as the voyage of discovery. On this voyage of self-discovery in SPN writing, the writer can choose to go beneath surface appearances and disrupt the status quo by sharing and disclosing what they are most comfortable in disclosing. In this disclosure, the writer has an opportunity to address particular events, people, and critical events that have framed or changed their lives. In SPN, the opportunity to change or impact someone’s life is somewhat inevitable since stories have a way of hooking the reader based on the constructs and themes that emerge from this form of writing. Critical ethnography emphasizes the importance of dialogical performance as it brings “self and other” together so they may question, debate, and challenge one another. In like fashion, SPN also brings self and other together through internal dialogue and truth exploration. The writer has a chance to question and dialogue with him or herself about what to share with others. The writer has a chance to question whether or not their own story conveys a truth that is important to others. According to Nash (2004), “In order to convince others of your truth, you need first to overcome your writer’s hard and stubborn ego to declare your truth as the Truth” (p. 64). Nash asks the writer to ask himself, “Is your story a way
of conveying some truth that you know is important, something that you have learned
about life, love and vocation…something you would like to share with others?” (p. 63).
In the end, it is all about what truth you are willing to share with yourself and others.

(Foucault, 2007), a critical ethnographer puts the idea another way:

Likewise, we may think, the purpose of writing a fiction is not for to convince
readers, but rather to offer them the opportunity to reflect on themselves through
this story. This reflection is related to their experience of both objectivation and
subjectivation. Though this fiction might be a local and personal story, it can
welcome the participation of others; it can become public (p. 8).

SPN bears witness to all of this. SPN stories start off with the writer writing for
self but ends up writing for the public. Readers who identify with a particular story start
to participate by sharing their story and narrative either orally or cursively. As in critical
ethnography where the focus is on the researcher who engages in philosophical
interactions of action and reflection in relation to the research, SPN follows a similar
route. SPN seizes an opportunity to draw out personal stories that then become the
universal nature of critical ethnography and SPN.

The emerging nature of my SPN is an ideal opportunity for me to communicate
what I believe, see, experience, encounter, uphold, espouse, and want the readers to
know. SPN is not a methodology for everyone although anyone has the opportunity to
write their own story. The caveat to this form of writing is that I, the writer, the
commander in chief, am in control of what I share or not. The themes that are drawn out
from this narrative are essential to who and what I am. The experiences are an example of
what I have encountered and what others from within my or any other Black Diaspora
may have experienced at some point in time.
Christopher Philips (2001) writes, “I don’t think a self is something that can be defined, but can only be revealed. Our self is who we are, what we say, what we do. Our self is a perspective, an approach, a disposition, not a thing. It is a work in progress” (p. 60). SPN as my dissertation methodology is my chance to reveal the “I” person. I believe that I have chosen the ideal form of methodology that best relays my experiences and that of my peers. SPN helps me to say what I want and need to say. It was the initial constant questioning of myself that resulted in the telling of my story of learning what it means to be Black. Many correlations exist between older accepted forms of research methodologies and this new methodological form of writing called SPN. SPN, though risky in nature, is an opportunity for meaning making to be exercised through personal narrative and an occasion for the telling of the untold. Despite the risks, SPN creates an opportunity for the writer to experience liberation and a heart of contentment. Through SPN, I am able to hook the reader with my story and narrative. I am able to use my own scholarship and pair it with other scholarship, resulting in the establishment of universal themes. Seemingly risky in nature, SPN is liberating in the end.
CHAPTER THREE: DIVINE PLAN

Every conceivable situation that you could ever think of exists now as a fact in God but cannot be made visible to you until you occupy it, for you are God's operant power. Everything in this world needs man as the agent to express it. Hate or love, joy or sorrow, all things require man to express it (Neville Goodard, 1967).

What is a Divine Plan?

I live my life each day believing that I am the operant power that God has used and will forever use in my secular, academic, and religious circles. Despite not knowing what lies before me, I trust that whatever may befall me, it is all part of a divine plan that will eventually work out for my good. I believe according to Romans 8:28 “that all things work together for good to them that love the Lord and to those who are called according to his purpose”. Purpose is a word that is rooted in something that is fundamental to my existence and bears witness to why I am who I am.

The root of the word “divine” is literally translated as Godlike and from the Latin Deus cf. Dyaus, closely related to the Greek word for Zeus. However, its use is dependent on whose god is being referenced. The Oxford Student’s dictionary defines divine as, “of, from God: excellent; very beautiful”. The Encarta dictionary defines divine as “connected with, coming from, or caused by God; to learn or discover something by intuition, inspiration, or other apparently supernatural means”. The word plan is of military origin, and is derived from the Greek word στρατηγός (stratēgos), which roughly translates to general. A plan according to the Oxford Student’s dictionary is defined as “an arrangement for doing or using something, considered in advance”. Encarta further defines plan as “something that somebody intends or has arranged to do”.

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When I combine these two words that surmise my dissertation topic, I interpret them to mean *that I am going to learn and discover that God is planning an excellent, very beautiful, something of inspiration for me, by me, through me.*

With this definition in place I am convinced that the events that have unfolded in my life thus far are a part of a divine plan. From a biblical standpoint, a divine plan has been my life’s story. With my faith being the cornerstone of who I am, there is no other way that I could use to share how the story of my Black Caribbean Diaspora identity has been impacted. This definition of divine plan is the foundation for understanding my purpose. Now I will share my story of what it means to have a divine plan.

**Opportunity Lost is never regained**

In her high pitched voice which is mostly annoying and piercing, the director with her usual meddling personality made an announcement at a staff meeting one day. She said, “Ok everyone, here is an opportunity that I hope you all would consider and try to take advantage of. Money has been allotted for all of you to go back to college and pursue a degree that will enhance your knowledge and better your teaching skills in the culinary education arena that we have here with our students. It will also improve your personal and professional growth. Don’t pass up on this great opportunity.” This announcement took everyone by surprise. Hearing those words from my director was like a bolt of lightning flashing before my very eyes. It seemed too good to be true. In the past, I had thought of going back to college and had known of lecturers and other scholars taking educational leave to pursue additional degrees. This opportunity seemed like my chance (or what I like to say my sunshine) had come to embark on a similar
course. Here I was for three years teaching students the fundamentals of culinary arts and thoroughly enjoying the experience. Now, it seemed I now was being given the opportunity to augment another phase of my life. The mere possibility was motivating enough to get my adrenaline pumping.

I knew within myself that if I really wanted to go back to college, I had to capitalize on this opportunity. With this in mind, I started researching American culinary schools to see what was being offered. Out of all the schools in the world that I could possibly attend, I chose a small private college located in Vermont, USA, called the New England Culinary Institution (NECI). I could have chosen other bigger, more reputable, U.S. schools such as Cornell, Johnson and Wales, or The Culinary Institute of America. I could have even chosen an institution in the United Kingdom or another part of Europe but I decided on NECI as it was on the list of top 10 culinary schools in America. Still before I made a decision to apply, I did what my mother would have encouraged me to do - pray. I prayed that God will lead me to the right place and that His will be made clear to me. I also meditated on one of my favorite songs by the Wilmington Chester Mass Choir entitled Stand Still (Until his Will is made clear to me):

What do I do when I don’t know what to do, What do I say when I don’t know what to say, where do I turn, what are the answers to the questions that seem to have no answer, what do I do Oh Lord when I don’t know what to do, I will stand still until your will is made clear to me (Antrom, 1992).

The lyrics of that song were so clear to me and were all the confirmation I needed to move forward with my decision. I decided that NECI in Vermont was the place I would attend, provided I was accepted. Although I had no idea where Vermont was located or had never heard about it until my college friend Angela shared her limited
knowledge of it with me, I knew I was going to Vermont. I had to trust the process. Trusting the process has become such a cliché statement that it is sometimes difficult to believe it anymore. It seems anyone in a dire situation always says, “trust the process, trust the process.” How do I do this when my faith is sometimes so weak? I have learned, however, that if I allow my inner faith to guide me and apply mindfulness in my everyday interactions, my active, open, unattached, mindful and faithful self can trust the process. I believe that I am a living testament of what trusting the process is all about. With a made up mind about going to Vermont and determination to return to school I applied and was accepted in to NECI.

The next phase of my plan was funding. Although the director said that funding would be provided, she did not say it would be provided in full. I still needed to find another source that would cover the majority, if not all of the expenses of an international education. After all, the cost of education in the U.S. is at an all-time high. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education (2009) report, tuition and fees rose between 4.5 percent and 6.5 percent for various types of institutions. For an international student the rate is even higher. International students pay the same rate as out-of-state students, which is three or four times higher than for in-state students. It is a simple, competitive fact of life that U.S. education is the most expensive National Association for Foreign Affairs Students (NAFSA, 2003). I had to truly trust the process that this would work out.

**God-Yireh (God Sees to it, He will provide)**

Genesis 22: 1-14, tells the story of Abraham preparing his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. Abraham’s faith was being tested by God to see if he could be counted on as a
man of God. Abraham did all that was asked of him. In the end, God provided a ram in the thicket for Abraham rather than to have him sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. Abraham passed in the test with flying colors. Although my situation in acquiring funding for my study abroad opportunity does not compare to Abraham’s, this story illustrates the importance of trusting the process and having faith that God will provide all that you need when you need it. As I prayed before about getting accepted into NECI, I had to continue trusting God to make a way. I truly believe that there is a divine plan for my life. Finding NECI in my initial research was by no means an accident; it was for a purpose, a plan, and certainly an opportunity for me to find myself.

Knowing that I had to explore other avenues for funding, I considered the student revolving loan granted to Barbadian nationals desiring to attend college abroad or even at home. I also contemplated a credit union loan, a bank loan, and the Organization of American States scholarship among others. I filled out the various loan applications and submitted all of the necessary paperwork. My credit was in good standing so I did not foresee any barriers in being granted the loan. In the meantime, someone told me about the National Development Scholarships provided by the Ministry of Education for Barbadian nationals to pursue an advanced college degree. It was an opportunity to give back to the good of the island. If the person was awarded a scholarship, they were bound by contract to return to Barbados and give back to the development and progress of the island through education, hospitality, medicine, tourism, the arts and many other fields of interest. I checked the local papers for scholarship advertisements and so I could apply as soon as possible. With the student revolving loan application in progress and the
possibilities of applying for a bank loan or assistance from my mother, all I could do was wait and trust God would provide for me just as He did for Abraham.

While at home one day after work, I browsed the newspaper as usual. I was not that interested in the current events around the world but I still scanned the headlines. My main focus was finding an advertisement about the National Development Scholarship or any scholarships for that matter. As I browsed the employment section, I spotted in a corner an advertisement for the National Development Scholarship. I was completely excited. This was an opportunity I was looking for and I could not pass it up. I took the paper and rested it in its usual place because my father who reads the paper on a daily basis had not read it as yet.

The next day, I went to look for the paper in its usual place. It was nowhere to be found. I looked up and down and down and up but there was no sign of the paper. I asked my mom and my dad but they had no idea of the paper’s location. I was baffled. My golden ticket and opportunity had passed. I tried to console myself by giving self a pep talk that it was ok but inside of me it was not alright. The paper with the advertisement could not be found. Weird, I thought, simply weird. How could it disappear just like that? Feeling daunted, I went to work and told one of my colleagues the whole story. He knew I was looking for additional funding and that the National Development Scholarship was a chance to at least get a full ride. “Oh, well,” I said to myself, “I guess it’s gone. Maybe the student revolving loan will come through.” In Barbados, when an advertisement is placed in the local newspaper for a job or bursary or scholarship of any form, it is usually
posted for more than once. With this assurance, I kept my fingers crossed hoping that the advertisement would show up again.

**Patience is a virtue**

Day after day went by but still no sign of the scholarship advertisement in the newspaper. In fact it was never posted again. In all of my anxiety and worry, I never once thought of going directly to the Ministry of Education to ask about the scholarship. I had tunnel vision on the newspaper advertisement. Days went by and I wondered what my next steps would be. How was I going to pay for school? Will a way ever be made out of no way? Where was my ram in the thicket? I was in limbo. One day, after I had finished taking a continuing education class, one of my co-workers pulled me aside and said, “Learie, I have something for you. This may come in handy.” Initially I thought it was a huge check since he knew of my desire to study abroad but that was far from reality. In his hand, however was something just as good - a cutout clipping of the National Development Scholarship advertisement. I was so happy that I could have hugged him but knowing him to be a very introverted person, I refrained. Instead, I thanked him politely and rejoiced inside of my heart. It was not a check, but it was just as good to me. It was an opportunity for me to get the funding I needed to study abroad. Wow, God is indeed Yireh, my provider and He definitely sees to all my needs.

Seeing that the deadline was in a matter of days, I quickly did everything that I needed to fulfill the scholarship application. I worked on my resume and completed the application process with the help of my brothers and sister in-law. So many reasons for doing this started to circulate in and out of my mind and in my heart. I knew that I was
doing this for me but it started to become clearer to me that I was doing it for bigger reasons beyond me. One reason was the memory of my grandmother who firmly believed in the power of education. Even though she did not have the access to a fulltime education, she always believed in me and my potential to be somebody. Another reason was my mother. In some ways, I was accomplishing a part of her dream. Since she had to drop out of school at an early age to help care for her siblings at home while my grandmother worked, I wanted to make up for some of the things that she was not able to accomplish. I was also doing this for my country, Barbados. With a literacy rate of 99%, I had to be numbered with the other well educated Black people in my country. It wanted to go to give back.

I filled out the application in its entirety but I needed my director’s signature. To my dismay I had to wait for days to get the director’s signature although she knew the urgency of the situation. Eleven days later she finally signed the form but I was already past the deadline. I was once again thrown into a state of mental and emotional turmoil. There was no way that the Ministry of Education was going to accept a late application for a scholarship that so many others were perhaps applying for. As that scholarship is only given out at certain times of the year, I was competing with multiple people for this one scholarship. What was I going to do?

Once again my faith was put to the test. As the Bible states in James 2: 20, “Faith without works is dead.” I had to continue to put my trust in Jehovah Yireh, the provider and God who sees to it. If it was part of God’s divine plan for me to return to college, I had to believe that the effort was going to be worth it. At least, if I was not successful, I
know I had tried. I am grateful each day for songs. Songs have the ability to lift your spirits and help you to find comfort, strength, and hope. A song can change the whole atmosphere, move you to tears, or restore you in your time of need. I needed a song at this most crucial time. When I reflect on my childhood days and remembered the folks singing in the church, it became clear to me why they were singing the way they were and where the emotion was coming from. They sang from a place the bottom of their hearts where they met and talked with God on a personal level. I was in need of that place at this moment and searched for a song to guide me there. The song that readily came to mind went like this:

He would not bring you this far just to leave you
He wouldn’t have made a way if He didn’t care
He wouldn’t have given His life if He didn’t love you
He wouldn’t lift you up to let you down (Washington, 2006).

Once again, I trusted the process. I was trusting in His divine plan.

**Divine Plan, Part 1: The Meeting**

The next day I took it upon myself to personally take the application into the Ministry of Education. I was scared and concerned that I would be turned away but my mom insisted that I had nothing to lose and that she had prayed. I can hear my mom’s voice saying, “If prayer does not work, nothing will.” I was going to walk in this divine plan and believe that it will all work out one way or another.

As I entered the door, I asked the receptionist the location of the scholarship office. She directed me intent on chatting with someone to explain my predicament. As I got to the top of the stairs, I explained to the next receptionist who I was and why I was there. She looked at me as if I had lost my mind but still with some skepticism in her
eyes. After all, here I was standing with an application in hand 12 days late, hoping to get it accepted for consideration. The scholarship advertisement had been closed for almost two weeks. With faith and hope still ringing in my heart, she said, “Well, the lady, Mrs. Jones, is not here right now but if you’d like, you can sit and wait until she comes back; she should be here shortly.” I did just as she said. I waited and browsed through some other scholarship applications that were displayed and advertised in that department; none of them matched what I was hoping for. After waiting only a few minutes, Mrs. Jones showed up. The receptionist explained to her why I was there and before I could open my mouth to speak, she looked at me and said, “Oh, I know you. Are you the guy that sings? Is it Learie?” I said, yes I am Learie.” Was this a signal that I was in? She recognized me from performing across the island at various gospel music shows and despite the lateness of the application, she would still accept it and process it with the others. This was too good to be true. I was in. I left the office in an ecstatic fashion. I needed to prepare myself for the interview process. I was in. Once again, God’s divine plan was confirmed He sees to it.

Divine Plan, Part 2: The Scholarship Interview

I showed up for the interview and was surprised to see three familiar faces waiting to go through the same interview process – a student of mine, a friend from college and another acquaintance. Obviously, this scholarship meant a lot to so many people. Little did I know that I would see many more familiar faces all competing for the same scholarship. Despite the nervousness and tension that permeated the waiting room, we were able to engage in amiable conversations. Soon, one by one the names were called.
However, it seemed as soon as they entered the interview room, they exited. Several of the interviewees shared that they were questioned really hard. I had to remain composed and positive. For some reason, I felt really comfortable despite the fact that interviewing can be a grueling experience. I wore one of my favorite suits and meditated on what seemed my mantra for this process - God, *He sees to it.*

My name was called and I entered the room. I was directed to the chair where I sat before a panel of seven educational figures from within the Ministry of Education. It was an intimidating experience. They all introduced themselves and among them was Mrs. Jones. Except for Mrs. Jones, all of them were strangers to me. I wondered if I was a stranger to them as well. I was questioned quite rigorously just as the previous candidates warned but I was comfortable. I think I did my best and saying goes, “Nothing but the best is the best.” I exited the interview room feeling confident tempered a sense of the unknown.

**Divine Plan, Part 3: What a coincidence**

I bade farewell to those who were still waiting to be interviewed. All I could do was wait and hope for the best. I returned to work and my friend Terri asked how the interview went. I told her it was fine and that it felt a bit strange interviewing for a scholarship with so many familiar faces present. She laughed and said, “All you have to do is wait now.” Before we parted, she asked me to describe some of the people on the interview panel. I did it to the best of my memory. She nodded and then said, “Well guess what Learie, the lady who was the interview chair, is actually the mother of a student in your class.” My only response was, “No way! You got to be kidding me? Are you
serious?” She said, “Sure nuff, Learie, she is definitely Shelly’s mother.” I was floored once again. Was this God’s way of setting me up? All of these people in these specific places – was this His way of providing a ram in the thicket by placing them there for me? I could not believe it; it was too good to be true. God He sees to it once again. Although I did not have a final word on the scholarship nor had any idea on when a decision would be made, I felt better but still nervous because some familiarity does not always breed positivity. I still had to trust in the process.

**Divine Plan, Part 4: The Drive Home**

After the interview, after talking to Terri, after work, I went to the gym as usual. I had a great workout and I was ready to take on the world. I had no idea how the rest of the day or week or month will play out but today was a good day.

While driving home from the gym, I turned the radio on to the gospel station, VOB Gospel 790. A preacher was talking about blessings. Although I tuned in at the end of his message he was doing a very good job of encouraging people to keep trusting and believing God for their miracle. I usually associate miracles with physical healing or some extraordinary event etc., occurring to other people. I did not think that I had a potential one on the way. Just when I was about to change the radio station, the preacher said, “I know that there is someone listening to me right now that went to an interview for a job or a scholarship today and I want you just where you are to believe God right now for this scholarship and claim it because it is yours.” I was in awe; it was as if the preacher was talking directly to me. How could God be looking out for me this way? Was I truly witnessing His skillfully orchestrated plan? This was just too surreal for me.
Without any hesitation, I immediately did what the preacher had advised me to do. I began pronouncing my faith, claiming and believing that scholarship to be mine; Amen. I drove the rest of the way home with my faith at its peak.

I got home and was still electrified by the day’s events. I recounted the entire scholarship process in my mind: starting with finding the advertised scholarship in the newspaper; the sudden disappearance of the newspaper from my house; the surprising hand delivered cut out advertisement from my colleague; the delay in submitting my application; the surprising, “I know you” greeting from Mrs. Jones at the Ministry of Education; the familiar faces in the waiting room at the interview; the subsequent conversation with Terri; and the radio preacher’s just-in-time sermon. What an unusual series of events all unfolding so suddenly. I was once again reminded of a verse of scripture and a song that so perfectly describes the events of my life thus far. The scripture verse was Jeremiah, 29:11 (NIV) “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” And the song was by Donald Lawrence:

Oh God who knowest my beginning  
Though who created the plan  
Who orchestrated my life’s journey  
God, you are my God.  
God of decisions creator of answers  
Thou who ordained my way,  
Through my transition helped my position  
God you are my God.  
I will forever give you praise, honor and celebrate your name  
God of the past present and who is to come  
Oh God you are my God (Lawrence, 2007).
This verse coupled with the song reaffirmed that this was all happening for a reason. Every event was a part of God’s plan for me.

God you are my God. I bask in the knowledge of knowing where my faith lies and I am very aware that it may not be the same for everyone but the events of my life up to this point have been more than incredible. They have fully confirmed the divine plan for my life seeing its fruition. Meditating on everything that had happened in such a short space of time, I was left with an insurmountable sense of peace and satisfaction despite some nervousness taking place in my lower abdomen. A few minutes after my prayer-like conversation with God, the telephone rang and I answered as usual assuming the call was for my mother. On the other line was the voice of Mrs. Jones from the Ministry of Education. I listened and the nerves finally kicked in. My stomach had a few knots and although my faith had seen me through to this point, there was still a little bit of doubt trying to surface. She said, “Learie, I just wanted to let you know that you were awarded the National Development Scholarship.” I was completely overjoyed and filled with ecstasy. I am sure the elation in my voice was quite noticeable. Mrs. Jones said that she would be in touch with me about the various documents to be signed and the other logistics when the time was right. I copiously thanked her and hung up the telephone. Immediately I jumped up and down, laughed and cried, and did everything that was out of the ordinary. I was in awe of God’s power. I was awarded the scholarship. “Oh my goodness” was all I could say. Wow, God prepared my ram in the thicket. The scholarship was my ram. I was going to America. My purposeful living and God’s divine plan were working together for my good. God saw to it and made it a reality.
In The Beginning: The Visa Process

“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try, try again”
(Anonymous)

Applying for a visa of any kind at the United States Embassy can be a nerve wracking experience for anyone. Preparation of the various required documents can be tedious. If you are not fully prepared, there is a certain level of embarrassment when you are turned down by the consulate office. Missing one piece can result in a, “please come back”. I had previously applied for a visitor’s visa at the U.S. consulate; my first attempt was unsuccessful. Of course I was disappointed but I did not allow this initial setback to prevent me from trying again. Like we say in church, “this setback is just a set up for greater things to happen.” I was determined to get a visitor’s visa to the U.S. for my vacation. My second attempt proved successful.

The American Embassy in Barbados is the main hub for most of the Caribbean islands to access a visa to the U.S. People from all walks of life come to the island to see if they are fortunate enough to obtain a visa. I counted it a blessing to be able to stay in my own country and apply for a visa. Although I did not have to travel to another country to apply for a visa, I still had to go through the process of queuing for long hours and waiting like everyone else. Having been given the opportunity to return to school to study again, I wanted to make sure that I had taken advantage of this chance, and optimized all that I had within me to be successful. Preparing for the interview at the embassy was important. A key requirement when applying to the U.S embassy is being on time. Barbadians or People of Color in general have a very different interpretation of time. When someone says meet me at 6:00pm, they actually mean 6:30pm or later. When they
say early, they mean later. Time always seems to mean the opposite. In going for this visa, I had to adopt a different mentality. I had to go early between the hours of 6:30 and 7:30am. I had heard that people formed queues very early in the morning, sometimes as early as midnight, especially those who were coming from neighboring Caribbean islands.

Waiting in Line

My friend Meshelle told me that she was also contemplating a trip to the U.S. for vacation and we agreed that we would both apply for our visas together. She agreed to go early and take a spot in the queue for both of us. I was glad that she did. I arrived at the embassy around 8:00am. I was greeted by a long line of people that stretched for hundreds of meters away from the entrance. Fortunately, Meshelle had seemed a pretty good place in line, even though it was still going to be a long while before we got to the door. As I waited my turn to enter the consulate, I noticed the people around me and reflect on my purpose for being in line and what I wanted to achieve in my endeavors. I also wondered what type of visa some of the other applicants were applying for. It’s no secret the Department of Homeland Security is very stringent about who is given access into the U.S. Everyone in line was taking a chance to see if this was their lucky day.

According to the Department of Homeland Security, hundreds of thousands of individuals apply to the U.S. consulate on an annual basis for B-1 Visas intended for visitors to the United States (http://www.dhs.gov/index.shtm). It allows one to visit the United States for up to 90 days with the possibility of extensions. The K-1 Visa is for individuals who are planning to marry an American citizen. This visa allows the foreign
born fiancé to come to United States 90 days before the wedding ceremony. The H-2B Visa allows non-agricultural workers to work in the U.S. It is granted to people of many trades which are in short supply in America. It crossed my mind that some of the applicants at the consulate from the neighboring Caribbean islands maybe applying for this type of visa. The H-1B Visa was reserved for professionals who plan to work in the United States but the applicant must have a serious job offer from a U.S. company in order to be considered. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (http://www.census.gov/) 65,000 H-1B Visas are issued every year. The J-1 Visa is commonly issued to individuals participating in paid training programs offered by schools, businesses, and other organizations.

Last but not least is the F-1 Visa for which I was applying. The F-1 Visa is for students who wish to study in the United States. The visa is usually issued for the duration of the student’s education in the United States and is usually reserved for higher education purposes, such as college and technical training. The International Educational Exchange (http://www.ciee.org/) reported that $15,543,000,000 was the net contribution to U.S. economy by international students and their families. I met one other person in line also applying for an F-1 Visa. His hopes were high. I wanted mine to be on the same level as his. In secret I captured some of his positive energy.

**So Many Questions**

As I continued to wait, I could not help but wonder how some of the people might react to the consulate officer’s decision. No one likes or wanted to be rejected. Based on my past experience, it is a relief to hear the words, “Please return for your visa at 3:00pm
in the afternoon.” I wondered what reactions my fellow islanders would have if they were successful at gaining a visa? What if they were unsuccessful? What would my reaction be to either outcome? What were some of their thoughts? Were they experiencing moments of discomfort and anxiety like I was?

Looking at all the different faces, I eventually started to think about race and racial identity. How do people of different races perceive themselves and each other? Does race or class unify us? Did race or class have anything to do with the visa process? If you were a white Caribbean islander were you preference in the visa process? So many thoughts were flashing in and out of my mind. I needed to give it a rest. I had to scale back my thinking and be comforted in more positive reflections. I was applying for a visa because I wanted to continue my studies and become better at what I do to become a more knowledgeable and skilled culinarian.

According to The National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA) and Association of International Educators (AII) (2007) to educate international students is to have an opportunity to shape future leaders who will guide the political and economic development of their countries. Renowned educator John Dewey (1916) also believed that experience, education, and life are essentially intertwined and that maximum benefit to society can only be realized if every member of a community is educated equally to realize their full potential. I was among that group that would have a chance to experience life from a different perspective. I had an opportunity to help shape the culinary world and give back to my country. This to me was a golden opportunity. I could not take it for granted.
Eventually, a security officer guided Meshelle and me to our seats along with other applicants. It felt like we were being corralled like a herd to the barnyard. That was not a positive thought. I had to erase it from my mind and sit in a seat of positivity. We sat and waited with all of our documents waiting for our numbers to be called to approach the consulate officer. The consulate’s job, I am sure is very arduous one since one sees so many applicants on a daily basis. For many foreign applicants, the first American they ever meet is the consular officer who adjudicates their visa application.

As I continued to wait, I could faintly hear the voices of the officers, in the glass booths interacting with the applicants. It seemed like an interrogation. Fear gripped me for a few moments. Some of the applicants had looks of disappointment on their faces, which I knew represented a season of sadness for then despite the sun shining outside. Some were obviously elated, which represented a season of happiness. Which was going to be my experience? I kept my fingers crossed. Meshelle was called first. I knew that her charismatic personality usually worked in her favor and I did not doubt it this time. I watched her interact with the officer and she was all smiles as she rejoined me a few minutes. She was successful at obtaining her visa. I was next. “Wish me luck” I told her as my number was called. I approached the officer with a smile and confidence, but beneath my smiles was a storm of emotion. Inside of me, the rain was trickling down with an occasional burst of thunder that sent shocks throughout my body and no sunshine in sight. Under different circumstances, I would not have been so nervous. If I was on stage in front of hundreds of people singing my lungs and heart out to “Oh, Happy Day,” I would have been just fine. But here I was standing before just one person and I was a
nervous wreck. I really wanted this visa. I had already been accepted to the New England Culinary Institute and was excited about beginning this new chapter of adventure and exploration in my life. Getting to The Green Mountain State in New England where seasons forever change was my quest. That was going to be my experience should I be successful in obtaining this visa. I just could not let negative thoughts overcome my optimistic outlook in this stage of the process.

The Visa Interview

At the window, I presented the documents to the officer. I felt a bit comforted when I realized a Black man would be interviewing me. He briefly looked over my documents. Then he asked a few questions. Did the other applicants feel the same way as I did? My previous experiences interviewing for a visa were done by white U.S. officers. They were more nerve wracking than this one, but in any visa process where the outcome is so uncertain, nerves have a way of monopolizing any sound reasoning that you may have. A wave of questions flooded my mind. Why did I feel comfortable with this officer? Was it because we were both Black? Was that the common thread or was there a stronger bond? Did he have some Caribbean lineage as well? Was it that my documents proved legitimate and that my previous trips were indicative of my commitment to return to the island after I completed my studies? These were answers to questions that I would never know.

“So, how are you?” The officer asked.

“I am fine thank you and you?” I replied.

“I am doing well.” He responded.
“So you’re going to Vermont? Why Vermont. I know it’s beautiful there with Fall and the changing of the leaves, but why Vermont?”

With a little level of comfort easing into my psyche, I responded with a smile and chuckle, “I just wanted something different and a friend of mine had shared that the school I had applied to was a good one and by the way what is life without a little adventure?” He also smiled. This interview was going pretty well, I said to myself, and began to feel even more optimistic about getting the visa. Then out of nowhere came his next statement. “Well,” he said, “you know they aren’t many of us up there, you know.”

I was stunned. Question after question flooded my mind. Was it that he had my best interest at heart and was looking out for me? Was he preparing me as a black person to go into a predominantly white state? Did he know of any prejudices or discrimination that I should be aware of? Did he say this to every black person that he interviewed who had considered going to study, work, or holiday in a predominantly White state in the U.S.? No answers came to my mind. In that moment, I realized that my unyielding commitment to Black was connected to my sense of place and my relationship with my home place. Then after a few more quick questions, he told me to come back later in the afternoon to pick up my visa. I was happy. I thanked the officer and rejoined Meshelle who was still waiting for me. We were both elated that we had obtained our visas. I was happy and relieved that this process was over. Yet, as I was leaving the consulate, those nine words that came from the lips of the Black consulate officer still remained with me.

“They aren’t many of us up there, you know.” His words lingered and tempered my joy. Was it really that bad for a Black person to live in Vermont? Would I be playing the
leading role in survival of the fittest? I tried to take comfort in the fact that the officer was preparing me for an adventure. But maybe he knew something that I did not know. Maybe God had given him an advance warning for me. I had no idea. Only time will tell how those nine words would come to bear on my adventure.
CHAPTER FOUR: BLACK DIASPORA PEOPLE

Blackness in the Diaspora

Black people have a proud and distinguished African heritage that dates back centuries. Black Diaspora, as defined earlier, references dark-skinned people of African descent, or persons of African descendant. Populations of Black people, originating on the continent, are now found on every inhabitable continent of the world. I recently watched the film *Roots* by Alex Haley (1977). Even though I had seen it as a child, watching the mini-series as an adult still resurrected a fresh rage in me. Historically, Black people, particularly Africans, experienced extreme trauma with the intrusion of the Western European world. This intrusion spread to various parts of our globe and is regarded as one of the biggest intrusions in history. The enslaved Africans, who suffered tremendously at the hands of White people were my ancestors. Watching *Roots* again, feelings of rage were triggered and anger boiled up inside of me. I was like a little black tea pot filled with hot black tea ready to be poured on anyone who wanted a drink of my boiling black rage. I felt pain and sadness at the same time.

*Black Diaspora Man*

Even though I identified as Caribbean Black, I still carried the racial identity as a Black Diaspora man. When I think of the term Diaspora as it relates to Black people, I think of the Middle Passage and plantation life. Black Diaspora, reminds me of the courage and strength that exists within a group of people who, amidst hardship and oppression were bonded kindred spirits. Black Diaspora reminds me of the faith and pride that flows through my veins despite the circumstances that may try to hinder the
collective progress of Blacks. Black Diaspora carries a fractured and dispersed sense of unity. Black Diaspora peoples’ experience is a testament to their ability to survive against all odds. As a BCD man this is part of my redemptive future. Black Diaspora people owe it to themselves to write such lessons upon the table of their hearts and pass it down to generations. Enslaved Africans in particular developed strategies, methods, and customs, in order to survive in captivity. They also resisted threats to their own native culture and created their own new Creole subculture in their new homeland. Years have passed but despite our own Black Diaspora identity, “we are still African in ways that we will never be able to articulate into words” (Smith, 2005).

The Black Diasporic movement, which is the strong and enduring cultural heritage from Africa, has shaped and continues to shape our modern culture. The various impacts of the Black Diaspora on the different societies, cultures, schools, colleges, universities, communities, and ethnic developments are immense and powerful. I have personally observed the impacts in the classroom instruction, cultural activities, food, dance and music. I find Blackness to be an ongoing dialogue possessing an ambivalent past, a complex and energetic (if uncertain) present, and a boundless future. The Black Diaspora is alive and well.

**Intersections of Critical Race Theory, Colorism, and Black Identity Development**

In the following chapter I will introduce the reader to three themes as they relate to a black student’s experience. Critical Race Theory (CRT) Colorism and Black Identity Development (BID) help us to understand how Black students go about discovering who they are and finding meaning and purpose for their lives. As I engage in the definition of
these themes, I turn to W. E. B Dubois (1903) for some help in asserting my topics of interest:

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: Unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All nevertheless, flutter round it…to the real question, how does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word (p. 2).

This quote brought to memory something that I had never thought about before. My desire to pursue this topic was truly centered in the reality of my own educational experience - an experience which I had lived but never fully dissected. We are in some ways still considered a problem - a problem because we, as black students, are still in conflict trying to define our racial identity as well as navigate and challenge how we are to be educated at PWIs. Dubois (1903) further describes our experience:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts; two reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (pp. 194-195).

Here, Dubois suggests that Black students, regardless of the Black Diaspora they identify with, have a notion of double consciousness. They enter PWIs with their own particular understanding of their Black identity. However, they are affected by the predominantly White environment and start defining their existence by “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (Dubois, 1897, p. 194-195). This type of double consciousness creates further conflict in Black students attempting to decipher who they really are. According to Caldwell and Stewart (2001), Black students who enter PWIs searching for some form of validation or seeking approval or expecting appreciation are setting themselves up for
an internal conflict caused by double consciousness because of the “campus climate, curriculum and organized structures were never intended to be inclusive” (p. 233).

Although I came into PWIs with a different understanding of my Black identity, I found myself emulating of the dominant Black Diaspora group, which in this case were African Americans. While not directly soliciting validation or seeking approval, appearing as a Black African American student became a part of my thought process and existence. I developed a form of double consciousness. I started to do a lot of self-talk to help me better understand what I was experiencing as a Black student. I started to question who I was and if my experience was similar to that of other Black Diaspora students. With this dichotomous racial identity going on inside of me, I was in a racial limbo. I had to find a way to resolve this internal conflict and better understanding myself. In this chapter, I seek to bring an understanding of the experiences of Black Diaspora students as it relates to CRT, Colorism and BID at PWIs.

**Critical Race Theory**

Race plays a very serious and integral part in the life of a Black student on any college campus. Race influences how we view the world, and ultimately influences how we interact with other people (Tatum, 2007, p. 89). Race is defined as a socially and historically defined human grouping hereditarily assigned but not logically defined. It refers to very large human groups comprised of diverse populations and ethnic groups. However, when people talk about race, according to Lopez (1994), they attach a biological meaning. Other researchers and scholars, such as Beverley Tatum and Conrad West, posit that the concept of race is a socially constructed ideology created by White
Europeans and subsequently Americans to justify the enslavement of millions of people for profit. Lopez (1994) further profess that race has been legally institutionalized.

Guinier and Torres (2002) in their book *The Miner’s Canary* compare “race, for us, like that of the miner’s canary” (p. 11). They recount how miners would often carry a canary into the mine to help signal unsafe conditions. Noxious gas collapses the canary’s respiratory system alerting the miners to unseen danger within the mine shaft. Guinier and Torres correlate the metaphor to race, saying “those who are racialized are like the miner’s canary; their distress is the first sign of a danger that threatens us all” (p. 11). So how do we talk about race among Black Diaspora students and engage others in a dialogue that addresses the experiences of Black students who attend PWIs? Guinier and Torres describes race as many things, not just a single thing. It can be stigmatizing, but it can also be liberating. How can Black students from different Black Diasporas like me find liberation in talking about race in light of our differences and stigmas attached?

Critical Race Theory lends to creating a better understanding of the role race and racism plays in the success of Black students. “CRT movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among, race, racism and power” (Delgado, 2001, p. 1). It was built on two previous movements - the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) and radical feminism - and in response to the law’s role in protecting hierarchy and class. CRT typically refers to a specific set of practices and theories advanced in the 1990s primarily by African American, Latino, and Asian American legal scholars. CRT “emerged from the interstices of the political and institutional dynamic created by the disintegration of the center ground, and represented
an attempt to inhabit the space between two very different ideological and intellectual formation” (Crenshaw, 1995, p. xix). In today’s society, CRT functions in a variety of ways. Collins (2007) describes CRT in the following ways:

- CRT typically strives to advance a social justice framework. Unlike traditional scholarly research that investigates and/or explains how race and racism are organized and operate, CRT aims to redress social inequalities. This is what makes it “critical.”

- CRT is often not immediately recognizable as theory. Because CRT interests academics as well as a wider public, many critical race scholars write with multiple audiences in mind and may create different versions of their work for different constituencies.

- CRT is typically interdisciplinary and embraces multifaceted disciplines and/or research methods. CRT tends to be organized around core questions that reach into several disciplines and that require multiple strategies. CRT requires using a broader definition of social science and humanities as well as the intersections between them.

- CRT draws upon paradigms of intersectionality. Recognizing that race and racism work with and through gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality and/or nation as systems of power, contemporary CRT often relies upon and/or investigates these intersections.

What does CRT have to do with Black Diaspora students experience at PWIs? During my tenure as an employee at the University of Vermont, I have the privilege of
working in a department that values diversity and is committed to social justice and diversity. The first function of CRT according to Collins (2001) is a social justice framework. That function reminds me of the work I do on a daily basis to educate white students and all students about creating a socially just environment.

**Social Justice Training Institute**

In December 2008, I had the privilege of attending the Social Justice Training Institute (SJTI) in Arizona. This annual weeklong forum focuses on race “for the professional and personal development of social justice educators and practitioners to enhance and refine their skills and competencies to create greater inclusion for all members of the campus community” (http://www.sjti.org/contact_a.html). The SJTI was founded in 1998 by Jamie Washington, Kathy Obear, Vernon Wall, and Maura Cullen. These scholars saw the need for individuals to become aware of their role in breaking down stereotypes, racism, and other isms that are perpetuated in our society each day. They realize that change can only come if they and we become the change that is needed for our world today. Despite the forum’s intensity, and the intensive laboratory experience that I was exposed to, the SJTI provided opportunity for me to focus on my own learning and development to increase my multicultural competencies as a social justice educator.

During the weeklong session, there were many tension-laden moments that made me sit at the edge of my seat like a wild cat ready to pounce on his prey. But, I learned how to engage in passionate topics in a manner that was both ethically and morally acceptable. An incident unfolded one day during one of the sessions that made me
realize the importance of my Black identity. It also made me realize how Black students are often grouped together without anyone taking the time to recognize or learn of their differences. Even though we may all come from the African ancestry, that does not mean one readily identifies with the Black Diaspora majority.

One Black participant, who identified as African American, was asked to name his racial group and those who identified with that group should join him. All but three of the Black participants in the room joined this group – myself and two others refrained from joining this group. The other Black members were quite alarmed. They assumed that since we all looked Black, we should readily identify and join with the group that was identified; in this case African American. One of my peers was adamant about not joining the African American group. She said in a huge outburst before I could, “I refuse to be a part of the African American group.” She was unwavering in her stance and sounded off her disapproval with much reverb. Her voice still echoes in my ear. Everyone else seemed perplexed and startled by her stance. I was not. I shared the same feelings. It had nothing to do with not being from Africa because we know our heritage. It had nothing to do with social class or any other varying identities. It had nothing to do with the continued oppression and racialization of White dominance since Emancipation. It had nothing to do with others questioning our ability as Black people to succeed in Education. We simply did not identify with the African American Black Diaspora. We were not African Americans; we were West Indians, specifically I was Barbadian. My other two colleagues and I identified with the Black Caribbean Diaspora.
Vickerman (1999) posits the view that Caribbean people do not identify themselves as African Americans primarily because of the derogatory notion of blackness. He further hypothesizes that West Indians want to be viewed by society as having their own unique identity that encompasses pride in an African ancestry and a focus on achievement. I agree with Vickerman in this explanation. Admittedly, I carry my Caribbean heritage with a humble sense of pride, and although I am of African lineage, my Caribbean Diaspora is an integral part of my identity. My outspoken colleague and I are not African American, but international students, specifically from the Caribbean. We are immigrants to this country, not citizens. We are required to use work visas to prove we have been granted the right to be here. Each time we return to the U.S. we are fingerprinted to ascertain we have continued permission to be here, among a slew of other things. In this context, it was about owning and representing my identity as a BCD person. Had the African American simply asked those who identified as Black to join his group, the outcome would have been different. I was glad, however, he specified African American because it provided me with an opportunity to represent my Black Caribbean identity. It provided me with the opportunity to bond and find a community that carried an identity other than being African American. I have no grievance with the African American community. Black African American and Caribbean peoples will always have a bond but there are significant differences that need to be acknowledged. After some explanation to the African American group about these differences and our decision to maintain a separate group identity, the tension in the room finally became
calm. For the first time in SJTI history a “Black” group was formed; a group that did not identify solely with the African American group experience but a more global identity.

**Why the difference**

Vickerman (1999) posits that West Indians take very seriously the idea that, regardless of their ultimate origins, they form a united whole under the national banner of whatever society they happen to live. This notion of individualism is very apparent in how West Indian students view themselves and prefer to be identified by others. I can attest to Vickerman’s point in the unity that develop between my friend Myra and I. Due to the negative stereotyping of African ancestry by Western culture, West Indian attitudes towards African Americans are a particular important aspect of our encounter with race in America, demonstrating the notion that race varies across cultures and ethnic identity is flexible (p. 139).

African American, African, and Caribbean Black Diasporas sometimes distance themselves from each other due to the negative stereotypes that racially define them. However, Vickerman (1999) believes that although some West Indians distance themselves from African Americans, they find that certain racial issues which affect both groups also pull them together. This is also true for the African students. The racial separation between these three groups usually leads to many internal concerns, inquiries and sometimes conflicts, often prompted by racial incidents, feelings of alienation, and African American student attrition on PWIs.

What does CRT have to do with Black communities? Reid-Salmon (2008) notes that for the Black race, ethnicity makes no difference to the experience of racism when it
comes to the issue of Black identity. Regardless of our blackness there is a need to engage others from a critical race perspective. Roithmayr (1999) notes that CRT is an exciting, revolutionary intellectual movement that puts race at the center of critical analysis. Roithmayr believes that:

CRT shares two commitments; first, as a critical intervention into traditional civil rights scholarship that describes the relationship between ostensibly race neutral ideals, like “the rule of law,” “merit” and “equal protection,” and the structure of white supremacy and racism. Secondly a race conscious and quasi-modernist intervention into critical legal scholarship, CRT proposes ways to use the “vexed bond between law and racial power”…to transform that social structure and to advance the political commitment of racial emancipation (p. 1).

Scholars use CRT in parables, chronicles, stories, counter-stories, poetry, fiction, and revisionist histories to illustrate the false necessity and irony of much of current civil rights doctrine (Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999). As a Black Diaspora student on a PWI, I have had to use my voice and story as a way of communicating my experiences of being oppressed and the realities of that oppression. Parker et al. (1999) shared that historically storytelling has been a kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression; it is the story of one’s condition that leads to the realization of how one came to be oppressed and subjugated. As a Black Caribbean student, for me oppression has not been as blatant or tangible as compared to the experiences of some of my Black Diaspora peers. The idea of living in a state that is predominantly white brings with it a level of awareness of my Blackness. The American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s indirectly contributed to the mental liberation of Barbadians and challenged their view of colonization as a positive influence on the country. After all Barbados is a predominantly Black country where the government and politicians are Black and most of the leadership
is Black; basically Black people have their say on the matter. The Civil Rights
Movement, however made Barbadians and other West Indians more aware of the
inequalities that existed and the need to change the status quo. W. E. Cross, Jr. (1972) in
regarding racial identity. Cross’ book examines the many stories and explorations of
Black people who have had to devise systems to help bring an understanding to people
who had no understanding of their identity. This I will elaborate on in the BID section.

**CRT and Race Relations**

CRT plays a useful role in keeping all pervasive racism in the world firmly at the
forefront of their agenda (Cole, 2009). I think this is something that my department does
through social justice training by bringing awareness to the social ills of race that
permeate our institutions today. My race is at the forefront of my Vermont world each
and every day although I try not to think of it intentionally. It is evident in my
supervisory role, my advisory role, my chairman role, my personal role; it is simply hard
to ignore at times. Race seems to present in every social configuring of our lives. It is at
the forefront of the CRT agenda, as well. Race relations among Black Diaspora groups is
evident in the context of educational circles and continues to play out in the classrooms in
about education, “Race inequity and racism are central features of the education system
and are not aberrant nor accidental phenomena that will be ironed out in time, but
fundamental characteristics of the system” (p. 497-498). I have had countless
conversations with African American Black Diaspora students and friends who have
experienced racism. The conversations and stories were usually very painful and in like manner I have shared some of my own, admittedly less traumatic experiences. Racism, unfortunately, can be best understood by both listening to and /or learning about the life histories and experiences of those at the receiving end of racism (Cole, 2009).

Students from the Caribbean Black Diaspora view race in a different manner in comparison to African American and possibly African students. In his essay, “Black Like Who?”, Reuel Rogers (2001) argues that the Caribbean Diaspora identify themselves according to their national origin and see no contradiction between ethnicity and race. I readily identify with this and this was part of my argument at the SJTI workshop that I attended. I am reminded of a recent trip that I took to Brazil where I got the chance to observe the interactions of the native people who resided there. Race relations were not as prominent as they are in the U.S. In Brazil, race is seen from an ethnic standpoint. Brazilians - an eclectic, diverse group of people – are by far some of the most beautiful people that I have seen from an aesthetical lens. Their varying colors were apparent but did not seem to be a factor in how they lived with each other. Race did not seem to be a problem for them.

I had the privilege of teaching and facilitating a credited Intergroup Dialogue class one semester. The intimate class setting and lively participation from the students was provoking and assuring. During that class, we heard stories from a student who appeared black but was from a different ethnicity. She shared stories of racist remarks made by professors and white students alike. She felt intimidated and afraid to speak out based on being the only one. I was appalled by her stories but was not totally surprised.
Banks and Grambs (1972) suggest that in a society in which college students and educational experts exemplify racist attitudes and perceptions, we would expect the general populace to express similar feelings – perhaps, in a more intense form. Her stories were eye-opening for me since I thought that we, as an institution, were making progress by creating an environment that addressed the needs of marginalized group of students. The stories shared by my students were discouraging but hopeful however. What I was proud to hear and see were white students speaking out to some of those same acts of intolerance and injustice they had witnessed in their lives in and out of the classroom. I was comforted in this respect and felt that the work that my department and I were doing from a CRT social justice framework was paying off.

Another area of CRT that speaks to my experiences as a Black Caribbean Diaspora student is found in the various paradigms of intersectionality. Race and racism work with multiple identities and they often intersect with each other. As a student who carries multiple identities such as my sexual orientation, national status, religion, gender, class, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and nationality as systems of power, Collins (2007) points out, “contemporary critical race theory often relies upon and/or investigates these intersections” (p. 2). CRT has provided me with a way to communicate my experiences and realities of being oppressed by using my “voice” and the stories of my peers; storytelling is a huge part of CRT. Although I can expand on any of these identities as it pertains to CRT, I will share stories of my national origin, immigrant status and social class.
Migrating to the U.S. 10 years ago was something that I had never imagined doing in my life. I had always dreamed furthering my education and other goals but they were centered on being in Barbados. After going through the process of acquiring my initial visa at the U.S. consulate and the amount of paper work required since to maintain my legal status, I am painfully aware of the rigors and pressures associated with being an international student. A task force developed by the NAFSA Association of International Educators (2003) identified several barriers that students face in their access to an international U.S. education. Three of the most salient ones for me were: (1) burdensome U.S. government regulations, which often cancel out recruitment efforts; (2) cost of the U.S. higher education: and (3) the complexity of the educational system. Fortunately for me, I had the scholarship which made it easier to pursue higher education in America, but for some of my fellow Caribbean and African Diaspora peers this is usually a hard fought battle. Unlike some White students where wealth is passed from generation to generation some international students who are not as privy to wealth have to use whatever income they have either by family contributions, government scholarships, loans and major savings as a means of just surviving. Even after you have the funding, international students are controlled by a large bod of federal regulation that far exceeds that which applies to any other category of nonimmigrant (www.nafsa.org, 2003).

When I first came to the U.S., after hearing those words “there aren’t many of us up there, you know,” I started to question an international student’s experience. There are multiple reasons why students like me travel abroad to pursue higher levels of education. Some reasons are attributed to personal aspirations but primarily it is national pride – we
want to assist in the development of our countries in areas where it is most needed. Such were my initial motivations for studying abroad.

African Black Diaspora students that I have had conversation with shared some of the same reasons why they were pursuing their education. One African student, who I had the privilege of supervising when I was a Residence Director, told me that he and his family originally came to Vermont for a better life via the refugee resettlement program because of a war going on in his country. He also shared that despite the strife and the terror that his country was experiencing he wanted to return eventually and give back to his country with the neurobiology degree he was earning. When I asked him and some other Black Diaspora students from the Caribbean and Africa about their pursuits, most of them attributed it to family expectations and the capital investment their families had made to further their educational pursuits. In contrast, the reasons for pursuing higher education at a PWI of the African American students I encountered were usually different. Some African American Diaspora students said that they would have rather stayed in the city because that was where they felt most comfortable and attending a PWI was not their first choice. They only stayed in the area to be close to family. According to Carter (2001), “the type of institution a student attends has significant implications for the student’s future degree attainment and future occupational earnings…it becomes an important element of understanding the process of educational aspirations development” (p. 36). Black Caribbean Diaspora students like me and other international students saw the benefits of attending college even if it was at a PWI. Additionally, I had to honor my government scholarship by performing at the highest level.
People have asked me time and time again why Vermont. My response is usually the same each time; it’s a seasonal thing. Everything in life is for a season and I am appreciating the season that I am. I have a commitment to my family and my country even if I do not return. I have a commitment to myself. The foundation has been made and the race has begun and I am committed to finishing the course.

**Black Identity Development**

*As Dorothy Holland and others maintain, ‘Identities are the stories we tell ourselves and the world about who we are, and our attempt to act in accordance with these stories’ (Perry, 2003, p.50)*

Many students from the various Black Diasporas experience their identity development in a variety of ways. Some experience it in a more poignant and contextual manner while others experience in socially isolated environments or just being stereotyped. Russell (1992) points out that “being Black is not a color, it’s an experience” (p. 62). This has been my experience since I had never experienced being Black until I came to Vermont. Many of my peers from other Black Diaspora have shared similar sentiments as it related to their experience as Black Diasporas students at PWIs. Russell believes that Black identity is a multifaceted nebulous concept. Being Black affects the way one walks and talks; one’s values, culture, and history; how one relates to others and how they relate to oneself (p. 62). I never knew that this would be my story until I found myself in an environment questioning or learning more about my BID. I came to the U.S. for one thing - education of the culinary arts – but found something else – my BID enlightenment.
In an article by Davis and colleagues, (2004), a student is quoted as saying, “And so a lot of times, I felt out of place, because you see all white faces. You know I’m the only fly in the buttermilk, so that took some getting used to” (p.2). Most Black students either verbally or non-verbally experience this feeling of being the only non-White person in the classrooms of PWIs. These students like me have found that in many cases they have been singled out to speak on the behalf of their entire race or other students of color in general simply because of their appearance, socio economic status, or some other form of arbitrary social alignment. They hated the idea of being singled out and used to speak on the others because they know the diversity that exists even within their own ethnic group. When I first came to Vermont, it was clearly obvious that I was one of those raisins in the bowl of custard sauce. I was one of three students at NECI that was obviously Black. Surprisingly, but with much gratitude, we were all from the Caribbean. We shared a common bond despite being from different Caribbean islands and as an older student, I figured out other ways to adapt. I used my charismatic attitude to make friends of all colors and cultures. My Myers Briggs Personality defined me as an Extroverted, Sensing, Feeling and Perceptive person (ESFP). I suppose that made my adaptation somewhat easier but I am still uneasy in my skin.

One day I decided to take a walk on the main street near campus. I wanted to familiarize myself with my new surroundings and I needed to go to the supermarket. Out of nowhere on the other side of the street was a Black man vigorously waving at me. I was perplexed and in doubt as to this man’s hysteria. After taking a look around me for a few seconds, I realized that there was no one else on the street and it was apparent that he
was waving at. I did not know him and I am sure he did not know me, at least I thought. I was not sure what I should do. Although hesitant at first, I reciprocated the hand wave and from the look on his face he seemed relieved and gratified. It appeared to me that he was excited to see another Black man walking the street whether I was African American, African, Black Caribbean, Black Latino, or whatever I may call myself. He saw someone that looked like him - someone that represented Blackness – regardless of the individual’s self-identification. In that moment, I was reminded of the words of the US consulate officer, “There aren’t many of us up there, you know.” He was right; there were very few Blacks in Vermont. And in that moment, I was also happy. It felt good to see another face that looked like mine, despite the shades of difference. That moment on the main street in Vermont made me realize my Blackness more than ever.

The Four Stages: Negro to Black

Cross (1971) introduces four psychological stages of a black person’s racial identity development, which he calls “Negro-to-Black.” The first stage is the pre-encounter stage where the (Black) individual believes that the dominant culture is the only true culture. They usually downplay the importance of their own culture and uphold the dominant as a standard of achievement. More to the point they believe that White is right and Black is wrong. Subconsciously, I am sure I felt this way at some point in my life and it seemed like the right thing at that time. According to Cross (1991), Blacks sometimes adopt an anti-Black attitude and do not see Blacks or the Black community as potential or actual sources of personal support. In positions of leadership, anti-Blacks can
be very effective in weaving and ideology that discredits and destroys Black Leaders, Black institutions, Black studies, the Black family, and Black culture.

Cross’ second stage is the encounter stage, which is typically precipitated by an event that forces the individual to acknowledge the impact of racism in one’s life. The dominant culture pushes the individual away and, for the first time, the individual is unable to identify with the dominant culture. One of my Black Caribbean friends recently experienced this encounter stage. I have seen him as a Black Diaspora student viewing his race as unimportant, adamantly preferring to be accepted as simply a human being. One day, he was denied access to the smart classroom because of his skin color. Suddenly he was in a situation where his skin color was called into question. He was caught “off guard” and it was a serious awakening for him. He, like others similarly disillusioned, experienced a range of emotion such as guilt, anger, and anxiety. His self-image was shaken and shattered, resulting in a new interpretation of their self-concept in relation to the “real” world.

The third stage in finding one’s Blackness is the immersion/emersion stage. At this stage, the subordinate or individual has completely rejected the dominant culture to the point of hatred and experiences a newly defined sense of self. According to Parham (1989), everything of value must be black or relevant to Blackness. It is a new paradox of social change. One example I have that gives a perfect example of this stage happened during my advisement of a Black student organization. Several of the self-identified African American students found themselves getting involved in everything “Black” at the PWI they attended. They got involved in the Black Student Union, and the African,
Latino (a), Asian, Native American (ALANA) Student Center: wearing “Black” apparel and hairstyles: supporting Black-related events on campus; and even imitating Black speech patterns or Ebonics. It was like they were born again, experiencing life anew from a new perspective.

Cross’ last stage is internalization where Blackness is internalized, evidencing itself in naturalistic ways in the everyday psychology of the person. Black culture is embraced through inner security and self-confidence. Racial hostility is replaced by a calm and secure demeanor. Some parts of the dominant culture are appreciated but only those parts that are not offensive. This openness allows for a more pluralistic and nonracist perspective by Blacks (Cross, 1978). As a Caribbean Black Diaspora student, I like those from other Black Diasporas, have experienced these phases of Black identity development but most un-relatable until I was placed in an environment where I had to examine my racial identity. I have encountered all four of Cross’ stages of Black identity development, but not in this particular chronology; through my varied experiences in the West Indies and America.

**What does it mean to be Black?**

Komives and Woodard, (1996) defined racial identity as the culmination of earlier developmental tasks in the life cycle and it is a building block for later developmental tasks. They went on to say that:

The development of a person’s identity involves change, and it may include growth… it represents a qualitative enhancement of the self in terms of the self’s complexity and integration (p.45).
Tatum (2007) believes identity is shaped by the social context in which we learn about ourselves over time. Group identities - gender, race, and social class, to name a few – are part of that developmental process (p. 24). Reflecting on these definitions, I find myself asking, “Where did I start learning about my Black identity? Where did it all begin? Who taught me about my Blackness or was I always aware?”

Dubois (1903) paints a clear picture of what African American students in PWI’s may face as it relates to their identity – double consciousness and psychic liberation. Dubois points out, “Students who enter the university searching for validation from white culture or, even more detrimental, unclear as to where their validation from white culture comes from, are prone to become attrition statistics” (p. 97). He goes on to say, “Some of the factors which contribute to double consciousness are social alienation, a lack of academic direction, and purposeless pursuit of a credential, which makes student, faculty and administrations susceptible to double consciousness” (p.98). Double consciousness, for Dubois, explains the ways Black students may find their own identify and sense of belonging, which directly impacts their matriculation and retention in certain environments. Sometimes it is not always one identity but rather multiple identities that come under fire.

Reflecting on Dubois’ notion of double consciousness, I often wonder how much does one’s identity affect the other and how much of it is attributed to our race and BID. What do these other identities affect Black students’ ability to succeed at any school, especially PWIs? Due to the differences that exist among the different Black Diaspora groups regarding their BID, it is difficult to know what propels or inhibits any of these
groups from overcoming the odds. As a Black Caribbean Diaspora student, I interpret ethnicity and race quite differently from my African American peers. As I discussed previously in my SJTI experience, it has nothing to do with my not wanting to identify as Black, but my nationality plays a significant part in my identity development.

As a Caribbean student, strong regional, national, and cultural identities are of utmost importance to me. My self-concept is sometimes misunderstood as a denial of my Blackness, a misinterpretation my African Diaspora peer also experience. Their many languages and ethnic groups significantly play into their identities. Tatum (1997) posits, “When we think about our multiple identities, most of us will find that we are both dominant and targeted at the same time. But it is the targeted identities that hold our attention and the dominant identities that often go unexamined (p. 22). For students from the various black Diasporas, this is particularly obvious and true in PWI’s. These schools were designed primarily for White middle class students. Black students have to deal with the psychological and cultural barriers that affect their identity.

My experience as a Black Caribbean Diaspora student has been interestingly different yet similar to some of my other peer Black Diasporas. All of us have in one way or another recognized that it has been a challenge in “achieving identity congruence in the face of racist and oppressive elements” (Robinson 2001, p. 177). Black Caribbean Diaspora students who migrate or have immigrant parents, must reconcile two separate, sometimes conflicting, Black identities – West Indian and Black American. Seeing that I am not a full-fledged immigrant, I do not have the same internal conflict. However, I realize, had it not been for my obvious accent, I would have to constantly defend my
identity as a West Indian or Caribbean student. Cross (1991) notes that for West Indians that chief way for them to manage themselves was their presentation of their West Indian accent. As Waters (1999) points out, the reality of immigrants is the color of their skin. This has also been the experience of some of my African Diaspora peers. Although they were as assumed to be African based on the darker complexions, it was usually their accents that set them apart from other Black Diasporas. For international Black students, language is their clear marker of identity so much so, some students have made deliberate cultivation and maintenance of their accents.

I am proud of my accent and it is a huge part of my Black identity. I have been residing in the U.S. for the past 10 years and people often ask me, “how come you still have your accent,?” Am I supposed to lose it? Am I supposed to rescind a huge part of my identity because I am residing in another country? Am I supposed to become fully Americanized; Black Americanized? Whateverized? Whenever this question is asked, I usually respond, “I do speak the Queen’s English but there’s nothing more beautiful than being able to speak some good ole’ Bajan dialect.” Owning and embracing my native language keeps me cognizant of my Caribbean identity and what it means to me. While it may be okay to link all Blacks together as one, it is also important to see the differences they possess in their language, dance, and overall culture.

**Discovering my own Black identity**

In my everyday life and experiences as a BCD student, I have come to recognize that “blackness” carries a more distinct and severe stigma in the U.S. than in my native country of Barbados. While I am (mostly) recovered from my initial shock of America’s
emphasis on race, I still find myself getting use to the pain that my Black African American peers have experienced and are still experiencing due to racism. Despite my distinctive culture and the pride I have for my homeland Barbados, there is an imposition of being merged with African Americans when it comes to the issue of race and race issues that affect Black people.

What do I do about my own Black identity? How does my own ethnic identity as a Black Caribbean student impact my identification with the dominant Black Diaspora? I find it difficult responding to these questions that I have posed for myself. I know that I have encountered some of these stages in the BID model as a Black student at a PWI but do they equate to the experiences of an African American or African student? Fischer (1996), in his essay “Ethnicity and the postmodern arts of Memory,” writes:

Ethnicity, like peoplehood, is not something passed down, but something discovered and reinvented; and that the process of assuming an ethnic identity is an insistence on a pluralistic, multidimensional, or multifaceted concept of self; one can be many different things, and this personal sense can be a crucible for a wider social ethos of pluralism (p.122).

This definition of ethnic identity has provided me with a sense of relief to know that I can be me on the quest to discover my identity. I am allowed, based on Fischer’s definition, to experience personal liberation and to be my own vehicle for experiencing my ethnic identity from an individual and creative perspective. I know that as Black Caribbean student I do not interpret blackness in the same manner as an African American student. This causes me to ask myself a couple of question. Do I submit to the stereotype views of “Blackness” offered by American society? Do I concede to societal pressures and identify as African American, regardless of the “baggage” associated with the label? Or do I carve
out a separate and distinct identity to counteract the anti-black stereotypes that are present? Do I maintain who I am and stay true to my identity as a BCD student? Or do I adopt the African American identity on some issues but distance myself and emphasize my Black West Indian/Caribbean identity in certain scenarios? Do I even need to choose a path?

As a Caribbean student at a PWI, I find myself exhibiting one or all of these three options. The path I choose or how I process my identity and see if, when, where and how Cross’s BID has any major significance to my own BID as a Caribbean student depends on internal and external factors. Like Fischer, I have a concept of myself that I am discovering through a pluralistic and post-modernist lens. I am constantly questioning who I am, where I belong and what my purpose is. Despite my questioning, however there is one thing I know; I know that I am a BCD student who takes pride in being just that.

Colorism

In the Castle of my Skin

In the United States, as well as some other countries around the world, the color of one’s skin has become a socially and politically reconstructed attribution rather than a mere biological characteristic (Gregory & Sanjek, 1994; Ogbu, 1988). My racial identity as a Black man is a characteristic that speaks to me on a daily basis. It is a part of my day to day living whether I am at work, school, church, a social gathering, or spending some time alone time. I find myself drifting off into a world of introspection, analyzing who I am and whether or not the color of my skin is significant in how I am able to navigate
through society. As a child growing up in Barbados, the term people of color had no significance or relevance to my identity. We are a predominantly Black society so “person of color” would be a redundant term. Many Americans readily assume that it is a universal term to refer to Africans, West Indians, Latinos, Asians and any non-White ethnic groups. However, these ethnic groups may not even consider themselves people of color because:

In their home cultures people may identify themselves by common religious ties, similar ethnic heritages, shared socio-economic statuses, and even by the common experience of having been colonized by Europeans, but they may lack any experience of identifying themselves and others by skin color and other so-called racial characteristics (Rong & Preissle, 1998, p. 82).

Like many Africans and Asians, I bore no relation to the term people of color or never looked at my skin color that much to make a distinction between myself and another person from the Black Diaspora. It was only after my migration that I notice a gap between how I defined myself and how my host country and community defined and viewed me. In my primary school education, I remember reading a book by Barbadian author George Lamming *In the Castle of my Skin*. This book anatomized the life’s events of a nine year old boy growing up in a small rural village in Barbados amid dramatic changes in the village and society in which he lived. Some of the themes addressed in this book were of poverty; community (village); British imperialism and colonization; various historical moments, such as the violent 1930 riots; the contribution of women to that society; the effects of feudalism, capitalism, education, the labor movement, and emigration on his small town and, by extension, on Caribbean society as a whole; and the cultural significance of race. Much of the dissertation is centered on the themes that are
raised in Lamming’s book. Many of the themes began to speak to me as I wrote about my experience as a Black student and much of which is rooted in my memories growing up as a Black child in Barbados.

Lamming speaks about education, race, and the effects of colonization on his life and his identity. I have looked at my race and education to see if there are any parallels to my learning about myself. Like Lamming (1970), I had to leave my home to know what it meant to find race. I also had to comprehend the complexities of my identity that were so profoundly encoded in my homeland of Barbados. As a child I knew that I was Black. I rarely thought of how others viewed me based on the color of my skin. However, I can recall times when there was a focus on my Blackness, even the shade of my Black skin. I did not know it at the time, but I was being colorized.

**What is Colorism**

Colorism, as noted in earlier, is defined as a form of discrimination where human beings are accorded differing social status and treatment based on skin color. The term is generally used for the phenomenon of people discriminating within their own ethnic groups, especially when lighter or darker skin tones are preferred over the other.

Colorism is also viewed as a form of racial discrimination. In exploring what Colorism is, racism has taken on new meaning for me. Reid-Salmon (2008) shares that based on the degree of one’s pigmentation, a system described as “pigmentocracy,” otherwise known as “colorism” as well as “skinocracy,” was developed as the ideology of having a resemblance closer to white as being superior to being black. Colorism speak volumes of good and bad to me. Angela Harris (2009), a well-known researcher on race,
gender and identity, shares that “colorism and racism are not only identical; hierarchies of color can destabilize hierarchies based on race…despite the fact that colorism and racism can move independently, the two nevertheless remain linked” (p. 1). Knowing that I was Black and experiencing colorism without recognizing it is puzzling to me. I guess, this has a lot to do with Caribbean/West Indian people not viewing race as ubiquitous. As Reid-Salmon (2008) notes, Caribbean people have been indoctrinated to de-emphasize the seriousness of racism. This explains why some Blacks look at other Blacks differently. Some of us have been proselytized to dismiss race, thus diminishing its impact on us.

The African Black Diaspora has also had their share of discrimination based on skin color. Skin color discrimination in employment, housing, and other interpersonal relationships is a feature of the daily existence of immigrants of African descent (Gilkes, 2007). Despite the fact that colorism and racism can exist independently, the two nevertheless remain linked (Harris, 2009); they are very much intertwined. Scholars such as Glenn, Thomas, Harris and Thompson outlined several ways in which colorism can operate. Firstly, Harris (2009) believes that colorism sometimes confounds and restructures the racial hierarchy, which results in the circulatory meanings attached to color, shaping the meaning of race. She believes that the language of color “circulates” at a number of levels of scale - local, regional, ethnic, national and on its journey picks up inflections, nuances, and connotations. Thompson interprets skin color in the context of hair, dress, gender, age, and season, among other factors. He exerts that there are many
discourses of color shaped variously by labor and migration patterns, by histories of conquest and subjugation, by class by gender and by national identity.

Secondly, according to Glenn and Thomas (2009), colorism as a series of symbolic economies is embedded in material economies of production, exchange and consumption. It exists in the form of creams, lotions, and surgical procedures that “promise us the ability to defy racism” and “sell us the dream that we can individually transcend oppressive systems” (p. 2). Thirdly, colorism is closely related to class as social mobility. For example, using eye shape or hair texture as a way to advance and be instantly recognized. Fourthly, colorism has a tendency to portray fantasies about personal identity and family unity as well as a confirmation of disruption of racial orders. For example, Black families who have a lighter skin color are portrayed as having social and class status similar to that of White families and are assumed to be in better standings.

These examples have identified some of the complexities of colorism and how Blacks, regardless of their Diaspora grouping are forced to compromise who they are based on the pressure of various systems and the presence of certain social norms. So where do I fit with relation to colorism and my personal identity? As a child, I can recall one or two instances when I was teased by a couple of my peers in my village about my fair skin. They assumed I felt superior to them just because I was a few shades lighter. In reality, I knew I was still Black just like them, despite the relative lightness of my complexion. With colorism, according to Reid-Salmon (2008), skin color does not serve as an indicator of race; rather, it is the social meaning afforded skin color itself that reflects the differential treatment. I was being ostracized and critiqued by my peers.
because I have a lighter complexion. I was “White” according to them. I was “better off than them.” I had some social status because I was fairer in complexion. As an adult, I have read that lighter skin is associated with higher socioeconomic status (SES) and that complexion operates as a form of social capital that can be converted to human capital assets (although at differing rates depending on skin shade). My mom never really had any conversations with me about her skin color being a problem growing up as a young Caribbean woman. She never told me of preferential treatment to fairer skinned Black people. Obviously, this is something that is never talked about. My example is not new and continues to happen within many Black Diaspora communities. Some people may even remind you that you are not Black enough just because you are a different shade of Black.

Considering the varied research on the African American experience and their struggle for equality during the civil rights era, African American’s view of being a black student in the classroom still comes with a lot of negativity, aggression and hostility. Other Black Diaspora students, who do not share a history like that of the African American student still share similar occurrences regarding their identity in the classrooms of PWIs. For instance, West Indians who wanted to identify ethnically seemed to have a struggle to form and maintain their identities in a society that defined them racially (Waters, 1999).

Community interaction has shaped the historical African Diaspora more than the common ancestry and inherent unity of Black people. African students in like manner have a different view of colorism since their structure is one of community and
belonging. When Black students like me and those from other Black Diasporas are in the classroom, the added pressure of having to convince white peers and professors I do not know every black person on campus is still a regular occurrence. This constant assumption usually leaves the Black student with the ongoing questions of “Who am I ethnically and/or racially?,” as stated by Tatum,(1997). Komives and Woodard (1996) look at racial identity and define identity as the culmination of earlier developmental tasks in the life cycle and it is a building block for later developmental tasks. Further, Komives and Woodard explain that “the development of a person’s identity involves change, and it may include growth… it represents a qualitative enhancement of the self in terms of the self’s complexity and integration” (p.45). Tatum (2007) reflects on identity and believes that identity is shaped by the social context in which we learn about ourselves over time. Group identities- gender, race, and social class, to name a few – are part of that developmental process (p. 24).

**The Blacker the Berry, The Sweeter The Juice**

Black is so often linked to negative or harmful outcomes; for some being lighter is seen as a good thing. For instance, I have heard many people repeat the superstitious belief that if a black cat crosses the street in front of you, it is a bad sign or a bad omen. The often repeated adage “there is a black cloud hanging over you,” means you have a feeling something unpleasant is going to happen and you are just waiting for it. Other examples of negative saying or folklore involving the color black include black sheep, black hole, black magic, blacklist, black book, black ball, black clay, black eye, among others. These few examples about the negative aspects associated with the word Black
leave little or no hope for positive associations with Black. Black as it relates to race and colorism speaks volumes of good and bad to me. Whenever I hear negative stories about the color black being negative, I emphatically state that there is nothing quite like being Black and I am proud to be identified with this beautiful color. In the 1940s Charles Parrish explored the nature of skin color stereotyped in Black teenagers. Some of the examples used to describe Black students skin color were, “half-white, ‘yaller,’ ‘high yellow,’ ‘fair’ (which I was referred to on many occasions), ‘bright,’ ‘light,’ ‘red-bone,’ ‘light brown,’ ‘medium-brown,’ ‘brown,’ ‘brown-skin,’ ‘dark-brown,’ ‘chocolate,’ ‘dark,’ ‘black,’ ‘ink spot,’ ‘blue-black,’ and ‘tar baby’, the latter of which I recall many of my peers using to describe several students in my primary education that were of a darker complexion than us (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992).

Growing up, my Blackness was never as pronounced as my change of season in Vermont. My peers who have shared their stories about being singled out or followed around by security in stores based on their skin color and I have had similar experiences. I have been stared at before or others have given me a second look but my experiences in Vermont are very new to me. It is as if I am the fly in the buttermilk swimming for dear life. Given the fact that there are more people of color in Vermont now compared to when I first arrived, there are still relatively few Black people here. I would like to think that things are getting better here for Blacks in this predominantly White environment as we are slowly becoming a part of the normal scenery.

In Wallace Thurman’s 1929 novel, The Blacker the Berry, he describes women “bleaching their skin with a peroxide solution and plastering it with a mud pack,
massaging it with bleaching ointment and then as a final touch using much vanishing
cream and powder” (p. 32). This was done to rid themselves of some of their Blackness,
to be less dark. Reading this saddened me in that Black people were not seeing or valuing
themselves as aesthetically pleasing. Although Thurman’s novel as fiction, there is truth
in it reminding us of the idea of Black/dark skin not being good enough so alternative
methods to change one’s skin color were adopted. I remembered having a conversation
with a very good friend of mine who identified as Black. He had shared with me that he
preferred the winter season and the coldness because that type of weather made his skin
much “clearer” another way of saying lighter. He said, “For me to feel better about
myself, I would rather have lighter skin because having a lighter complexion ensured
some type of social mobility or acceptance. I get tired of being held back based on the
color of my skin.” Such a poignant statement reiterated the ages-old notion of Black folks
needing to have lighter skin for acceptance and recognition. Admittedly, there are many
challenges associated with being accepted for who we are and able to do than the color of
our skin. I still struggle with the concept of colorism. Who brainwashed Black people
into thinking that being Black was bad and something was wrong with us because of our
skin?

**Which Black are You?**

*If you’re white, you’re right, if you’re yellow, you’re mellow
If you’re brown, stick around, if you’re black, step back.*

Anonymous.

My chest tightens and my face contorts in disbelief. I experience a queasy feeling
and a moment of trepidation. What has occurred? I ask myself. What could have
triggered me this way? I pause and briefly reflect. I soon realize that it was those words; those words that started it. Reading this excerpt from the book the *Paper Bag Principle* written by Kerr in 2006 created those feelings. “If you’re white, you’re right. If you’re yellow, you’re mellow, if you’re brown stick around, if you’re black step back.” It is a very difficult thing to read such a quote and not feel sad and angry at the same time. As a Black person who is socially conscious or someone who understands what it means to be an outcast, feelings of indignation, numbness and consternation are sensed. The historical context of this quote still shocks me, but recognizing that this type of thinking still exists today is even more shocking. Racial equity continues to be a long hard struggle.

Several years ago, I remember watching the movie *Feast of the Saints*. I decided to watch it again for the sake of my research to see if anything more would stand out for me as it relates to this discussion of colorism. This story takes place in Haiti when it was still colonized by the French and Blacks were still enslaved. Those slaves who bore children for the massa (by force or choice) with light or close to White complexions were classified as mulattoes with a social class standing that was better than the “normal” Black. Those who were darker than a paper bag were disowned or made to do menial chores. The movie explores the differences in what it means to be Black and how appearance is a key indicator in whether one is embraced or cast out. The test was a comparison of skin color to a paper bag; if you happen to be darker than a paper bag, you faced a life of hard work and the lowest subjugation.

According to Kerr (2006), The Paper Bag Principle speaks to the power of lore in intersecting social, religious, and institutional norms. The paper bag, most commonly
used to carry school lunches or groceries from the supermarket, is an object of complex meaning in the Black community. Throughout the 20th century, references to paper bag parties (gatherings for lighter skinned Blacks), paper bag churches (those catering to a fair hued congregation), and brown bag clubs resulted in a prescribed language of exclusion and exclusiveness. This movie is depressing and informative at the same time as it sheds light on a very important subject that still exists today within Black Diasporas – the perpetuation of differences in the skin color of Black people. Re-watching the movie leaves me with the question I still ask myself, which Black are you?

Reflecting on the quote and the film, I felt an obvious and instant need to react. I imagined being in the shoes of my Black forefathers and how they might have felt being categorized according to the color of their skin by their own people. I believe worthlessness and low self-esteem found its way into their thoughts and made them feel as though they were nothing and all they should do was give up.

This quote taught me to appreciate my Black beauty despite what others may see as insignificant and ugly. I love the color Black. There is something that is so natural yet mystical about it. I love it in its many forms. It draws attention and evokes a variety of emotion. For instance, when black is worn to a funeral, it elicits a somber mood, however wearing the same color to a banquet or gala affair can easily reverse the negative stigma to express feelings of elegance, grandeur and sophistication.

Historically, to be Black meant something that you should be ashamed of, like “having a phenotypical affliction” (Evelyn, 2002). This affliction is coupled with prejudice against the abnormal. These prejudices result in the inferiority of Blacks, and
superiority of non-Blacks, usually Whites. Marion Anderson, the first African American singer to perform at the Metropolitan Opera in 1955 spoke about prejudices saying, “Prejudice is like a hair across your cheek. You can’t see it, you can’t find it with your fingers, but you keep brushing at it because the feel of it is irritating (para. 3). I find myself identifying with that feeling of prejudice from a colorism perspective. I know that I can never change my skin color or brush it off nor would I want to, but I am always cognizant of my Black skin and how others see me. I will always be viewed as different based on the color of my skin.

Reading about how Black people were so disgusted with their skin color that they would try anything to be lighter is a very disconcerting thought. Who or what was the driving force behind Black people desiring to change their natural Black beautiful selves in an exchange for a lighter or less dark color? Could the color Black be so bad? Could my identifying as Black be so terrible? Is there nothing positive to be said about being Black where being Black was indeed a good thing? How do Black Diaspora students at PWIs view their Blackness from a colorism perspective? Is there any hope?

**Brown Skin, Black skin**

> Brown skin, you know I love your brown skin,  
> I can’t tell where yours begins, I can’t tell where mine ends...  
> Apparently your skin has been kissed by the sun...  
> Every time I see your lips, it makes me think of honey-coated chocolate...  
> Your kisses are worth more than gold to me, I'll be your almond joy, you'll be my sugar daddy... Beautiful mahogany (Batson; Sanders; Arie-Simpson, 2001).

India Arie is by far one of the most self-affirming singers in Black music today. Her lyrics and messages assert and confirm the power that is within the Black Diaspora.
She sings with confidence and dispels any fears or doubts associated with Blackness and deliver a message of restorative and social justice. Hearing India Arie sing this song, “Brown Skin”, reaffirms for me the beauty of the many shades Blackness. I love the light not-quite-White, fair skin that’s obviously Black and “something” else. I love the chocolate brown reminiscent of the smooth Black Velvet cake that is made down South. Imagine how the cake melts in your mouth…hmmm good. There is also the milk chocolate and caramel shades that seem to glisten whether in the sun or dark. Imagine cutting into a molten chocolate bomb dessert and the caramel swirls as they mix together. The taste is sinfully delightful and heavenly at the same time. There is the smooth solid ebony of a Nubian goddess or king, or of a Senegalese princess or prince; strong elegant and confident. It commands attention without even making any effort. That is the power of Blackness.

Renowned blues singer Sara Martin references some African American lyrics that speak directly to and about Black women and their uniqueness. One line in the song goes “Now my hair is nappy and I don’t wear no clothes of silk, but the cow that’s black and ugly has often got the sweetest milk.” These lyrics have a way of empowering black women and challenging the negative paradigm, showing there is something sensual about being Black. Not only is there something intriguing about Blackness, but there is something nourishing and mystical that defies conventional definition of beauty.

**My Black is Beautiful**

Black Entertainment Television (BET) broadcasts a show entitled “My Black is Beautiful,” which focuses on the beauty of Black women and the color Black in its many
forms. The focus is not entirely on the skin color but about the achievements and successes of high profile Black people who have either made or were making an indelible contribution and mark on society. The positive focus of the show is helping to remove many of the negative stereotypes commonly associated with Black culture and people. Even though my ethnic identity is that of a Black Barbadian, I am still very much aligned with the stories that are shared on that program. I think of my mother and grandmother and the many other women who have been a strong influence in my life. I think of the values that they have instilled in me and the courage to accept those things that are sometimes the most challenging to embrace. Being able to fully embrace the notion that my Black is indeed beautiful is an empowering concept and belief. I wish more of my Black Diasporan brothers and sisters could experience this pride.

We, as Blacks, are sometimes caught between a rock and hard place in trying to identify with a shade of Black that is most acceptable by society. Black students may also be forced to sometimes be at conflict with each other as they vie for social acceptance and mobility on campus. Many times I am grouped together with my African American peers on the job or just in a social setting because it seems like the easier thing to do. Sometimes I would prefer not to be, based on the negative connotations associated with African Americans or Black Africans and I know that my peer Black Diasporas may also feel the same way. Yet, as long as you are Black in complexion, there is a label or stereotype attached deserving of the individual or not. But I also have to realize that we carry this racial identity of being Black and this is where we need to bind together as a unified group.
Whether colorism is practiced interracially by members of the same racial group (e.g., a light skinned black person discriminating against a darker skinned black person or by some external group, it presents many challenges within the various racial communities (Evelyn, 2009). How can we overlook these shades of Black and work towards an ethic of care and a common ground of support for each other? Being Black is something that cannot be changed despite the claims of a multi-million dollar skin care industry. Unity is strength and as Blacks we need to pull together to overcome our own prejudices to continue to fight against the racism that punishes us all. As Colored, Negro, Black, African American, and multitude of other titles, we owe it to ourselves to walk with our heads held high knowing that we are Black and proud.

CRT, BID, and colorism offer considerable explanatory power for incidents that have plagued the past of Black people and continue to compromise hope for an equitable education and a chance for social mobility. Each topic is useful in mainstream dialogue, and has an opportunity to inform strategies for social change across multi-color lines. If theorists, researchers, practitioners, and scholars engage in authentic dialogue about CRT, BID and colorism, many of the concerns associated with Black students, their skin color and their ability to succeed in education will dissolve. Blacks will then be able to show that they can pursue higher education without any concern based on their race.
CHAPTER FIVE: EDUCATION, LEADERSHIP, PURPOSEFUL LIVING

“The Mind is a beautiful thing to waste”
United Negro College Fund Motto (1972).

Are Black Students Capable of Achievement in Higher Education?

Throughout the history of the Black Diaspora student in America, there has been a troubled record with the American higher education. Some of these troubles included legal prohibition on education, de jure segregation, de facto segregation and futile efforts towards social integration and participation (Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, Bowles, 2007). Further research has attests that these students struggle with isolation and loneliness, discrimination and indifference/insensitivity (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald & Bylsma, 2003). Many other studies have also examined the ability of the Black students and the actual educational vision that they possess. Some other struggles faced by Black students include but are not limited to social integration, participation in campus organizations, and interacting with peers and faculty. They have all had an impact on the grade point average of these Black students in comparison to White students (Nettles, 1988).

In 1972, The United Negro College Fund which is the U.S.’s largest and most effective minority education organization that provides operation funds for 39 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), teamed up with the U.S. Ad council to come up with the slogan “the mind is a beautiful thing to waste.” Since many Black students were dropping out of school, or were not privy to an education, this slogan served as a reminder for them to recognize the importance of an education, and strive to achieve success despite their odds. According to Astin and Cross (1979), student
persistence in higher education is a subject of growing concern particularly as it relates to members of ethnic minority groups. A student coming from this particular group usually finds it difficult to acclimate to a college environment, but more importantly a PWI. They occasionally have to deal with transitioning to a new environment, in addition to issues of race, socio economic status, and class. Black students also face a great deal of anxiety and stress, as they strive to acclimate to a new environment. They have to challenge the stereotype to prove their academic competence. They end up spending large amounts of time dealing with their own and others’ perceptions of their abilities. Stikes (1984), found that Black students’ need to self-actualize is virtually impossible given the depression, alienation, doubt, anxiety, and anger fostered by a hostile environment. This form of alienation that is experienced by the Black students, is closely aligned with racial discrimination and vigilant racial consciousness (Harper, 1975). Levine and Nidiffer (1996), describe two main barriers to poor students attending college - getting out of poor neighborhoods and getting into college (p.153). Once they get out of the neighborhood and enroll in college, their socio-economic status is a determining factor that decides if they have the ability to proceed upwardly.

One of the greatest struggles that Blacks have faced in the U.S. has been the struggle to be educated. HBCUs were established in the 1800s with the mission to educate Black Americans. This struggle has been guided by the philosophies of black scholars, who believed that without struggle there was no progress. Black revolutionist, who fought for this equal access, believed that education was the passport to the future. The black clergy, who included Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, and Sojourner
Truth (Isabella Baumfree), were instrumental in guiding this movement. They sermonized that without a vision the people would perish. Within the Black community, education is now, and always has been, a vital weapon in the black arsenal. Black Americans essentially used education as their primary source of ammunition in the fight against a segregated society, racism, illiteracy, and poverty. The steadfast desire of the black population to be educated influenced the development of HBCUs, and HBCUs have likewise contributed much to the advancement of the black population.

Black Students enrolled at HBCUs, experience a different type of climate as it relates to their acclimation and adaptation in higher education. Unlike some of their peers who attend PWIs, Black students who attend HBCUs according to Freeman & McDonald (2004) do not feel they have to prove themselves in the classroom. They shared that there was strong support from faculty and peers, and felt comfortable asking for help should they need it. Black students enrolled at HBCUs do not see themselves as a case of wasted potential. The atmosphere of Black cohesiveness that exists among them creates a sense of belonging and further solidifies that being around students who look like you, and who are ambitious, and who set these tremendous goals, is encouraging and empowering.

Freeman & McDonald posits that communities of support at HBCUs provide Black students a foundation to protect them from negative images about Blacks and to instill a sense of pride in the Black culture (p.36). While some Blacks at HBCUs do not experience the same pressures to prove themselves in the classroom, they did encounter pressure to prove that they were as capable as students who attended PWIs. (http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2046/Historically-Black-Colleges-
Universities.html#ixzz12Ya3y3lr). After looking at the difference between Black students who attend PWIs and those who attend HBCUs, a caveat is in order. Two factors which determine success for these Black students on any campus are social integration and academic integration. Black students can succeed on college campuses, but a strong commitment to diversity and implementation of retention models can see Black students thriving amidst the institutional climates they sometimes face.

As a Black Caribbean student enrolled at a PWI, my struggles and experiences were slightly different, yet similar to what my Black Diaspora peers encountered. I undoubtedly shared struggles with isolation, loneliness, discrimination, and indifference and insensitivity. I also experienced what it was like coming from a Black race, and how Blacks were considered, or looked at as the same. I never really questioned my class status. I was coming into a PWI financially sound. The village where I grew up had poor people. Many of them came from a working class background. My parents were from the working class background, but they pulled themselves up by the bootstrap to become middle class citizens. I believe that my social class standings were at a reasonable level, not because of my initial scholarship, but due to my parent’s social standing.

Unlike some of my Black Diaspora peers, I never once questioned my ability to succeed. I purposed within myself that I would be the best that I could be. I knew that I was a representative for many which included my family, and had to do well in my academics. I could not fail. I had to live up to the divine plan that was set out for my life and make sure that I succeed. Due to this educational opportunity that I was privy to, I had to look past the depression, alienation, doubt, anxiety, and anger fostered by a hostile
environment, as well as the racial discrimination and vigilant racial consciousness that sometimes arose. I simply had to be the best that I could be.

**Readjusting to College Life**

Adjusting to college in the U.S. was more difficult than I had anticipated. Having been out of the classroom for a number of years, I found myself in a remedial form of learning. I believe that some of my Black Caribbean Diaspora peers also felt the same. As (Webster, Sedlack, & Miyares 1979; Thomas, 1981), stated, many of Black students’ adjustment problems are common to all college students. These students also face more specific problems. After being out of school for some time, a refresher course was a good thing. Unlike my white counterparts who may not have the varying factors as it relates to their race, and class, Black Diaspora students have to adopt a different method of adjustment in order to succeed.

Bayer (1972); Gruber (1980), hypothesized the way Black students feel about themselves is related to their adjustment and success at White institutions. Bayer continued to say Black students also find themselves in positions where they have to prove themselves competent enough of acquiring an education in PWIs. Black students are not comfortable in the academic environments of most PWIs and universities. As a result, they often fail to thrive as members of these educational communities they feel so alienated from. Based on my experience and the conversations I have had with some of the undergraduate and graduate students from the Black Diaspora, their experiences have been similar and parallel to my adjustment period. After my first day of classes at NECI,
I remembered making a personal commitment to myself, “they’re (NECI) gonna’ know that I was here.” I was determined to have my name in lights at NECI.

Hedgegard & Brown (1969) examined some of the contradictory norms that Black freshman students face. They believed that Black students tend to have higher aspirations – but obtain less than whites in higher education - they may also be less satisfied after their freshman year. Black students according to Bayer (1972), believe that the curriculum should reflect the real world, and often do not find the curriculum relevant to their world when they enter college - they desire more control over the environment than the situation allows them (p. 88). As much as this statement is true for college students’ right out of high school and for students who have had many difficulties with acclimating to a PWI, I was back in school to have a different experience. I wanted to experience an American education considering my education was Caribbean but aligned significantly with the British system. I knew that I was determined to remain optimistic and navigate my experience with the best intentions in mind. A lot of my success would be attributed to self-reliance, self-efficacy and adaptation, seeing that the current educational system was not necessarily set up for people of my own race although progress had been made to do this. Like Portes and Wilson (1976) believed, African Americans are only able to move through the educational and occupational systems due to self-reliance and ambition, while White students also use these attributes as well as benefitting from a social structural system that can carry them along to higher levels of attainment. Caribbean/ West Indian and African students according to Vickerman (1999) have deeply internalized the idea that merit is the only basis for upward mobility. Waters
(1999) also posits that for West Indians, schooling has always been seen as the path to upward mobility for the children of immigrants. Though there seem to be differences in how educational attainment is achieved, the importance of education is recognized as a means of social mobility for Black students and their ability to achieve an education despite the barriers they may face.

**Social Mobility: Standing out**

_The writer is a person who is standing apart…_

_You’re outside, but you can see things up close through your binoculars._

_Your job is to present clearly your viewpoint, your line of vision._

_Your job is to see people as they really are and to do this, you have to know you are in the most compassionate sense._

_Then you can recognize others (Lamott, 1994)_

For most of my life, I have always felt that I stood out or stood apart from my peers and others. My childhood days were met with favoritism [in a good way] from teachers in both my primary and secondary education. They saw something in me that was stardom, in some ways a bit scary, however, exciting at the same time. Whether I was singing in the adult choir as a little boy alongside my parents at church, or being the lone male chorister standing in the middle of my secondary school choir, I always felt like I was standing apart. I knew I had the ability to sing from an early age, but there seemed to be more about me. I was yet to discover what this being “special” was all about and was I in for a surprise. My pursuit of furthering my education in the U.S. was a further testament of standing apart; even though I questioned why I would end up in a state like Vermont. Despite the unknowns and uncertainties for my life, I learned to
accept that standing apart was absolutely okay. It created an opportunity for me to better understand who I was in my identity as well as helped me see people for who they are.

The awareness of my race was heightened when I enrolled as a student in Vermont, at NECI. This was more obvious when I saw the campus filling up with white students, but kept looking for the Black element of the school. I knew I was in Vermont, the second state with few racial differences. I was hoping for more but found none. I thought there would be more than just the three Black students present on campus. Not to use the stereotype that is associated with people of color, but maybe the Black students were on Colored People Time (CPT); that was my thought. As the only Barbadian at NECI, I was determined to prove myself capable of an American higher education. I had no idea what the perceptions were of Black students at NECI, but I was determined to let my work speak for itself. As a student at NECI, I had already received a degree from the Barbados Community College in Food and Beverage Operations, so, rather than boast of my academic achievement and prior experiences, I ate a large portion of humble pie and adjusted to being in the classroom like my white peers.

Despite the fact that they were only three Black students on campus, my enrollment into NECI was a pleasant one. I found the staff I interacted with extremely friendly and accommodating; my skin color never seemed an issue. One of the most amazing individuals I came into contact with at the beginning of my studies at NECI was Ellen McShane. She had a very sincere and friendly disposition. She ensured that I got settled and was attentive to any request that I had. Several of the other faculty and staff also made a favorable impression on me. Howard Fisher, Marybeth Rowe, Greg
Litchfield, and the many chef lecturers did an amazing job in helping me to acclimatize to the newness of Vermont and NECI. Seeing the lone Black man waving to me in hysteria on the main street, and being one of three Black students at NECI, I used my positive outlook on life to spiral me to be a stellar student. Each day I reminded myself that I was going to be great. Each day I said, “They’re gonna’ know I was here.” When I found myself in a state of isolation, and a little depression would surface, speaking positive words into my spirit and allowing my faith to surface made things better. I allowed my work to speak for itself. As a student, I did a great job. I advanced in my classes and finished that first degree in a short time. I was delighted. The belief I had in myself resulted in being the student who awarded several awards at the end of the first year. I Once again, I was delighted. This was just the beginning.

At graduation, I was chosen as the valedictorian for that year. I was also awarded the speakers award. It was an exciting, memorable and honorable time. Although I had set out in my mind to stand out and create a great impression on the staff and faculty at NECI, I never knew that it would have unfolded in such a remarkable way. I never allowed my race or skin color to be a hindrance in my ability to succeed. I used my faith, inner strength, confidence, determination, positivity, and the orchestrated divine plan to work on my behalf. I took the words said to me by one of my chef instructors and allowed the “world be my oyster.” I desired within myself to capture every moment that presented itself to me and make the best out of each situation whether it was good or bad.

Upon the completion of my degrees at NECI, I was ready to return to my country Barbados, however, the divine plan for my life was still in motion. Due to the
encouragement of my best friend Dave, I started to look into some international schools outside of the U.S. to pursue my Master’s degree in Hospitality Management. I found several, but the process was a very frustrating one. I rescinded that idea and decided to pursue my interest in a U.S school. Several schools were willing to accept some of my credits, but not all of them. I was now faced with the challenge of getting my credits accepted by one school in the U.S. I eventually met Robert Nash after chatting with his daughter Mika, and ‘whallah,’ the rest was history. I got accepted into the Masters of Education, Interdisciplinary Studies at UVM which was administered by Robert Nash. To this day I am eternally grateful to Robert for giving me the chance, and making it possible for me to further my education.

As a student enrolled in the Interdisciplinary Masters of Education at UVM, I became the first NECI student to be admitted to that program, as well as the first NECI student to pursue a Master’s degree at a four year institution. That was quite an accomplishment. My education was going in a different direction, and I needed to focus on the moment and what was unfolding. Although I was not sure how I would fund my degree, I had to trust the same process as I did in the initial stages of the scholarship. God would provide. Having been through all that I have shared, I am still okay with standing out and standing apart. There is a rhyme and reason to everything, and I am forever grateful to the many people who have been placed in my life to make my standing apart an unforgettable experience despite my Black Caribbean identity. As Lamott shared “the writer is a person who is standing apart.” I am that writer.
Self-efficacy/Self-esteem, Acculturation

Self-efficacy

As a Caribbean student, my belief in the efficacy of higher education is a cultural characteristic that helps to define who I am, and my motivation to succeed. Since education is something that is highly encouraged in my island, the mentality I have towards it is more than receiving a good grade; it is about exceeding and excelling against all odds. As a child, I never envisioned myself pursuing a doctorate in education. In fact, it was my brothers who excelled academically at almost everything. I was the child that did just enough to get by and sometimes my best did not seem good enough. Fortunately, my parents never got terribly upset. My mom gave some tough love occasionally and strongly encouraged me to do my best. In that same token, I was being challenged and supported in a caring manner.

Teachers were also a huge source of encouragement for me. They provided me with resources to achieve the best in my academics, and believed in my ability. They often recited a motto we repeated each day in general assembly at school. “Nothing but the best is the best, never let it rest, until your good becomes better, and your better best.” This mantra sounded good back then, and to this day, the message still rings true for me. I believe that nothing beats being the best, and what you put into a project will reflect what you will get out of it. This mantra has become my motivator for my academic experience in Vermont and has boosted my self-esteem and self-efficacy even more.
Self-esteem

In my education and personal life experiences, self-esteem has played an instrumental role in my success as a Black Caribbean student at PWIs. According to Porter & Washington (1978), self-esteem is having feelings of intrinsic worth, competence and self-approval, rather than self-rejection and self-contempt. I knew I was planning to attend a PWI based on my decision to return to school. I knew I needed to also apply a level of self-resilience in my daily routine in order to overcome any barriers that arose. Noticing and seeing few Black people in Vermont would be a reality for me, and I should be prepared for the moments of isolation and loneliness that would come. I should also be prepared for any discrimination based on my race, even if I did not identity as having or coming from the same ethnic group as my peer Black Diasporas colleagues. Maybe, I should pack my bags and leave as soon as I had completed my intended educational studies.

As convincing as it was to move on, I knew what lived inside of me. I had an abundance of self-esteem; I felt good about myself and loved myself. I knew in my act of self-esteem, I was comparing myself with others from the Black Diaspora since self-esteem is influenced by the social comparisons we make of ourselves with others, and by the reactions that others have towards us (Porter & Washington, 1978). Although I was pursuing my studies with a full scholarship, I could have easily become dismayed by being in this particular space. I could have easily adopted a low self-esteem and used my race as a way to defend why I had this form of low self-esteem. I chose not to because
others were counting on me and this educational attainment was critical to my own personal and professional development. I had to stay true to myself.

Some Black Diaspora students adopt levels of low self-esteem due to their environment, lack of resources and community or lack of opportunity for social mobility. Others such as African Americans may have higher levels of global self-esteem when compared to even whites. Rosenberg (1986), argues that one reason African Americans do not have low self-esteem in comparison to their white peers, is attributed to their self-worth which is based on evaluations and comparisons with their co-ethnics rather than the larger society. Other researches such as Gray-Little & Hafdal (2000) argue that the out-group status of Blacks promotes a stronger and more salient racial identity, which in turn has been linked empirically to higher self-evaluations.

Based on this research, it is almost convincing to say that Black Diaspora students find solace in community. Although there may be moments of colorism that surface, the self-love they have for each other is highly validated through their communities. Blacks, who are deemed unattractive due to their skin color, do not escape the biases associated with colorism. This can be a disabling form of self-esteem. Coming from a Caribbean background, my idea of self-esteem is deeply rooted in who I am as a person. I believe a lot of my self-esteem is attributed to the experiences of my mother and grandmother. They knew what was needed for them to be strong and courageous, and the importance of loving oneself. This was passed on to me, and I gladly embraced it. My self-esteem has kept me even though my skin color, race and social class could be identified as the impetus for me having higher levels of self-esteem than others. I would share that it is the
stories and the overcoming of racial barriers that has aided in me in being who I am. The Black Diaspora students, with whom I have interacted, have shared the importance of Black communities, and the strong levels of self-esteem which are gained from these communities. Despite the differences that exist among them, the common thread they share is striving for greatness in their educational endeavors and the unity they have with each other. This becomes their strength.

**Acculturation/Enculturation**

Acculturation as defined by Banks & Grambs (1972) is the process of adopting the cultural traits or social patterns of a group other than one’s own. Berry (2006) defines it as a process of cultural and psychological change that results from the continuing contact between people of different cultural background. As a Black Caribbean student from Barbados, I never envisioned myself donning flannels or being so casual in my attire until I came to Vermont. I would never leave my home in Barbados without ironing the clothes that I was wearing, even if it was a simple t-shirt or a pair of jeans. Being colonized to embrace a more refined code of dress was always part of my identity. Having been transplanted into a different place such as Vermont, I found myself not only adapting to some of the laidback styles but was slowly implementing some of the music, religious affiliations, behavioral norms and tendencies of my new environment. Banks & Grambs and Berry were true in their definitions of acculturation as an adoption process. I never thought I would embrace some of the cultural traits and social norms of Vermont life, but having lived here for 10 years, this process was becoming a reality for me.
My department did an activity on assimilation and acculturation, where members of the Black and White group were asked to share their thoughts on their acculturation and assimilation into the Vermont lifestyle. Some of my Black and White peers responded yes to adapting, others responded no. After prodding however, the respondents who said no soon rescinded that initial answer. When people Black or White live in a place for a certain length of time, they are certain fabrics of that environment that tend to “rub off” on them. I was a witness to this adaptation. Despite becoming a participant in this acculturated White process, my Barbadian ethnicity and Black race were still very salient identities to me. As LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton (1993) states, “the acculturation model posits that although immigrant individuals will become competent participants in the majority culture, they will always be identified as members of the minority culture (p. 397). This was my experience. I was still quite visibly a minority based on my very noticeable identities. In addition to this clash of where I was in my acculturation and assimilation process, I found myself embracing some of the norms of the majority Black Diaspora in Vermont; in this case it was African American.

LaFromboise (1993) posits that acculturation is assumed to be in the direction of the ethnic minority group adopting the ethnic majority group’s culture, but it can also be reciprocal. Certain aspects of my Black identity were aligned with those of the African American Black Diaspora. This included my fashion sense, food, music, language, religious affiliation and overall Blackness. Several of my African Diaspora peers adapted well to this new environment. Although they were removed like I was from the comfort of their homeland and available resources, they seemed to have accepted their current
living arrangements and were navigating for themselves very well. Unlike the African students and me, the African American students seemed to struggle more with the acculturation process. The lack of resources available to them, and the make-up of the White environment proved to be a very challenging experience for them. Some of the undergraduate students with who I had built a relationship, were ready to leave. The limited resources and support available to them was making them very unhappy. They were experiencing loneliness and alienation (Rokach, 1999; Nwadiora, 1995), feelings of powerlessness and loss of control over personal events (Kuo & Tsai, 1986). Although I had experienced symptoms similar to those expressed by the African American students, there was always something to remind me of my purpose in Vermont.

For African American students as Berry (1987) posited, “People who resist acculturation or who feel marginalized by the process tend to be most stressed” (p. 509). I will admit that there were times when I was stressed for a variety of reasons. These included finding a place of worship, similar food, people who were from Barbados or the Caribbean or even familiar music. The unhappiness expressed by my African American peers could have also been my story. The stress of my acculturation could have been attributed to my age, education, gender, length of stay in the US, my cognitive style, racism, and discrimination. I knew that it was not an easy thing for students of another Black Diaspora to embrace and undertake. Fortunately for me, my sense of meaning and self-efficacy was my sustainer and motivator.
The Only One

*College provides a glimpse of the higher life, the broader possibilities of humanity, which is granted to the man who, amid the rush and roar of living pauses four short years to learn what living means (W.E.B Dubois 1898).*

I can still remember the day when I finally convinced my brothers and my immediate family about my intentions to return to school to advance my education. I can still see their faces telling that story of “yeah, here he goes again, making these bold statements and never following through with it.” I must admit, as a child I would always say or start one thing, but never follow through with it. This became a norm. So many times I was never taken serious for mostly anything I said I was going to do. The news that I was delivering this time was different. I was going away for school, and I was looking forward to this experience. My resolve to rise above the limitations and doubt placed upon me by cynics was about to come to an end. I knew that my season of living in Barbados was about to change and I was ready to stake my claim in the classroom. I was galvanized in my God-given Blackness, my God-given ability and my God-given potential and I was not going to let anyone take that from me.

When I reflect on what education means to me and my family, I am usually left in a phase of awe and contentment. My mom never finished high school due to the lack of opportunities and family expectations. I can only imagine the disappointment she may have felt in not fulfilling that part of her life. When she shared that story with me, I knew that she was comforted in knowing that she was able to provide for my brothers and I, an equal opportunity to an education. My mom had the potential to be a brilliant lawyer or accountant. She possessed wisdom that was parallel to that of Solomon in the bible.
Subconsciously, my pursuit of a higher education is attributed to my mom. I was gaining this for her and myself, and my satisfaction and achievement was her satisfaction and achievement. Although my mom was able to return later on in life to obtain her bachelor’s degree in theology, I am sure she would have liked to experience those wonder years of going to school. With my mother’s story as a catalyst for me, I was ready to venture into my educational pursuits. My will, confidence, determination, and faith, were all suppressed into a force of one that was ready to guard any possible attack on my agenda. I was going to do this even if I was the only one.

How does it really feel to be the only one? Acquiring this doctoral degree would name me as the first and only one in my family to have a master’s degree and a doctorate. Even though my brothers graduated from college with their City and Guilds certification in civil engineering and architecture, I would be the only one from my immediate family to have made it this far in education. I would be the only one to defy any odds and realize my true potential as a “professional student.” Little did I know that I would be the first NECI student to go on and gain my Master’s degree? This educational attainment was indeed my catalyst for achieving my life’s full potential and according to (Smith) 2005, “If education was the horse that would carry me forward towards my hopes and dreams, then I was the determined jockey positioned in the saddle with heels to the side and whip firmly in hand forever urging the steed to greater speeds” (p. 370).

Being the only one in Vermont was something that I had learned to accept, but I knew that there were other challenges of being the only one that were before me. As the only Barbadian student enrolled at NECI and at UVM, the only Barbadian at my church
of worship and the only Barbadian in so many different arenas, I had to sit and be
comfortable with being that only one, or do something about it. What does it take for a
Black Diaspora student, who recognizes that he/she is the only one to succeed in a PWI?
Like the undergraduate students of color I interviewed in my pilot study two years ago, I
was able to identify with their experiences of isolation and loneliness. I had to find ways
to navigate the systems that were not systematically set up for me and use them to my
advantage. Institutional racism often plays a part in denying and discouraging Black
students the space to excel. My experience as the only one had its ups and downs. I
appreciated being the only one in some arenas, in other arenas; it would have been great
to have some community and solidarity with Blacks from different Diasporas.

As a non-traditional age student at NECI and partly at UVM, my maturity level
aided me in being able to navigate a track record of excellence. There were days when I
felt everything was too much, but often rescinded those thoughts and pressed on. “I
wanted to run on to see what the ends gonna’ be” according to the old Negro spiritual.
My experience is not a generalizable account for Black Diaspora students from Africa,
America, the Caribbean or any other region that is predominantly Black. Some Black
Diaspora students are not able to navigate for themselves the systems that are in place,
and a lot of this is attributed to history and the hardship endured by ancestors. From the
beginning of time, Black people were not meant to share in the opportunities that Whites
received. My Black ancestors were brought to the Caribbean, Britain, the U.S. and other
regions as slaves, with the intention to remain slaves. Other groups such as Whites made
various voyages across the Atlantic. Their hope was to have a new lease on life, while we
as Black people would have to endure the dreadful “Middle Passage” and the Atlantic slave trade. History of Blacks has a way of raising its ugly face in just about every situation. Oft times it has a negative effect on Black students as they try to navigate their educational path at PWIs.

Although my statement may seem erroneous in nature, a lot of Black Diaspora students experience failure due to the Eurocentric value system that was never intended for them to succeed. As a Black Caribbean student, I learned how important it is to take advantage of those opportunities given. I also learned the rules of the White world so that I could gain an entrance in their world. My intentions were not manipulative, but rather my way of doing what I needed to do in order to survive. I believe that the values of love and respect given to me by my parents, were two of the main reasons I was able to make it so far in my educational pursuits. If I did not love and respect myself, it would have been unreasonable for anyone else to love and respect me in return. Loving me for me has given others the permission to love me and respect me for who I am. This is one of the tools in my tool box, and it has allowed me to be okay with being the only one.

The Joy of Learning

“So what are you working on now Learie?” The question is asked. “I am working on my doctorate. Can you believe it?” “You are such a professional student.” “I guess I am.” I guess I am indeed. From the moment I landed in Vermont, this would often be said to me. I never considered myself to be a lifelong learner, but I recognized the importance and benefits of learning. As a Black Caribbean student coming from an island with a high literacy rate, the term professional student should have been a readily accepted term for
me. I was still surprised when I heard it, seeing that my intentions were only to pursue one degree and then return to my country. In order for me to realize my true potential as a Black Caribbean student, I had to take control of what I thought about myself and the world around me. Despite discrimination that I may have been subjected to, I never saw myself as inferior, incompetent or incapable. There was always a motivational factor that enabled me to reach my full potential. This factor helped to spiral me in the right direction. I realize more than ever that I am indeed a descendant of a once and still proud people. My Black ancestry is something to be proud of and instead of becoming fearful of achieving, I am happy to embrace the concept of becoming.

In today’s world it is becoming extremely difficult to succeed in life without an education. That is why I find so much joy in learning. Had I not decided to come to the U.S. to advance my education, the exploration of my racial identity would not have occurred. Malcolm X in a speech given at Militant Labor Forum, on May 29, 1964 said, “without an education you are not going anywhere in this world” (Breitman & Shabazz. 1970, p. 178). I was not going to allow myself to become a drop out statistic that is so easily tagged to African American Black men or Blacks on the whole. I had endeavored to counteract that myth with reaching my full potential by being a joyful learner. Marianne Williamson in her book *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles* wrote an inspiring quote that I happened to see while viewing the movie *Akeelah and the Bee*. The movie focused on a Black middle school female student who had a love for words, which eventually leads her to compete in a Spelling Bee competition. She was tutored by a variety of people but was also opposed by many. Her
determination and the constant urging by others for her to see her full potential allowed her to see that she was capable of being anything that she could be. It even resulted in her Black neighborhood that had initially offered no support becoming her involuntary tutors. This quote reminded me of a shooting star making its great appearance and landing. I had to add it to my list of favorite quotes. The resonation of this quote convinced me once again to learn as well as push myself to attain the best that was available. It was more than being just an educated man, but helping others such as other Black Diaspora students see their full potential. Williamson (1992) wrote:

> Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others (p. 190).

Powerful was all I could say. My fears of inadequacy were like that of scales falling from my body. They crumbled after reading this quote. My fears of thinking small and playing it safe were thrown out the door. Any fear of not being proud of my Black identity was quickly dismantled. Hiding behind the blanket of can’t do, or just enough to get by were all shredded. I felt a sense of liberation, and, if this liberation was within me, I had to let it be seen, so that others who were modeling or emulating me could also see their potential coming to light. I know I am one to think differently about education and the joy of learning. I often hear people say, if one door closes, another one will open. This is always used to encourage someone who may have had a setback or disappointment in
life. I believe that if there is no door that one should be demanded. When that door is given, you should walk through it with high self-esteem and self-respect.

Education allows for your outlook on life to be expanded. Since I have been living in the U.S., my outlook on life has been more introspective and gratifying. This introspection is one that I will use to better serve the experiences of any Black Diaspora students who may be struggling in their education and social circles. According to Moses (1939), when you find a man[woman] who has lost his [her] way, you don’t make fun of him [her] and scorn him [her] and leave him [her] there. You show him [her] the way. If you don’t do that you just prove that you are sort of lost yourself. Learning is a joyful thing.

LEADERSHIP

Leadership is not a goal. It’s a way of reaching a goal. I lead best when I help others to go where we’ve decided we want to go. I lead best when I help others use themselves creatively. I lead best when I forget about myself as leader and focus on my group, their needs and their goals –Anonymous

What is Leadership?

Many theories have been established to define what leadership is, and it continues to remain an ongoing developmental practice. Leadership incorporates stories and experiences of people who have helped to create change within the corporate, educational, and other business world. My initial thought on leadership was the visible presence of someone walking in front with a following of one or more people behind. Having been exposed to an understanding of what leadership is, my thoughts have since then changed. When I consider my own path to leadership, I believe that one of the most important aspects of being a good leader is having a heart and leading from somewhere
deep inside. Bolman & Deal (1995), clearly state that “the heart of leadership is in the hearts of leaders...you have to lead from something deep in your heart” (p. 23). This quote further solidified that I was on the right track of becoming a leader and all I had to do was to keep the faith and those values given to me. The epigraph noted above, is a good example of how a leader can bring others into their circle. When the leader forgets about their role and focuses on the group, the person, their needs and their goals, it makes their goal of being a leader a more affirming one. This to me is the art and essence of leadership. There are many followers, who in an unconscious manner have the heart of leadership within. I find this to be a wonder of mine in my constant interactions with students. Sometimes they find it difficult in articulating how to attain or achieve leadership. Having a passion and a heart of humility is the premise that followers need in order to make the first step in pursuing their call to leadership. I saw this is as a testament to my path in ascribing and becoming a leader.

My personal experiences have enabled me to make the statement that leadership starts with following, even if it is not in a physical display. Many of the people who I have encountered on my journey from a child to adulthood have influenced me in knowing what a leader is. They have given to the many facets of my own life through mentorship, role modeling, advising, and guidance. This has been evident in my educational, spiritual, social, emotional, psychological, and moral development.

The Leader, the Follower

When I think of the leader first being a follower, I am reminded of a book written by Dupree (1989) that speaks about participative premises, and covenantal relationship.
Dupree posits that building a great work relationship by being a listener, and where participation is practiced and inclusive groups are formed, is the essence of leadership. Most of my leadership skills were patterned after my mother and grandmother. They modeled participative practices of leadership in the community where they lived. They knew how to include people when it seemed that no one would hear them, and that is where I got my attentive and informed hearing from.

Not everyone is capable of executing this practice of covenantal relationships in an effective manner; however these two strong Black women, my mother and grandmother were ideal role models for me. Their kind of leadership has been instrumental in my own ability to build covenantal leadership initiatives with others; which I hope to transcend to others. Covenantal leaders have the ability to impact the lives of others, simply because they pay attention, and incline their ear to their followers.

When I was a chef instructor at The Hospitality Institute at the Barbados Community College, students and staff would approach me with problems relating to class, work and their personal lives. In spite of my already busy schedule, I made it my business to listen to their concerns, and only offered advice if it was requested. My colleagues and students alike wanted an opportunity to talk and voice their concerns, and by taking a step back, I was able to understand their concerns through their eyes. These experiences also allowed me to see how the participative management leadership style could be a very effective tool, especially when there are other people involved.

Participative management style is “An open form of management where employees have a strong decision-making role. It is developed by managers who actively
seek a strong cooperative relationship with their employees” (Answers.com). Certain episodes in my life have reminded me that no man is an island, and although I may think that it is possible to do it all on my own, the help of others is still a good thing to have. When a leader can engage and empower their followers in the decision making, it creates an environment of togetherness, and generates longevity in the relationship. These examples have enabled me to be who I am today.

**Resonant Leadership**

A resonant leader is one who can inspire others to reach for their dreams, and aspirations. Boyatzis & McKee (2005) posits that “great leaders are awake and attuned to themselves and others, and the world around them. They also commit to their beliefs, stand strong in their values, and live full, passionate lives” This type of leader embodies a certain level of emotional intelligence that Boyatzis & Mckee notes as “being mindful, and seeks to live in full consciousness of self, nature, others and society” (p. 3). Many of the leadership skills I practice today were acquired through examples from great resonant leaders. I was privilege to learn from resonant leaders within the Black and White communities, but little did I know that this kind of leadership would have a huge influence on how I lead and conduct myself in my interaction with many others?

According to Boyatzis & McKee (2005), resonant leaders inspire others through clarity of vision, optimism and a profound belief in their - and their peoples’ ability to turn dreams into reality” (p. 3.). I believe that a lot of my resonant leadership is attributed to my mother. I grew up seeing her practice these principles daily, and have found that everything that I do today is of semblance to hers. There is no doubt that I am very much
like her and that I am a “chip from the old block” or “the cherry does not fall far from the tree.” I believe that these sayings are applicable to my experience as a Black man who gained a lot of his leadership traits from the women in his life primarily my grandmother and my mother. I know that I am a resonant leader and my optimism and belief in others is enacted daily in the lives of students. I appreciate the fact that this form of leadership has enabled me to be a Black student affairs practitioner professional today.

**Leadership Called by Opportunity**

_Then forward still tis’ Jehovah’s will, tho’ the billows dash and spread, but with a conquering tread we will push ahead and roll the sea away – H. J Zelley_

My faith has been an integral part of my identity; therefore, it comes as no surprise to have a personal recount of moments where I have seen a call or vocation on leadership in someone’s life being demonstrated. On many occasions, I have heard the statement, *many are called few are chosen* and it was mostly related to a religious persons or clergy. I have also seen this statement being used in both religious and non-religious settings, where a person’s vocation was positively interrupted so that the call on their life could be fully implemented. With this premise, I am compelled to share how I have seen the call of leadership being skillfully and successfully executed on a very important person in my life. This is a little glimpse into the life of a strong Black woman whose dreams for a sound education were cut short due to family commitments, but still used her proud and confident Black self to become someone great; my mom the called leader.

One of the more pronounced moments where I witnessed resonant leadership being demonstrated, happened when I turned thirteen. My mom had just been given the
mandated opportunity to become the pastor at a disbanded church which was located in a rural part of the island. Like some ministers, a church that was already established with a thriving congregation would have been her preferred choice. However, she took this church as obedience to God’s calling on her life. As young as I was, I was able to witness the resilience and steadfastness of my mother, who simply “took the bull by the horns” and pursued this calling. She knew that God had a calling on her life from a very young age, but had no idea that it would have unfolded like this. Within the Black Diasporas, there have been countless stories of challenges and struggles; so much that it has helped to define who Black people really are. A challenge for Blacks is seen as an opportunity to make a positive statement. As Smith (2005) enunciates,

“We [Blacks] must let the light that is in all of us shine, and help the light in our brothers and sisters to shine, so that we shine as a people…not to claim that we are better than another group - it would be very unwise to rise above oppression and then become the oppressor” (p. 421).

My mother did just what Smith described. Rather than allow the brokenness of the church to impede her ability to move forward, she allowed the light within her to shine, and used it as a pathway to make things better. Resonant leadership is parallel to the epigraph at the beginning of this section; with a conquering tread we will push ahead and roll the sea away. My mother saw this call as a challenge for her credibility as a leader to shine. The call was willingly accepted, and she was able to make the best out of a bad situation. Her faith in God allowed her to have a vision and a plan to see what could be done to rectify this broken church. As a young man, I wondered how she would be able to undertake this challenge without having any undue stress and anxiety but, knowing my mother, she always had a plan. Chemers (2002) states, “By managing anxiety,
maintaining a positive attitude, and successfully coping with stress, leaders and followers are more able to make use of the resources of knowledge and skill that they possess” (p. 152). The road to officially pastor a church seemed dismal and bleak for my mother. She knew the situation would be a challenging one, but instead of being daunted by the challenge, she allowed her faith, resilience, skill, and knowledge to become her foundation. Those members who remained at the church after it was disbanded totaled 12. It was obvious that it was going to be a life altering, defining moment for her. She always stated her words of wisdom in the best and worst of situations, “if prayer does not work nothing will.” As a Black man, reflecting on the history and the importance of faith in the lives of Black people, it is no wonder why Black people are the way that they are. There is always that connection to faith and the God of their choosing. To this day, I find myself using my mom’s theme as one of the tenets for my life. It is also a major part of my motivation and succession plan.

According to Cherniss (2006), “confidence is especially important for effective leadership and skill in handling stress, along with a high degree of self-awareness, from the basis for strong self-confidence” (p. 6). In my mom’s situation, she knew that in order for her to be successful in her new position, she had to capitalize on her strengths of confidence and self-reliance to compensate for any weaknesses she had. She had to build a trusting relationship with the few members that remained, and set out a vision and a plan for moving forward. By doing this, she would be able to meet the specific needs of the people, and work towards rebuilding the fallen church. It has been 30 years since my mom displayed the attributes of a resonant leader. She led with emotional intelligence in
a very critical and crucial time. Her church has since then blossomed into one of the most outstanding, vibrant, and visible congregations on the island. They currently occupy a spanking new edifice, where the congregation has also embraced the theme of stepping by faith.

This example of resonant leadership is a constant reminder for me when I think of my own style of leadership. I have realized that mentorship in leading can be found in any race or ethnic group, and I have had the opportunity to experience both sides of the spectrum. Some of my finest mentoring moments of leadership were found in my mother, a Black Caribbean Diaspora woman. She is one of the reasons why I believe in the plan for my life being a divine and purposeful one. As mentioned by Hunt & Michael (1981), “mentorship is the most important element of the psychological development of men and it is an important device for influencing their notion of commitment and self-image” (p. 475). It is my hope to use such forms of leadership with the Black Diaspora students I interact with at PWIs. Since Black professionals as myself have the opportunity to effectively mentor leadership to these Black Diaspora students, it will help to supersede and deflect any barriers that may hinder these students from seeing their true potential.

**It Takes A Village To Raise A Child**

*Black is Beautiful and Black people have a proud and distinguished African heritage.*

*Anonymous*

When Hilary Clinton decided to published the book *It Takes a Village*, she was constructing it based on the Nigerian African proverb that was grounded in family and community. She saw the communal effort that existed among African Diaspora people,
and the responsibility of raising a child to be more than the immediate family, but rather the extended family. I have always appreciated the extended family as part of my Black Caribbean Diaspora upbringing. My grandmother who lived with us played a vital role in helping me to be the man that I am today. She, along with the village, did their part in ensuring that I had the resources and sense of belonging needed to survive.

Within the Black Caribbean Diasporas, children are considered a blessing from God for the whole community. When someone gives birth to a brand new baby in the village, there is a communal celebration. People in their own way congratulate the parents, and set up a paternal type of care for the child. In African and African American Diasporas, this sentiment of children being a blessing is also demonstrated. The communal responsibility in raising children is an important component in setting up the child with good mentors, role models and an example of achievement. In the Sukuma (Tanzania) proverb "One knee does not bring up a child" and in the Swahili (East and Central Africa) proverb "One hand does not nurse a child" values of family relationships, parental care, self-sacrificing concern for others, sharing, and even hospitality are crucial to the African family. Also recognizing from the days of slavery that religion is an integral part of an African person, the scripture texts related to unity and cooperation in (Ecclesiastes 4:9,12) and a mother's self-sacrificing love (Isaiah 49:15-16) are great examples of the village being fundamentally important in the raising of a child.

My grandmother “gran” as she was affectionately called, always reiterated to me the importance of being proud of my Black heritage despite hardships that may surface. She often reflected on what it was like for her growing up, and those stories shared were
like a pirate’s treasure chest. When I reflect on what it must have been like for Black folks like my grandmother, the ideal of the village raising a child was a normal thing. Black people could not depend on money or wealth to solve any problems they had, but their lack of, often resulted in their achievement of spiritual success, and an increased dependence on their living God. Their many attempts to conquer hardship were often overturned, but it fortified their faith in God and provided a space for them to have a greater attachment with each other, and formed stronger kinships and community. A peer of mine who I had not seen for a long time once shared that one of the main distinctions between the U.S. and the West Indies was the extended family. She said:

Look here, in the West Indies, you know we had extended families and because of that extended family surroundings, it helped me as a child to look around and see. Over here in the U.S. it’s just you and your parents growing up, your father if he is present or sometimes your mother if she is present or both parents. However, I had great aunts and cousins and people within the village where I lived. These people looked out for me. (U. Brathwaite, personal communication, August 23, 2001)

I was privy enough to experience the village raising the child in my upbringing and in my education as a BDC student. If I did wrong at school, I could guarantee that I would be in for a spanking from my parents when I arrived home. Villagers looked out for each other, even though it was sometimes too much to comprehend why they did, what they did. Within higher education today, the village mentality can find its way into the colleges and universities. Faculty, staff, and other administrators can unify as one to become the village for Black Diaspora students who find themselves in need of support. With the perception that Black students can only achieve success by becoming an athlete or an entertainer, rather than a doctor or a lawyer, has been perpetuated for too long. My
village which was made up of many working class individuals was influential in my success and achievement. It is therefore important to instil within the various Black Diaspora students, the full spectrum of possibilities and potential that lies within each of them.

**Parental Involvement And Upbringing**

There were two things that were distinctively important to me as a child growing up. Those two were my parent’s involvement and my faith. Although I had both parents in the home, most of my parental upbringing was orchestrated by my mother and grandmother. My father was a physical presence, but in many ways was also absent. My master’s degree thesis focused on the absence of a father figure, and the effects that it can have on a child growing up. This thesis provided me with themes that once again spoke to the importance of community, and the village being a key component in the life of Black child in their moral and social development. Hill & Craft (2003) made the following remark that family involvement in their children’s schooling is considered a crucial key to children’s academic success. Policymakers, educators, and researchers agree that family-school partnerships enhance children’s educational experiences (Chavkin, Gonzales, & Rader, 2002; Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000; Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2007). Given that school and educational psychologists must consider the contributions of various contexts on academic success when engaged in assessment or consultation within the school setting, information on the interaction between family and school are pertinent for practice (Merchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2003). Several studies document that parental participation in children's
education results in an increase in student achievement and an improvement in students’ attitudes toward schooling (Catsambis, 2002; Falbo, Lein, & Amador, 2001).

I believe that a lot of my success was highly attributed to my parent’s participation and the involvement of the village. My idea of schooling had its moments of positive reinforcement and resistance, but overall school was seen as an important essential. Family and school represent the primary contexts in which children grow and develop (James & Partee, 2003). Although shifts in beliefs, values, and attitudes have contributed to significant changes in the structure of the family, the institution of the family continues to be a fundamental factor in the development of the physical, emotional, and social well-being of children (Cairney, 2000). This research aligns beautifully with my experience as a Black Caribbean student on the island of Barbados.

As education is perceived as being absolutely essential, there is no reason to shirk or prevent education from being a part of your life. As noted earlier, my mom’s sacrifice in her earlier years is one of the major reasons why she encouraged us to get a good education. There was never any direct pressure to have a specific career. It was all about acquiring a good education. One of the Jamaican undergraduate students who I had an opportunity to speak with, and who I also concurred with in the Caribbean experience, referenced a conversation she had with her mother. She said:

There were certain things that were instilled in us from an early age. Due to the poor district from which we were raised, a lot of people thought that as a girl, I would finish school and start having a family right away. Yes that could have been my story, and yes it still happens to this day where some Caribbean children finish high school and look for a job, have children and perceive it to be a life of independence. To each his own but that was not going to be my experience. Before my siblings and I were ten years old, my mother insisted and instilled in us that we were to finish school and upon completion of high school, we were going
to go to college or some other tertiary institution. This was the Caribbean way of education that was drilled into us (Jamaican student).

Upon hearing her story, I found myself resonating with it quite strongly. My brothers and I were encouraged to go to school, complete it, and then enroll at the Barbados Community College (BCC) or one of the tertiary educational institutions to further our education. After I finished high school, I took two additional classes because my finals were not as good as they could have been. My parents were supportive nevertheless, and encouraged me to make the best of the situation at hand. After I completed those two continuing educational classes, it was my intention to go to college to pursue something that I was passionate about. Although I had no idea what I wanted to do in college, I knew that I wanted to go, or basically, it made sense for me to go. I followed in my brothers footsteps and enrolled at the BCC. I graduated with a degree in Food and Beverage Operations; something I still love to this day.

Parents’ involvement in their children’s education often depends on variety of factors; one of these factors is the school climate. School climate is defined by Hoy, Smith, and Sweetland (2002) as the overall atmosphere and culture of the school or learning environment characterized by the attitudes, actions and interactions of the administration, teachers, students, and parents. Thus, when schools create a positive school climate by reaching out to families and providing structures for them to become involved, the result is effective family-school partnerships (Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2002). Such partnerships connect families and schools to help children succeed in school. Given the considerable contribution of parental involvement to students’ academic performance (Barton, Drake, Perez, & George, 2004; Epstein, 2001; Thornkidsen &
Stein, 1998), it is not surprising that researchers have sought to determine what factors promote parents’ involvement in children’s education, as well as to establish the various ways in which they can become involved.

In my primary education, one of the most influential people in my life was once again a woman. Mrs. Moe was the principal of the St. David’s primary school that I attended. She took me “under her wings” like a mother, and mentored and modeled for me the ideal kind of student I could be and more. I would never know what she saw in me as a student, but I soon realized that there had to be something special in me. From a very early age, people were mentoring and preparing me for life. The school communities in Barbados are closely connected to the villages where they are located, and the partnership created by schools and families is an established relationship. Everyone looks out for each other, and the idea of being different based on the color of one’s skin, is never ever addressed or seen as an issue. I appreciate the partnership of the community and families in my country Barbados, but I find myself pondering whether or not such communities are prevalent in places where Black Diaspora students are the minority, and the dominant group is white. The question is still asked, how much support even at a college or university level is afforded to Black Diaspora students to aid them in their educational attainment?

Darling and Steinberg's (1993) integrative model of parenting provides insight into the mechanisms by which engaged parenting might operate. In their model, they postulate that children's academic outcomes are derived from parents' attitudes and behaviors. In turn, parental attitudes and behaviors originate from their parenting goals
and values. Parenting goals, according to Dix (2000), fall into two general categories: empathy and socialization goals. The former involves establishing a nurturing, responsive environment, while the latter aims to shape the child's academic achievement and social behavior. The apparent primacy of parenting goals in the model suggests that parenting goals can be a powerful leverage point for interventions aimed at improving parental involvement (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Moreover, an atmosphere or environment that nurtures the motivation to learn can be cultivated in the home, in the classroom, or, in the society at large. Children’s home environment shapes the initial constellation of attitudes they develop toward learning (Pintrich, 2002). When children are raised in a home that nurtures a sense of self-worth, competence, autonomy, and self-efficacy, they will be more apt to accept the risks inherent in learning, especially within the classroom environment (Giuliani & Pierangelo, 2002). Fortunately for me, I had the privilege of a nurturing environment as my learning experience. My mother and father who were both working class parents, made the necessary provisions for my brothers and I to have a good education. Despite their social class backgrounds, they nurtured a sense of self-worth, competence, autonomy and self-efficacy that helped us to value the importance of education. To this day I am eternally grateful.

Parental factors such as efficacy and involvement (Ames, Tanaka, Khoju, & Watkins, 2000), level of education (Baker & Stevenson, 2003), socioeconomic status (Kerbow & Bernhardt, 2003; Sui-Chi & William, 2004), and parents’ own negative school experiences have influenced parents’ desires and ability to become more actively involved in their children’s education. Furthermore, because parental involvement in
children’s education has been associated with positive outcomes for students, the
development of positive teacher/parent interaction skills is an essential area of teachers’
professional development (Moles, 2000). Several researchers suggest that teachers who
engage in effective parental involvement strategies are more likely to be perceived by
parents and principals as high in teaching ability, receive support from parents, and hold
higher levels of teaching efficacy (i.e., Epstein, 1985, 1986; Greenwood & Hickman,
1991; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987). Now that I am much older and have
immigrated to a state that is predominantly white, I find myself appreciating the level of
parental involvement that I had growing up. Many Black Diaspora students are not privy
to such an experience due to factors such as single parent homes and the lack of guidance
in their high school experience. I am sometimes disappointed when I hear stories from
Black Diaspora undergraduate students about guidance counselors negating their ability
to gain a college degree. Just like Malcolm X, they are encouraged to learn a trade rather
than pursue a career such as a lawyer, doctor, bio-engineer, and those jobs which are
mostly filled by white people. Although I believe that college may not be for everyone,
any opportunity to gain an education, or pursue a goal, should not be dismissed until the
person is able to explore it. People like Mrs. Moe and the other teachers who created a
door for me to walk through, makes me truly grateful. My experience maybe similar or
different to some of the other Black Diaspora students, but each day I am thankful for the
preparation that has led to a good education. Living in the US has provided me with an
opportunity to achieve a goal that was not possible in my country. It has also helped me
to see immigration as a way of realizing my true potential in education.
**Trusting Relationship**

When I think of some other ways my leadership has been formed, I am reminded of spiritual foundation and the building of trusting relationships. Maxwell (1993) believed that leaders must know the way, show the way and go the way. I believe that if the trust factor is initiated, it paves the way for a better community to be formed. These have all proven to be a core value of who I am today.

I look to Christine Rodriguez in *Leading Coherently*, who shared that her parents were the spiritual leaders who invested high morals in her. She also stated that the qualities she has and the beliefs she holds, are those which have kept her grounded, and what has also been instrumental in helping her to know who she is today. I like Christine, can identify with spiritual leadership being the core for who I am today. Having been raised in a Christian home and my mom being the minister of an evangelical church, the characteristics of a resonant leader has been the focal point for me having certain attributes. Although others have helped to form how I am as a leader, the majority of my leadership skills have been formulated and grounded in my spiritual foundation. The conversations that I have had with Black Diaspora students at PWIs have for the most part highlighted the importance of church, and God, and a belief in a higher power, as an essential component of their existence. Though they find it difficult to find a place of worship that is similar to what they are used to, they look for meaning in their lives through connecting with other Black students.
PURPOSEFUL LIVING

He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.
Friedrich Nietzsche

You cannot discover the purpose of life by asking someone else
the only way you’ll ever get the right answer is by asking yourself.
Terri Guillemets

The purpose of life is a life of purpose.
Robert Byrne

Each Life Has A Purpose

Each day I am grateful for having a life that I can live to the fullest in order to
fulfill my purpose. Though I have been privileged to experience some exciting and
memorable events in my life, I believe this opportunity to write about my educational
attainment and my Black Diaspora identity has been an incredible achievement thus far.
My educational achievement though unexpected has proven to be a gratifying
accomplishment; one that I will always remember for a lifetime. To be recognized and
appreciated by family, friends and colleagues for persevering against all odds leaves me
very humble yet satisfied that I have been executing the purpose for my life and bearing
all that I needed to bear successfully. I am also grateful to be associated with being a part
of a people, who have traditionally considered faith in a mighty living God to be an
essential element in their lives in the face of adversity. For most Black Diaspora people,
expecting to do the impossible and unthinkable but eventually doing the impossible was
something not to be expected. Black people were disenfranchised in so many ways, and
the only other outlet and dependence that they had was their unwavering faith in God.
This eventually became something that they would be proud of. Faith in the lives of
Black people is likened to the air that they breathe. As long as they had their God and
their resilience as a Black people, things had a way of working out even if it took a long
time to get there.

According to Henry McNeal Turner, a strong proponent of emigration to Africa
and an outspoken bishop who criticized the racial injustices against African Americans in
1800’s, believed that Black people had a spiritual need to hear that they too, were created
in God’s image, and were just as important as any other race in the eyes of God. Martyrs
and prominent figures such as Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, Dame Nita Barrow,
Sojourner Truth, Julian Tillman, Henry McNeal Turner and others, have overcome major
obstacles with little to no resources. Their unyielding faith in a mighty God was
sometimes all they had to depend on, and in the end it kept them steadfast and
unmovable. Just as African American Blacks in America were able to do this, so were
Caribbean and African Blacks. Most of the triumphs and successes that Black people
have accomplished are stemmed from purposeful living and having a zealous heart. As a
Black Diaspora student educated at a PWI, my reason for being in the U.S. is truly
credited to desiring more in education and doing it with a sense of purpose and diligence.
It has also strongly addressed my faith in God, and showed how much my educational
pursuits and faith has worked in a simultaneous manner.

How Much control Do I Have Over My Life?

Since migrating to the U.S, these past 10 years, I have reached a personal resolve
that it is okay to say that God has my life in His full control. I make my own plans and
they come to fruition, but when all is said and done, my plans are carefully mastered by a
greater being than myself. Having control of my life started in my childhood but
manifested itself more clearly when I decided to apply for the scholarship and visa to return to school. I had to believe that what I was experiencing was attributed to a divine intervention of some sort, and that my life was being controlled by God. As an administrator/educator at a PWI, it is sometimes difficult to talk about religion or spirituality. Some individuals would rather not dialogue on this topic because of the church and state milieu, and the sensitive nature of the subject. Coming from a culture where it is okay to freely practice your faith in any school, I was a bit puzzled as I saw migrating to the U.S. as a further opportunity to talk about religion in the classroom. It still comes as a surprise to me when people shy away or in hushed tones default on talking about religion. By living in the U.S. where it is proclaimed as the land of the free and the home of the brave, I figured it was okay to talk and practice my faith on a college without any fear. I felt that it was okay to share this, but I found myself exercising caution when speaking about religion and spirituality. When I took Robert Nash’s religion class during my master’s degree, I felt like a space had finally been created for me to explore what religion was to me. It also provided me with an opportunity to explore through an experiential lens what other religions, faiths, agnostic and atheist’s thoughts were on religion and spirituality.

As a Black Caribbean student who grew up with a fundamentalist approach to Christianity and religion, I found myself wrestling with being in the classroom and talking about my religious beliefs. It was customary for me to speak about my Christian beliefs without any inhibitions, and I assumed that it was okay to venture out without any judgment. Despite the initial apprehension to talk about my faith and religion, I was able
to gain a lot from being in the classroom. The class provided me with a better understanding of the differences, similarities, and unique characteristics that are found in each religion. As a further reflection, I wondered if it was okay to say that Black Diaspora students were of the same mind set as it related to having a faith and a trust in God. I wondered if their faith was instrumental in their acclimation and survival on a PWI. Was purposeful living associated with their educational attainment when they made the decision to attend a PWI? These questions I may never have the answers to, but my lived experiences have provided me with some good answers.

When I first decided to return to school for the advancement of my education, I had only thought of pursuing it for a two year period. My thirst for more knowledge started to increase, and the two year period seemed more distant than ever. The many educational opportunities that were presented to me were astounding, and I felt the need to capitalize on each of them. My desire to remain focus even though I was the only one on so many occasions helped me to run my course of purposeful living with confidence. I am still okay with planning my life’s course, direction and goals, but willingly allowing God to be the pilot of my life.

**How Much Is Cultural?**

From an early age I learned that religion was serious business for a lot of Black people. My mother, father, grandmother, uncles, and the villagers were those people who believed that religion, their faith, and prayer were things that should be taken seriously on a daily basis. As Henke (2001) comments, “the church communities usually draw on their faith and simply trust in their future” (p. 78) as it relates to their overcoming of obstacles.
My mother and grandmother did this on a regular basis. They attended services regularly and many times I would stumble on both of them silently praying on their knees next to their bed. This moment of prayer was something that was also observed by the slaves, who used it as a way to overcome the hardship they were experiencing. When Africans were brought to the Caribbean, they brought with them their tribal connections and religious traditions. “Africans had indeed come to the Caribbean with a long history of syncretization, that is the gradual blending of different strands of culture, and converting to Christianity promised real benefits” (Henke, 2001. p. 9). This evidence of religious traditions and culture confirms the importance of faith in the lives of Black Diasporas and also why I see it as an important cultural piece.

I believe that I have adopted my mother’s discipline as it relates to faith, church attendance, and the practice of religion. Attending meetings with her was like a ritual. I wanted to find out why it was so important to her, and why she did what she did. These meetings took place at church or at someone’s house. They called them back then “cottage meetings.” I soon found out that the folks who attended those meetings thought that everything and everyone required God’s attention, which resulted in them praying for everything and everyone. For me to hear and see my mother and the other villagers asking and praying to God, confirmed that there was something powerful about this particular practice. What I thoroughly enjoyed as I reflect on those meetings, were the words that came from the people’s mouths as they offered up praise and thanks. Thank yuh Lawd and Lawd hav-is mercy. It seemed enough for a sinner to become holy. I chuckle when I think of this. Once again I find myself asking the question, how much of
my faith and purposeful living is cultural? My educational attainment is due in part to those prayers that were said when I was a child. One song that was sung in church when I was growing confirms the practice of prayer for me:

Somebody prayed for me, they had me on their mind, they sacrificed their time, they fell down on their knees and prayed for me, they had not doubt, that God will bring me out, that He would change my life and set me free, I’m so glad that someone prayed for me.

I believe that where I am in my education and career track is attributed to those prayers. Some Black Diaspora students who are of African or African American descent may not share the same experiences as it relates to where they are at in their educational attainment, but I believe that mine are firmly rooted in this idea of purposeful living. The people, who attended those meetings with my mother and grandmother, had many challenges of their own. Those challenges required “maximum physical, mental and spiritual effort in order to overcome. What they all had in common was their faith, and their Black identity. Smith (2005) postulates, “they were Black people who had carried the yoke of oppression around their necks all of their lives while enduring the constant companionship of poverty” (p. 14). This was why their faith was all they could hold onto. They had suffered a lot, were still enduring a lot and those prayer meetings or “cottage meetings” were the cornerstone for their survival.

How much of this is cultural? Even though I do not know all there is to know about my mother and grandmother’s experience growing up Black in Barbados, I know that they had their share of not having and making the best out of what they had. What I am eternally grateful for based on the sacrifices made for my brothers and I, is the lack of material success that enhanced the achievement of spiritual success. My brothers and I
were able to gain a college degree and it was due to those prayer meetings, bended knees, and the dependence on God from my mother and grandmother. Black people and Black Diaspora students all share a common bond as it relates to faith and religion. Though some Black Diaspora peers may not believe in this purposeful living as much as I do, the aspect of religion and faith is rooted deeply in our culture despite the differences we all carry. I look to the famous American philosopher Alaine Locke (1925) in *The New Negro Youth Speaks* when he said:

> All classes of a people under social pressure are permeated with common experience; they are emotionally welded as others cannot be. With them, even ordinary living had epic depth and lyric intensity, and their material handicap, is the spiritual advantage (p. 220).

This powerful statement confirms and answers the question on the degree of my purposeful living and the extent to how much of it is cultural.

**Ain’t No Making It…I Am Making It**

Hostility and discrimination against Black people in the United States have been historically strong and deep. Most of the Black populations living in the U.S. are descendants from slavery; they were brought forcibly to the New World before the 19th century (Rong & Preissle, 1998). This argument by Rong & Preissle highlights a common theme among Black people of all Diasporas. Although our ancestors were sold and bartered throughout the various parts of the world, stories of courage, determination, and purposeful living is a common bond that exists in our ancestry and traditions. As a Black Caribbean immigrant student in the U.S., my ancestors like those from the U.S. endured some of the same hardships and experiences in the Caribbean. Blacks were not constituted to be anything more than just slaves but although some anticipated that
Blacks would be less successful because they faced the double barrier of xenophobia and racism, others have regarded them as “a Black success story” in a racially segregated society (Butcher, 1994, Farley & Walter, 1989; Model, 1991).

When I reflect on the historical context of the Black story, I can attest that I am an example of the Black success story. I believe a lot of my success is attributed to the educational preparation and the social and educational environment that I was exposed to. Researchers Rong, Brown & Guo in (1996) hypothesized that Black immigrant children perform well by most educational measures, and compared to native born population of the same age. They also shared that they are not just doing well in comparison to many immigrant groups, but they are doing better in U.S. schools than native born Black children and youth. My experience as a Black Caribbean student is different to my African American and African Diaspora groups. What worked to my advantage as a Black Caribbean student was the selective assimilation that I chose to ascribe to. I was socialized in a society where the Black majority ruled and role models were evident in my development. As a Black Caribbean student, I believe the continued strength and support I received from others aided in my ability to succeed. For some African American Diaspora students, this was not always a possibility. Where I had communities which instilled and embodied unique human, cultural and social capital (Rong & Preissle), other Black Diasporas were not privy to such. As told in the book Ain’t no Makin it, my experience would be the opposite of the young men in that study. Though some of them had support in getting out of their bad situation, they still found themselves retracting to square one. I think one of the things that motivated me more than ever in my
endeavors was reading the success stories of immigrant students in the daily newspapers. These students who migrated were advancing their collegiate careers abroad and were doing amazingly well. I wanted my experience to be the same. A Barbadian friend of mine once shared her story and said:

*I had a cousin who left Barbados and went tuh America to study. He spend a long time dey and when he com’ back, he was de’ people. You know, de people. All de papers did writing bout he and in my mind I was sayin, “he is de man, he is de king in de family and everybody looking up to he. I tink I gine’ have to do the same ting’.*

Hearing her story alone was a further confirmation that I had done the right thing. I was wise to capitalize on the opportunity that was presented to me. Had I not obeyed and followed all of the steps leading me to Vermont, I would have missed a great opportunity. One of my undergraduate advisees who was born in the U.S. but identifies as Caribbean was on the cusp of withdrawing from UVM. She became frustrated with not having a community of fellow Caribbean or African American students with whom she could form a community and a home. UVM has a very small Caribbean student population which helps to make up the thirteen percent of students of color at the university. With my encouragement, I advised my advisee to see her presence at UVM as a golden opportunity to standout. I encouraged her to do well and succeed amidst the disadvantages of little to no community. She knew about the history of Black people and their fight for equality in education. She also knew about the sacrifices our ancestors and her parents had to make in order for us to be who we are today. She knew the importance of faith and religion in our Black Diaspora community and how living by faith was the catalyst for us making it. She knew that a certain level of responsibility had been placed
on us, and we needed to succeed not only for ourselves, but for our families and communities. Today, Black Diaspora people are still seen as pawns in a game of chess. People from various groups are still saying, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, my grandparents did, or my mother did, or my relatives did. Although that may be true, many of those same bootstraps are no longer available. Supportive communities of grandparents and other family members, the village with the one room school, the neighborhood, that place where people looked out for each other and supported each other, where they shared joys and sorrows, good times and bad times, in many places is sadly no more. Many things have taken their place, and it is therefore important why Blacks student affairs practitioners and other educators need to take on the role of caretaker for our students, in order for them succeed in their endeavors.

After pleading with my advisee to continue being enrolled as a student, she rescinded her decision to quit and decided to continue her educational journey at UVM. Her road to Zion is still being paved, but she has recognized the importance of trying to make it, despite the system and environment not being the ideal one for her. As an educator and student life professional, I have recognized that my role is an important one to Black Diaspora students in their undergraduate and graduate level of study at PWIs. Confucius made the following remark which I have used as my life’s philosophy from the time I stumbled upon it. Our greatest glory is not in ever falling, but in rising every time we fall. Still I rise.
CHAPTER SIX: NOW WHAT, SO WHAT

Black not a color; but an experience

Still On The Road

The road to Zion within my heart is still being walked as I question the next steps of my BID. I do not see myself not ever walking this road. It is a continuous journey with sporadic burst of demystifying stereotypes and engaging in those difficult conversations on race and ethnicity. I have unpacked some narratives and stories of my own journey as a BCD student. However, it is important to bring attention to the needs of Black Diaspora students in their success and retention at PWIs. As a Black Caribbean student that has studied and worked at three different PWIs, I am okay with what I have achieved despite the learning curves I had to overcome. Like Kathy Russell shared being Black is not a color, it is an experience. I have learned to accept that as part of my destiny. I am more aware of what Black means to me and my BID has been and will continue to be more than a color for me. It is no surprise to share that for other Black Diaspora students at PWIs, particularly African American, African and Caribbean students, that being Black is something that is unchangeable. It is one of life’s blessings depending on how you look at it. I view my exploration as a blessing and encourage others to view there’s the same. My conversations as I alluded to in the earlier sections of my dissertation, have been centered on what I have experienced or seen my peers go through in their unrehearsed Black exploration. My intention within this research is not to berate or embarrass any of my Black Diaspora peers. It is more or less designed to bring a needed attention to the onslaught of connotations that are as often misconstrued as
it relates to understanding and working with Black students at PWIs. It is also an opportunity for administrators and faculty to see where their responsibility lies in working with, communicating with, engaging with and advocating for these students while they are on their campuses. In the next few sections I will be sharing the narratives and stories of students/staff from each of the three Black Diasporas that I have compared my experiences with. These experiences are in response to the questions that I have asked in the earlier section of my dissertation. The responses shared relates to their experiences and their success and retention at a PWI, as well as how faculty and administrators can learn to educate them, as well as create strategies for retaining them to complete a college degree.

**African Diaspora Students**

“Why is it necessary to feel ashamed of who you are”? I asked one day to an African Diaspora student. His response was, “well I migrated here with my family a few years ago to escape the hardship in my country. The wars and the killings and bondage of young children to become soldiers for the various militias was something that we had to escape. It was not a good thing for my family and I. This opportunity to be here is a blessing Learie.” I was teary eyed on the inside, and could feel his deep sense of appreciation manifesting itself. I found myself reflecting on my own experience and asking for forgiveness at the same time. In the past, I had forgotten to count my blessings and instead was complaining, in reality I should have been grateful for all the good things that I have in this life. Sometimes, we that are more privileged often complain about the little things in life, while others who are less fortunate than us, are experiencing greater
wrongs heaped upon them. I could never understand or imagine what his experience was like as a child growing up in a war torn environment, but I was comforted in knowing that he and his family had a second lease on life to start over. So why should he be ashamed? His shamefulness was attributed to words he heard growing up about being African, and the brainwashing and hardship targeted towards his race, and what his ancestors experienced under the white man’s abuse. He was trying to reconcile as shared by Smith (2005) about a “new African phenotype which was born through the use of the terms: nigger, darky, colored and Negro – a phenotype that could not fully express the dominant pride of its African genotype” (p. 131). He had been looked at and ostracized because of his skin color being darker than other Blacks, and was made to feel ashamed of his skin color. Keith (2009) posits that “Blacks of all phenotypes have faced obstacles to advancement, but those with darker skin have generally experienced more difficulties than their lighter counterparts” (p. 37). I felt even worse listening to his story as I knew some of my experiences were similar to his but not as comparable. Hearing his story began to shed some light on how this may also be perceived by faculty and staff on PWIs, who have already likened all Blacks to be the same despite their ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. It also highlighted the need for PWIs to communicate confidence in the Black student’s ability, to be successful in their academic and social experience on campus. After all Black students are often confronted with the dual role as student and as Blacks (Stikes, 1984). Being Black according to Cross (1991), has high salience to one’s sense of well-being, one’s purpose in life, one’s sense of connection to other Blacks.
Feelings of being wanted, accepted, appreciated, and affiliated are deeply rooted in Black people, Black culture and the general Black condition (p. 217).

As a student affairs practitioner, I have a responsibility to learn as well as educate others about the stories and experiences of African Diaspora students. It is also my responsibility along with other administrative staff and faculty, to provide African Diaspora students with a caring and culturally supportive school environment. Although plenty of research has indicated that African students have a tendency to do better than their African American Diaspora peers or other Black students, their academic success could be halted by the covert acts of racism that are targeted at them. Racism is any individual or collective act which denies Blacks access to positive identity factors in American society (Banks & Grambs, 1972). The African students that I have had the privilege to work with are hardworking and dedicated to their studies. They proudly indicate that their dedication is attributed to their culture and the communities from which they come. As this African student who was studying in the field of molecular biology shared, “I am not just succeeding for myself, but I am doing this for my family and my country”.

**African American Diaspora Students**

African American Diaspora students have been labeled over and over again as the group that is more likely to fail or drop out of high school or college. Mortenson (1991), whose research focuses on academic achievement and access to education and opportunity for under-represented low income students, revealed through his research that African Americans and other blacks were the ones having the largest percentage of high school
and college dropouts. Lang & Ford (1992) believed that the retention rate of black students at traditionally white institutions is likely to be a function of their own self–
determined goals, as well as the extent to which they find a hospitable environment. This statement rings true to me as I reflect once again on the self-determined goals that I made for myself on being the best student at NECI. I could have adopted an attitude of just getting by and completing the curriculum, but that was not my story, or who I was. I wanted to be the best. The self-determined goals I sat for myself in addition to what I have seen other Black students do, has been the catalyst for me. The African American students who I have had the privilege of speaking with, shared stories of wanting to quit so that they could return to their comfort zone, similar to that of the Hallway Hangers and The Brothers in the book *Ain’t no Making it*. They were ready to throw in the towel and look for a way out of their hostile and unwelcoming PWI environment. One African American student, who I advised, shared that he had to find some common ground of experiences and motivation in order for him not to be numbered with the dropout statistics. He was almost out of the door but found solidarity amongst his Black Diaspora peers. Other students who I engaged with at UVM and Plattsburgh State shared similar stories. They shared a common interest in their racial identity even though they were different in some cultural aspects. They concurred with Davis (1985) in her remarks when she shared:

The common experience of oppression and slavery, the common struggle for full humanity and economic reliance and the common fight against racism and other forms of social and systematic injustice are all too compelling to engender tensions of mistrust and hostility between Afro-Caribbean and African Americans (p. 58).
As an administrator at UVM, the countless conversations with Black Diaspora students who identified as African, African American or Caribbean always left me bewildered. I always wanted to find the best solution to the difficulties experienced by these students. Many of the broad assumptions that the African American students received from peers and faculty members in regard to our race was always disheartening. As a student, I hated these readied assumptions because it perpetuated the idea that all Blacks were the same. These assumptions sometimes resulted in psychological injuries both visible and invisible to the Black students. Those students, who were able to mask their injury, did a good job of concealing their wounds. Despite their social interaction, there was still a sign of pain that they were experiencing. Persistence seemed to be the only way to hide the pain for the African American Diaspora students’ success.

Jackie an African American peer of mine was happy to share what her experiences were like as an administrator at a PWI. She said, “As an African American administrator at the same PWI that I graduated from, I felt myself and others were viewed more closely and the color of our skin mattered more to administrators and colleagues rather than students. I felt I had to give one hundred percent of effort to find that, although my work was more outstanding and better quality it did not matter. I felt that having the preferred Master degree did not matter much either, while my counterparts did not have these credentials. I felt that staff and administrators viewed my coterie as "black resident hall directors" instead of their equals. It had been mentioned that we hired because the previous Assistant Director was African American, however, no one seemed to realize that two of the African American RD’s were the only ones who
had a Master’s degree”. Jackie’s recount of this personal episode in her life was
disheartening to me. It did not seem fair that she be meted out this type of caste like
ostracizing. I also wanted to know what she thought needed to be done in order for PWIs
to communicate confidence in the ability of Black students and engage them in the
campus and academic life regardless of their race. She said, “Firstly, PWIs must
acknowledge that more needs to be done around cultural competence of the institution, as
well as improving the PWI knowledge of Black students on campus. I think it is also
beneficial to have a proportionate number of African American administrators/ faculty
employed by the institution, as this would cultivate role modeling for African American
students of the institution”. (J. Greenidge, personal communication, August, 29, 2010).
What Jackie shared in her conversation with me, was something that I had also
experienced when I conducted a pilot study with undergraduate students at UVM. Was
this information alarming? No. Interesting? Yes. It seemed as though most Black
Diaspora students whether African American or of another Black Diaspora group always
felt the same about these scenarios. The onus now lies on faculty, administrators and
staff, to reverse the negative experiences of Black students and replace them with a more
affirming space of positive reinforcement.

**Caribbean Diaspora Students**

One day I was collecting some books at the library to begin my research on Black
Diaspora students experience at PWIs. In my quest to finding some exciting and
informative books, I parenthetically “bumped” into one of my Caribbean friends who I
had not seen for a very long time. She, also surprised to see me, chose this unexpected
meeting to catch up on the latest information about ourselves. In our conversation, we ended up sharing why we were at the library, and it was exciting to see that we were both utilizing the library’s resources. I shared with her what my research interest was all about, and if she would be interested in telling her story. Without any hesitation she said, “I am down Learie. I will be more than happy to tell you. I do have a lil’ something to share.” I was pleasantly surprise but happy at the same time. We talked for a bit, and I posed three of my research questions in order to gauge her thoughts. I knew that I was considering qualitative research at this point, but after hearing how passionate and excited she was to speak of her experiences, it confirmed for me the depth of a story and how her story would be a compliment to mine. After giving her the three questions she began to share.

Lynn started off, “For the most part, my experience has been a good one. I have met wonderful people from all cultures who have allowed me to grow as an individual, while embracing the new society that surrounds me. I must admit, it is harder to meet individuals from the Caribbean in this society, and one has to work harder to keep the Caribbean culture and a sense of self alive. But, a society such as the one at UVM allows you to appreciate even more your heritage and background. It makes one aware of how big and diverse the world is, and that by staying true to self allows diversity to thrive”. I was not expecting to receive such and extended response from her, but I was happy that she was willing to share a little bit of her story with me. I felt comforted in knowing that we both had similar views on what it was like being a Black Caribbean student at a PWI. That confirmed for me Nash’s theory of generalizable themes and versals. I jotted down this information to prevent missing any of her precious thoughts and views. After her
carefully thought out response, I asked her the other two questions. I was also eager to hear her responses on them as well.

Lynn how do you think Black students can be retained to successfully achieve and complete a college degree? What are some of the factors that have allowed you as a Black student from the Caribbean to persevere amidst the racial prejudices to be successful? She responded, “I have always been taught to persevere, especially when the situation or circumstance is difficult. We are taught in the Caribbean to never give up and in America we are taught that there is no limit to what one can achieve. These mere sayings have propelled me on a path to not merely attempt, but to embrace and inherit my dreams. As a graduate student in sciences, I felt like I was constantly fighting the stereotypes that existed for Black students. Most individuals offered surprise, skepticism when I discussed my career goals. These memories now make me smile. The Caribbean is not racist, and so I was surprised by how many stereotypes exist for Black students. As such it was easier for me to ignore them. I truly believe that my upbringing made all the difference: I came from a very loving, strong home, where I was always encouraged to do whatever I wanted. I have a family that held me in the highest esteem, and they remain my “catalyst. Moreover, I always remembered the sacrifices and discipline that afforded me this opportunity to become a scientist, and I never took that for granted. Privilege is a gift, a gift that many Caribbean students do not have and I truly believe that when granted that privilege, we run with it and never give up”. (L. Lebruin, personal communication, August 28, 2010)
I was extremely excited and appreciative of Lynn’s genuine and candid response to my questions. It had to be fate that we were both in the library at the same time. I knew what story I wanted to share, but I appreciated even more the story of another Black Caribbean/West Indian who lived in Vermont. After saying goodbye to Lynn, I left the library with a broad smile on my face. I felt comforted in knowing that one other person had similar experiences to mine. Although we came from different Caribbean islands, we both appreciated family, the resilience of never giving up, and the right to take advantage of any opportunity given.

**Faculty And Staff Relationship With Black Diaspora Students**

One of the things I deemed very important in my experience as a Black Caribbean student at a PWI, is relationship building with faculty and staff. I recognized this to be an important entity in my success, and knew relationships with faculty and staff would enhance my social integration into the university. Tinto (1975) stated that the degree to which faculty imparts to a student the feeling of acceptance, support and encouragement will determine to some extent that student’s feeling of belonging (p. 61). Stikes (1984) echoes similar sentiments by stating that too often, faculty do not know how to relate to black students. To some, a student is a student, and that is that (p. 96). Jackie my African American peer had this to say about her experience at a PWI. “Attending a predominately white institution as a student was definitely an eye opening experience. I don't recall recognizing any major issues amongst peers as a first year student. However, I noticed it more amongst faculty. I started off as a Nursing major, and it is safe to say that I was a less than average student. However, so was my Caucasian roommate. When
speaking to the advisor in the nursing department she suggested I consider changing majors due to my grades. However, my white counterpart/roommate, who also had less than average grades, was given resources to help her improve her grades. This is when I became much more aware of my race as an African American female. As time went on and I began to get further into core classes and the class size began to shrink, I notice that the number of African Americans also began to decrease and by senior year there were only two African Americans in our graduating social work class. I remember becoming even more aware of my race and feeling a bit uncomfortable, because there was only one other person of color in class with me”. (J. Greenidge, personal communication, August 29, 2010) Jackie’s experience is very common in Black Diaspora circles. I could never imagine what that was like for her. If this is the stance that faculty or some administrators have taken in working with Black students, it can result in several things happening. It may involve the student overcoming this lack of faculty and administrative support, by having courage and determination to succeed on their own, or succumbing to this lack of resources and attention and give in, which may ultimately end in being a school drop-out and failure.

What faculty members and administrators need to realize is the variety of hurdles that Black students face on a daily basis. According to Stikes (1984) even though those faculty members make no account for the difference between Black and white students, those differences must be acknowledged if the Black student is to survive in a white institution (p. 96). Sometimes faculty members are oblivious, or are not aware to the idea of race, oppression and social alienation that the Black students face, but these things
should be taken into account when these students are in their classes. Stikes (1984) quotes McSwine (1972) in his findings when he found the following:

As one student has said, “slavery’s legacy is still with us. The lack of motivation seen in many black students, the carefree, take- it-or- leave- it attitudes, the personality of oppression, the disdain for high academic standards, and the psychological chains yet to be severed – all these factors and more belie a cruel legacy fostered by three hundred years of attitude that a student is a student is to triple the black students’ chances of failure (p. 33).

This statement shows that a greater effort and responsibility needs to come from faculty and staff who sometimes function in a silo context. This statement can also be interpreted as a form of oppressive practice and behavior that further marginalizes Black students in their academic goals, and challenges faculty and administrators to further educate themselves and create relationship with Black students and their experiences. Johnson and Leibowitz (2009) shared that “the goals of anti-oppressive practice should include not only empathetic regard for the other, but also introspection, as more than a way of thinking about oppression and marginalization of the other, in addition to understanding a mode of action for grasping the essence of another person’s experience” (p. 50). All students, particularly Black students in this context are not the same. Even though they may have similar traits as it relates to their admission to college, language, cultural heritage, race or even skin color, a variety of systems that point out difference still needs to be addressed and corrected, in order for them to feel welcomed and included in their new environment. Johnson and Leibowitz (2009) posits that “the contemporary struggle for Black students in university environment is to be cognizant of power differentials based on the divisions created by race, social class, and sexual orientation,
and help bridge gaps” (p. 50). Blacks like myself are capable of adjusting to the
sometimes not so welcoming climate at PWIs, but have also proven that they can achieve
academic success and bridge those necessary gaps needed to succeed.

**Is It A Case Of Wasted Potential?**

On the average, Black Diaspora students encounter a variety of things that can or
have set them back in their educational pursuits. They have lower grade point averages,
higher attrition rates, and lower enrollment in post graduate programs then whites (Boyd,
1974, DiCesare, 1972). Limited numbers of Blacks at all levels in the university,
disappointed by the campus social life, exposed to racial discrimination, doing less well
academically and in general disenchanted with the school (Kleinbaum and Kleinbaum,
1976) are also contributing factors. These are the ongoing examples that oftentimes
question the ability of Black students and their potential at being retained or succeeding.

When I decided to return to school for another degree, I was never concerned with
the campus social life and the exposure to racism. It was never on my radar. I trudged
through my academics with a focused and determined mind despite being the student
who was satisfied with just a passing grade in the past. Some Black Diaspora students are
not as skillful at self-motivating, but I knew how to do it now regardless of the structure
or lack of structure in diversity. Carter (2001) believed that the structural diversity of an
institution (the numerical representation of various racial/ethnic groups) is an important
characteristic of colleges and universities (p. 41). This factor supports the idea that there
needs to be a greater cross-race dynamic on PWIs to support both the Black and White
student populations that are in existence. White students tend to treat students from
minority groups as symbols rather than individuals, and tend to convey the message that maintaining a campus multicultural environment is a low institutional priority (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 2000; Loo & Rolison, 1986). If these practices continue to occur, it will continue to promote the idea that Black students are a case of wasted potential, when in fact, it is the lack of support and encouragement that projects this picture of inadequacy.

Jones (2001) suggests that faculty plays a large role in the perpetuation of these environments, in addition to retention models which have not been maximized in terms of potential (p.18). My conversations with Jackie were memorable and I recorded them in the hope that I would have a chance to use her story as germane information. Jackie said, “Knowledge is power. As an African American student, education was priority in my household, and this lead to the road of higher education. However, as a first year student I attended a summer program one month before the start of my freshman year, which prepared me for the upcoming school year. It was there that I met African American role models, mentors and lifetime friends. I think it is important to have these grassroot programs for African American students, because we as a race are still coming into our own and growing in the realm of higher education. Although Blacks have been attending institutions of higher education for decades; we still have a large number of first generation students who can benefit from a strong foundation, such as the college prep program mentioned above. I think it is programs such as this that will provide them the tools, mentors, networking skills, and contacts that will help sustain them throughout their college career and further on to their private and professional lives. They will then
begin to instill the importance of education in their children and families which will have a positive effect on many generations to come.” Jackie’s final comments solidified the fact that faculty and staff can provide Black students with a great educational experience only if they make the time to support them in their goals and aspirations.

CONCLUSION

There Is Hope Despite The Few

“They aren’t many of us up there you know.” These words still ring true to me most days. I can still picture the day at the immigration office as if it was yesterday, standing, waiting, anticipating and praying that I would get my U.S. visa. The number of Blacks in Vermont is still very small although within the past few years the number has increased. Those numbers however do not account for the lack of diversity that is still absent within the Burlington area and the university. I should not be too hasty however to cast blame on the university. Within the past few years, there have been considerable strides in creating awareness and understanding for students on identities, diversity and social justice on the UVM campus. The inclusion of the Six-Credit Diversity Graduation Requirement course which focuses on race and racism in the U.S. and human and societal diversity has been a groundbreaking initiative. There is however more work to be done. If faculty and staff continue to be more intentional in their efforts of creating and establishing strategic plans for a more inclusive campus, retaining Black Diaspora students at PWIs will become a little less forceful.
Who Would Have Thought?

My mind continues to be a battlefield when I have to deal with my identity as a Black man. Who would have thought that I would have been embarking on this journey of learning what it means to be Black, when in all reality I was and am Black. Who would have thought that I, the last of three siblings would be writing a dissertation for a doctorate in educational leadership and policy studies, when all along I did not even think I even equated to such academic excellence? Who would have thought that my working class background, and a history of persevering against all odds, would see me excelling in my studies despite my skin color? Who would have thought that I would be doing something great with my life, rather than be meshed with the other Blacks from my village who failed to make something of theirs? Who would have thought?

The apostle Paul wrote in his letter of encouragement to Timothy in the bible from 1Timothy chapter 1:5 and said, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you.” Who would have thought that my faith and the faith of my mother Evelyn and Grandmother Mildred “gran” would have been sufficient for me to see my purpose in my life? Who would have thought that my religious and spiritual belief would be a huge part of my educational journey and the orchestrated plan for my life?

I am a firm believer that my life is totally ordained by God. Considering the many obstacles and paths that I have trod, and the overwhelming evidence to prove that He has been looking out for me is enough to seal my faith. I have attributed the successes of my life to the divine plan that God has for me. A popular spiritual sings, “How I got over,
how I got over, my soul looks back and wonder how I got over.” I learned to accept that being Black sometimes came with paying a price, but I was glad that I am able to look back and realize that it was all for my good. I was glad I got over despite the odds that sometimes ran against me.

Somehow I Made It

Despite the hardship and cruelty that my ancestors had to endure by being Black, I can attest that everything they went through was for the good of Black people. Gospel music legend James Cleveland declared in the song, I Don’t Feel No Ways Tired: “I don’t feel no ways tired, come too far from where I started from, nobody told me the road would be easy, I don’t believe He brought me this far to leave me” (Cleveland, 1998, track 1). I live the lyrics of that song each day. No one told me that learning about my Black identity would encumber a humbling and sometimes painful reflection of my life’s experiences and that of my peers. I had taken for granted or simply pushed episodes of my life under the carpet to avoid dealing with them, when I reality I had reason to share and confront matters of injustice that occurred. Although I did not confront some of the injustices that hindered me in my Black exploration, I am still able to reference James Cleveland in his song, Somehow I made it and say: “Somehow I made it, somehow I made it, through it all God brought me through” (Cleveland, 1990, track 2). This was something that I could not have verbally said in the past, until I had actually been through a situation that merited me using those lyrics.

As a Black student on a PWI, there is still a feeling of shame, anger and despair that surfaces. For some of my Black Diaspora peers, it is difficult to acknowledge and
celebrate that Black is beautiful, when so much of the racial climate does not support this belief. It takes a lot of courage to positively declare that you have made it, even though the finish line is still off in the distance. Stacey Miller the director for the department of Residential Life at UVM is always saying, “Fake it till you make it”. There is an obvious reason why she says this. As funny as that statement is perceived, Black students have had to fake it at either a PWI or some other hostile climate in order to convince others of their ability to succeed. Being Black is hard work and is quite the experience. Margaret Burroughs wrote a poem that addresses the Black concept and how Black Diaspora students need to look past the negative stigma attached to being Black and rise up. She said:

What shall I tell my children who are black of what it means to be captive in this dark skin? What shall I tell my dear one, fruit of my womb, of how beautiful they are when everywhere they turn they are faced with abhorrence of everything that is black? The night is black and so is the bogeyman. Villains are black with black hearts. A black cow gives no milk. A black hen lays no eggs. Bad news come ordered in black, mourning clothes black. Storm clouds, black, black is evil and evil is black and devils food is black (para, 1).

Haunting as this poem is, it is still an affirming piece of poetry for Black people. Despite the abhorrence that is attached to being Black, it is still a beautiful thing. Black students may identify as African, African American, or Caribbean, but they are all a part of the same Black Diaspora. They may also differ based on the many colors of Black that exists within their culture. They may also differ based on the food that is eaten, the music played, dance, song and other cultural norms. Difference may also be based on the clothes worn, hair texture or the customs observed. Despite being found across many
continents and countries, Blacks are inherent in their race and historical background and bear a commonality that is unique in many ways.

I Will Always Have A Story To Tell

There is a road inside of you, inside of me there is one too. No struggling pilgrim in the dark, the road to Zion’s in your heart. As I contemplate how I should bring my final thoughts and this dissertation to an end, I am reminded once again of the song I used at the beginning of the dissertation to set the stage for my story. I believe that I have found the road inside of me based on the reflective and introspective writing that I have been able to do. During my writing process, there were times when I struggled in finding my way due to the time and energy that I was putting into it. I also struggled with using the SPN methodology, not that it was something I had difficulty using, but it was more akin to the pain and the discomfort I experienced as I reflected and wrote. I knew there would be a feeling of liberation and the chance to breathe at the end, but the process of getting there was tough. It was exhausting and nerve wracking all at once, but I had to remind myself; I had a story to tell. I had to find the Zion in my heart through the telling of my story regarding learning being Black. As I close, I am still walking this road although it has been very lonely at times. In the beginning, I encouraged the reader to walk with me as I share my story in the hope that they would find theirs in relation to their identity or any other path that they were walking. My hope is that a road of self-discovery and insight has been found. I am confident that mine has been found, but the road will forever be walked
Diasporic Intimacy

In my quest to find the Zion in my heart, many of the authors, poets, singers, musicians, scholars, researchers, communities, personal communications, family members, and unsung heroes in my life have added immeasurably to the personal experiences that I have had. Through the Black Diasporic intimacy of scholarship and research from these parties, I have been able to draw evidence of my personal experiences, and find parallels to the research that is in circulation. I knew that my experience as a Black Caribbean Diaspora student at a PWI was not a singular thing, but I needed to see if my story was worth telling and would resonate with someone else. Scholars such as Dubois, Manning, McGill, Waters, and Tatum have enlightened me about my Black identity from both a historical and current lens. They helped me to see how race is defined and the many stereotypes that are synonymous with being Black. These scholars helped me to understand the many titles that Black Diaspora people were given such as colored, nigger, Negro, Black, among many others. Tatum in her book, *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria* is a higher education and student affairs book for all times. It is a good way to prepare interested student affairs professionals for the things they will see and encounter when they enter the field. I have gained a lot from this book and the many others that I have opened to read and research on for this dissertation especially its relation to Blackness and race.

Literature by Hines and Mcleod spoke about kinship that existed among the Black Diaspora groups. It is likened once again to Tatum’s book *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria*. Despite having to face colorism as noted by Vickerman
and Reid-Salmon, Black students for the most part have a tendency to stay together or form clusters of their own. For their own development, it may be necessary for them to build new relationships with people other than themselves. However, when the environment is not ideally set up for them, it can become a problem and ultimately force them to band together rather than spread out and make new friends.

In crafting my SPN, I attribute a lot of my humbling beginnings of this writing to Patti Cook. She in an informal way introduced me to Robert Nash before I eventually had a chance to meet him. His book on personal narrative writing helped me to not only believe in my writing, but share the importance of my story in all of its ugliness. Everywhere I go or turn, individuals are always talking about their stories and the importance of telling them. Gornick, King, Maisel and other countless researchers who I have read have highlighted the healing power in this form of writing. Not only is it reflective, but liberating and practical at the same time. This form of writing helped me to explore and reveal answers to questions that I have pondered over and over again in my head as it relates to being Black. Such answers have also helped me to see what other Black Diaspora students may be facing when it comes to telling their stories. Writing my SPN dissertation confirmed for me how stories are truly a huge piece of real estate that can never truly be purchased.

As I explored themes of faith, resilience, purposeful living and a divine plan, Smith in his book *My sin was my sin* helped me see how these four components were an essential component to my Black Diaspora. Smith’s account of his family, the community from which he came, and the many obstacles he faced were paralleled to mine. The
resilience of his grandmother and the faith that she exercised was something that I readily connected with. It confirmed for me the importance of faith and spirituality as a grounded and lasting theory within the Black community. Although everyone within the Black Diaspora may not share my theory as it relates to faith and spirituality as important entities in the Black Diaspora, a lot of the literature has highlighted the importance of this as survival kit for Black Diaspora people. I look to borrow from acclaimed gospel singer Yolanda Adams in her Through the storm album with the title track Through the storm:

While I’m riding through the storm, Jesus holds me in his arms, I am not afraid of the stormy winds and the waves, though the tide becomes high, He holds me while I ride, I found safety in the Master’s arms while riding through the storm


This song has not only provided me with connections from a spiritual lens but has shown me how Black Diaspora students can overcome their obstacles such as racism and oppression by riding through their difficulties with a positive attitude and a faith that is resilient. I never expected that I would have so much to share about my divine purpose, but going deep into my stories allowed me to see the relevance of this being a huge part of who I am.

Silence The Demons

During the writing of this dissertation, subtle hints on what it means to be Christian, immigrant, Caribbean and Black was being manifested along the way in my story and narrative. I have seen it being subtly displayed in the verbiage on billboards, speeches by individuals, activism in states such as Arizona on racial profiling, newspaper headlines on Black college students drop outs, conversations with my peers and advisors and countless other mediums. In times past, this never would have occurred to me as
something that I needed to share, but there seemed to be some illuminating light that was projecting on me to tell my story. I was like the actor on a Broadway stage and all lights were on me. In telling my story, I used what Maisel (1999) describes as *Hushing the mind*. I knew I had to *S-s-s-sh* and “silence the demons that would try to destroy my resolve and drown my good ideas” (p. 16). My hopes and dreams of shedding light on a population such as the Black Diaspora students from Africa, the Caribbean or America had been silenced for too long. Black students like me come from an ancestry of strong Black roots with examples of slaves risking their own lives so that they can learn how to read. They were as Smith (2004) affirms, people who improved the literacy rate from 20% to 70% between reconstruction (the period immediately following the Civil War). Black Diasporas thrive on education and achievement despite the odds. Excelling and being Black seemed to go hand in hand.

With this brief historical account in mind, how could I allow the demons to silence my story and the story of other Black Diaspora students? How could I not shed light on what Blacks in education needed to do, in order to be recognized as competent and capable individuals in higher education? How can I be silenced when the educational system in America is Eurocentric in nature and makes it impossible for African American Black students to relate? How could I not confront the need for PWIs to put in place cultural frameworks for Black Diaspora students to be educated in their culture? Smith (2004) said that “in order for kids to be able to appreciate the accomplishments of others, they must first understand their own and then be taught about the accomplishments of others” (p. 435). Black Diaspora students specifically African American students need to
have that grounded culture in order for them to survive in a very white environment. One of the things I appreciate about Smith’s account is his ability to clearly state what Black students need in order to make it. Black students need a foundation on which to stand and this can only be done when they are supported and provided with the right resources.

As a Black Caribbean student, I had the opportunity to be schooled on my Black history and took pride in knowing this information. With this knowledge I was able to stand firm on why I identified as a Black Caribbean student without flinching or wavering. I knew how I identified and even though I was placed in an environment where I could have been forced to accept and adapt to the norm, I knew where I was going, what I wanted to achieve and what I needed to do in order to achieve. No demons would have an opportunity to S-s- s- sh or silence me and my story especially if others were given the opportunity to bring awareness and change with their own stories. Although my experiences have not been as alarming as some of my African and African American peers, my story still had to be told.

And So……

As a researcher, student affairs practitioner and true SPner, it would be remiss of me not to share my thoughts on how PWIs can communicate confidence in the ability of Black students and engages them in the campus and its academic life regardless of their racial identity? Black Diaspora students have not fully explored what their racial identity is. I stumbled on mine through various encounters and experiences in my life. This would probably be true for many other Black Diaspora groups if they were asked the question. Unless educators both Black and White help white students and PWIs understand what
racism is and the effects of racism, seeing Black as a problem will continue to be perpetuated. The academy, classrooms and residence halls are places where learning is sought by individuals of all races. Creating a space for conversations to be had and practicing a range of pedagogical instructions will lend to a more liberated and caring environment. hooks (1994) posits that:

The academy is not a paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom (p. 207).

Secondly, teachers must be reoriented so that they can avoid the same mistakes that past generations have made as it relates to working with and understanding Black Diaspora students. It is rather interesting to see that some teachers despite the growing levels of diversity that are visible in our countries, are still color blinded by the issues of race and the need to be more inclusive of different races and cultures. Even though UVM is working on diversifying their college campus with more people of color, a lot more work needs to be done. Employing and staffing the PWI with people who are aware of the differences in varying identities can help propel the movement for respecting Black students who are schooled on white campuses. By examining these differences, similarities and unique qualities that exist among Black Diaspora students and making the appropriate reinforcements to meet the students’ needs, will and can result in more Black students completing a college degree.
Seasons Change

I was fortunate to complete a college degree at a PWI. I leaned on the everlasting arms of my God. My faith, my community and my family sustained me. I trusted in the divine plan that had been orchestrated for my life. I operated in the leadership examples of many individuals who impacted my life in a significant way, and I lived my life believing that it was purposefully designed. Through SPN, I was able to share my story about my experiences as a Black Caribbean/West Indian Diaspora student in a predominantly white environment and on PWIs. I would love to continue expanding on this topic of Caribbean Black students at PWI and hopefully publish an article or a book from either a SPN or qualitative lens. This topic is of extreme importance to me. Had I not engaged in multiple conversations with African, African American or Caribbean students and seen their struggles for succeeding at a PWI, this topic of interest would have been swept under the carpet and a story would have been lost.

Some of the important pieces of literature that I have read in preparation for this dissertation are probably up for questioning based on the author’s frame of reference. I believe however that I was able to draw important points from their work, align it with mine and write an SPN that is worthwhile reading. There is validity in storytelling. My story and that of my Black Diaspora peers is scholarship, personal and full of narrative. I was able to tell my story. I was able to walk the road that was inside of me in order to find the Zion in my heart. The exploration of learning what it means to be Black, coupled with my Black Caribbean identity revealed so many things for me. I believe that I am a redemptive and liberated soul. Hopefully my readers are able to find the road inside of
them and be able to create some meaning for their own narratives. As noted earlier, everything I do has a synergy of food or music attached to it. I leave you my reader with these two songs which have been a tower of strength for me in the writing of my narrative. I hope that you will find strength likewise and that these songs will help you to either appreciate the season that you are in, be prepared to change your season or get ready to walk into your own seasonal narrative.

*Keep the dream alive, don’t let it die, there’s something deep inside, keeps inspiring you to try, don’t stop and never give up on you,*

*Sometimes life may place a stumbling block in your way, but you go to keep the faith, reach for what’s deep inside your heart, to the light,*

*and never give up, don’t ever give up on you, don’t give up*

*Yolanda Adams*

*So happy being me, I’m regretting nothing about me.*

*Too busy living life living love freely,*

*I’m so happy being me.*

*Angie Stone*
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