

IT'S OKAY FOR US TO BE STUDENTS, BUT NOT LEADERS

It's Okay For Us to Be Students, but Not Leaders:
African American Women in Executive Leadership within the Community College

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Abstract

As the nation's racial and ethnic diversity continues to grow, so does the number of students of color within the college system, particularly within the community and technical college systems. While the student body grows more diverse, African American women are not invited into circles of power and executive leadership positions continue to be filled by White leaders. This racial disparity perpetuates an educational system that is neither open nor inclusive. To better understand the persistent underrepresentation of African American women in community college leadership settings, a racially conscious framework was chosen to be applied in the exploration of how higher education institutions impact African American women. A blended Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Thought (BFT) framework was used to examine how systems of oppression serve to disempower and disadvantage these women. The usage of this blended framework allows for the consideration of multiple roles and identities that other theories may not address. This study centered the experiences of four African American women in executive leadership positions in Pacific Northwest community college settings by fostering counterstories that highlight the fight for equality and justice while providing insight and hope to African American women that seek upward mobility within the community college system. Key themes include the devastating impact of being the only African American woman in leadership, systemic inequities, and the urgent need for mentorship and sponsorship.

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It's Okay For Us to Be Students, but Not Leaders: African American Women in Executive Leadership within the Community College

As the nation's racial and ethnic diversity continues to grow, so does the number of students of color within the college system, particularly within community and technical colleges (Bright & Travis, 2010; Harper, 2007). With the rapidly increasing cost of four-year public and private institutions, the number of students who seek to enroll in community colleges will continue to grow (AACC, n.d.). Almost half of U.S. community college students identify as students of color, with 21 percent identifying as Black (AACC, n.d.).¹ Yet despite the number of students of color enrolled in community colleges, higher education institutions have been slow to respond to the needs of our increasingly diverse communities. To note, these institutions have been particularly unresponsive in creating institutions that are reflective of the populations that they are serving (Benjamin, 1997; Britton, 2013).

These post-secondary educational systems have been resistant to changing institutional practices that continue to maintain white dominance in the face of the before mentioned rapidly changing student body (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002). This resistance to inclusion is not limited to the community college system. Rather, it is rampant in the U.S. K–12 system and is sustained insidiously throughout the higher education system (Epstein, 2005; Harper, 2012). Long before students enter into post-secondary education, their educational pathways have been defined and are often truncated by the K–12 system. This damage is done through lack of career and educational resources in underfunded schools, limited access to coursework that would prepare these students for college, and lack of access to counseling and advising services (Dervarics,

¹ To reflect participants' terminology and contemporary usage, African American and Black are used interchangeably throughout this dissertation.

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2011). If, after navigating the K–12 gauntlet, these students make it to a college campus, they face countless obstacles—unfriendly campus climates, college systems that are difficult to navigate, inequitable admission requirements, standardized testing that block entry for students of color, and more. Au's (2009) research highlights how standardized tests have long been used as a tool of exclusion for people of color and these instruments perpetuate structural inequality within educational systems.

The Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC, 2014), responsible for collection and examination of data collected from the 34 community and technical colleges (CTCs) in Washington, identified that from 2000 to 2010, populations of color within the State of Washington increased from 18 percent to 28 percent. Also, the SBCTC identified that projections for 2012 to 2022 anticipate that diversity will continue to grow.

While the diversity of the CTC student body has steadily increased, the 17.9 percent representation of staff of color in administrative positions decreased 1.9 percent in this same 5-year period. These positions encompass the entire range of administrative positions, from coordinators to president/chancellor positions (SBCTC, 2014). Additionally, data from the SBCTC provided a more granular look at executive leadership positions, with executive leadership defined as any position higher than a dean level. This data identified that in 2014–2015, 136 White women held executive leadership positions compared to a mere 11 African American women (Dupree, 2016).

Overview of the Study

While the topic of African American women in the academy has been explored through a small body of research, the pathway of African American executive leaders called for more

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exploration. African American women face political, cultural and institutional barriers and these barriers are evidenced in the United States higher educational institutions that are a mirror of our White male dominated society (Benjamin, 1997; Bright & Travis, 2010; Wenniger & Conroy, 2001). This study sought to understand the racialized, lived leadership experiences of African American women in the Pacific Northwest region who have achieved executive leadership positions within the community college setting. By documenting experiences through this research, we will inform emerging African American leaders interested in leadership of the pathways and pitfalls. In what comes next, a blended Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Feminist Thought (BFT) framework is examined, followed by my family's personal story, context of study and a review of literature.

Theoretical Framework

To better understand the underrepresentation of African American women in the higher educational setting—specifically the community college—CRT and BFT were used as a framework to examine how interlocking systems of oppression serve to disempower and disadvantage African American women attempting to move into executive leadership positions in predominantly White institutions (PWIs). These frameworks provided African American women the opportunity to share their experiences through lenses that recognized multiple identities and roles and supported the development of voice and narratives that challenge systems of oppression. As hooks (1984) identified “As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history” (p. 42). By becoming a subject and not an object, women develop a liberated voice.

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Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a framework that emerged in the 1970s from the fields of legal scholarship that examines the intersection of race, law and power in society—it provides a critical analysis of race and racism from a legal point of view while engaging in a social justice agenda (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). As Bell (1995) identifies, CRT is engaged in scholarly resistance that lays the ground work for broader scale resistance. CRT examines racism and the inequities of power and privilege as they are manifested within systems that persistently disadvantage and oppress while challenging claims of neutrality, objectivity and colorblindness presented by oppressors (Garrison-Wade et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2000).

While CRT has been used to engage in discourse on a wide range of topics, the use of CRT to explore racism within educational research began growing in the late 1990s. CRT was introduced to the K-12 and higher education fields and over the last 20 years, has been used to explore the complexity of race and education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harper, Patton, & Wooten, 2009; Knaus, 2014; Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995). According to Solorzano (1998), “A critical race theory in education challenges ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus of most CRT analyses, and insists on analyzing race and racism in education by placing them in both a historical and contemporary context using interdisciplinary methods” (p.123).

Museus, Ledesma, and Parker (2015) identified five ways that CRT has been used in higher education research: a) CRT has been used to illuminate the voices of people of color; b) researchers have utilized CRT to highlight the reality of the social and historical context of racism and how racism impacts post-secondary institutions; c) CRT has been used to dismantle the dominate discourse that impact students of color; d) researchers have used CRT to elucidate

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ways that policies that are presented as positive often reinforce structural inequities; and e) the utilization of this theory supports people of color being able to tell their lived experience through stories.

CRT can be used to explore power structures that are built on White privilege and White supremacy—these structures perpetuate the continued marginalization of people of color. CRT supports the understanding and deconstruction of the role of racism in policy and practice. CRT provides a framework that centers the voices that are directly impacted by racism and helps to contextualize the experiences of people of color revolving around race, discrimination, and marginalization. As CRT recognizes that racism is enmeshed in the fabric of all systems of American society, it also serves to lift up previously marginalized perspectives through multi-faceted qualitative methods (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). CRT is often disruptive because it goes beyond affirmative action, integration, civil rights and other liberal ideology in anti-racism commitment (Bell, 1995). This framework also offers a contrast to deficit-oriented frameworks that serve to perpetuate negative perceptions of people of color and CRT defies the dominant narrative that maintains that people of color are solely responsible for their circumstances (Harper et al., 2009; McCoy & Rodrick, 2015).

Furthermore, CRT explores how race intersects and interacts with other forms of oppression, as well as how the intersecting systems of oppression create social hierarchies of power. Hiraldo (2010) contends that CRT is a powerful tool to examine systems of oppression and educational inequities. In this study, CRT was used as a lens to help examine the racialized experiences of participants and to question and critique the ways that race and racist ideologies impacted and shaped their path to leadership in the community college system.

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While there is no single definition of CRT and its tenets, many scholars agree on these five tenets: (1) the centrality of race and racism in America—permanence of racism; (2) interest convergence; (3) Whiteness as property; (4) critique of liberalism that stems from the ideas of colorblindness; and (5) narrative/voice/counterstory telling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Though all of the tenets have importance, three tenets are used to structure data analysis; these are, 1, 2, and 5, and, as I point out in the next section, they directly align with Black Feminist Thought.

The first tenet—the centrality of race and racism in America—was used to examine how racism is ordinary and a permanent component of American life (Bell, 1992). It is normal and embedded in the way society functions and the way it constrains political, social and economics in the United States. Ordinary and normal because racial oppression is so deeply entrenched in the social order that it is taken for granted and seen as natural by individuals in America. It is because racism is seen as natural that it is difficult to address and to eliminate (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Tate, 1997).

The second tenet—interest convergence emerges when Whites agree upon changes that support communities of color but only when these changes align with their own interests and do not provide disruption to their way of life (Bell, 1995). Because the dominant group has power, this group is able to create policies and structures that are identified as antiracist, but it is primarily the dominant group that reaps the benefits of any changes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Miller, 2017). An example of interest convergence is provided by Bell (1980) when he reflected upon how early civil rights legislation merely granted Blacks rights that the U.S. Constitution had already provided to all citizens—rights that had been enjoyed by Whites for many centuries. Further, Ladson-Billings (2000) identified that over the years, White people have been the

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primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation and *Brown v. Board of Education* is a classic example of interest convergence at work. This case, which was a catalyst for K–12 integration, garnered America international accolades for what was seen as groundbreaking efforts of racial equality. However, the aftermath of *Brown v. the Board of Education* had many deleterious results for African Americans. Specifically, African American schools were closed down, African American teachers were fired and were not rehired in the newly integrated schools, and African American students were mainstreamed into White schools in which they were not wanted nor were they welcomed (Bell, 1980; Miller, 2017).

The fifth and final tenet—narrative/voice/counter-storytelling—structurally lends support to this study and is especially salient because it supports the use of voice by people of color. Through frequent use of the first-person perspective, storytelling, and counter-storytelling, CRT considers the intersection of race and class and names one's own reality and the unapologetic use of creativity (Bell, 1995; Delgado, 1990). The unique voice of color is realized through narratives or counterstories that center the experiences of the marginalized and allow for the telling of those stories and narratives that often go unreported and unrecognized in mainstream society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Museus et al. (2015). The act of storytelling allows marginalized groups to tell their own story, name their own reality and share knowledge that others are not likely to know—these others include people of color as well as White people. Delgado (1989) speaks of the role of story and counterstory to assist with the social construction of reality, destroying and/or changing mindset, community building, and helping with mental preservation of oppressed groups.

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Black Feminist Thought

BFT incorporates ideas produced by Black women who clarify a standpoint of and for Black women (Collins, 2004, p. 103).

As CRT examines race and racism in a broader context, Black Feminist Thought (BFT) situates the voice of African American women and through this voice, empowers African American women. Collins (1998) identified that “race, class and gender are the systems of oppression that most deeply affect African American women” (p. 225). BFT rejects additive approaches to oppression (Collins, 2004) and instead examines the intersection of class, sex, and race and how they are bound together (Collins, 2009). For example, it does not passively stack layers of other constructs onto gender— constructs such as religion and sexual identity. Rather, BFT situates all of these constructs under one overarching systemic umbrella of structural dominative oppression (Collins, 2004).

The ability to see the intersectionality of race, class and gender also opens up the possibility of the identification of other intersecting constructs. Due to this multilayer marginalization of African American women on campus, it is difficult to tease out which of these factors has the greatest effect. In turn, all of these factors must be examined (Gaetane, Williams, & Sherman, 2009). The ability to rearticulate everyday experiences through a lens of race and gender convergence supports the expansion of awareness around the controlling images of Black women acts as a lever of empowerment through its creation of knowledge by and for African American women (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2000). African American women’s experiences exist within an interlocking system of gender, race, and class, and BFT decimates the thought that Black and White women have lead similar lives. Within their unique experiences Black women often have commonalities, but this group is in no way homogeneous;

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differences in age, class, sexual orientation, and religion remain (Henry, Butler, & West, 2011).

Collins (2009) explains that subordinate groups almost always experience different realities than the dominant group and they often interpret these experiences differently than the dominant group.

Collins' (2004) concept "insider/outsider" or "outsider-within" highlight the voices of marginalized African American women walking between the Black and White worlds. This biculturality allows women to be privy to some the inner workings of White institutions of power, understand the marginality that is at play, while being in touch with their own self and culture. As identified by Bright & Travis (2010), the "outsider-within" is a constant state that places African American women in a position in which they have to continually hustle to keep up with the standards set by the White majority while trying to remain loyal to their own culture, family, and friends.

BFT is particularly useful for analysis because it allows the researcher to have a framework that supports the understanding of the needs, struggles and realities of African American women in higher education. Henry et al. (2011) identify that research on the psychological issues of Black college women the usage of BFT for analysis in higher education provides information that can be used to help women as they experience the wide range of inequities, particularly, microaggressions that occur within the work setting. In this analysis, BFT was used to explore how race, class, and gender work as an interlocking system of oppression for the women in this study. There are six distinct features to BFT:

1. Black women's group location within intersecting oppressions produces commonalities among individual Black women.
2. Black Feminist Thought emerges from a tension linking experiences and ideas.

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3. Black Feminist Thought is concerned with the connections between Black women's experiences as a heterogeneous collectivity and any ensuing group knowledge or standpoint.

4. Black Feminist Thought is concerned with the essential contributions of African American women intellectuals.

5. Black Feminist Thought is concerned with the significance of change.

6. Black Feminist Thought is concerned with its relationship to other projects for social justice (Collins, 2009).

Because CRT and BFT both address marginalized groups and examine the impact of race and class while privileging the voices of oppressed groups, the researcher used a blended lens of CRT and BFT, displayed in Figure 1, to examine the centrality of race, intersectionality, insider/outsider, interest convergence and the African American women's bicultural reality through voice. This examination is accomplished through the telling of stories by those that have been marginalized, usually not heard from, and/or completely ignored (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

With CRT and BFT as a theoretical foundation, an overarching research question emerges for this qualitative investigation: What is the lived professional experience of African American females in executive leadership positions in the face of oppressive systems? Examination of the lived experience of African American female executive leaders was further nuanced by additional guiding questions: a) How have racism and sexism impacted the personal experiences of African American female executive leaders? b) How have racism and sexism impacted the professional experiences of African American female executive leaders? And c) What coping mechanisms and methods of resistance have been utilized to successfully navigate while leading?

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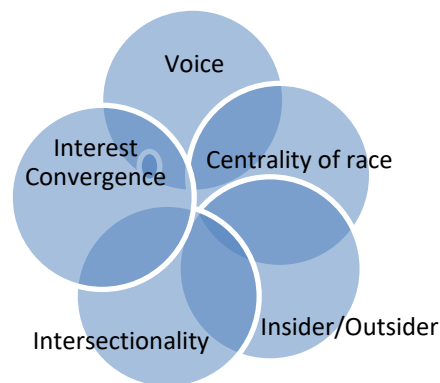


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Figure 1 is a graph that provides a conceptual visualization of how individual parts of the BFT and CRT framework interact and help inform this study. The circles within this table represent the overlap of the two theories in relation to themes that emerged. As these frames overlap, a natural space at the center emerges. At this center point, space is created in which voice emerges to tell powerful stories that rage at oppressive systems and highlights gaps that identify the needs of these participants. Needs that emerge because of interacting oppressive forces.

Commonalities in experiences between the researcher and participants created a safe place in which participants could share and participants identified that they felt comfortable speaking with the researcher. The conditions that were created for these participants are in alignment with what Collins (2009) identifies as a need for safe spaces in which Black women can freely examine issues that concern them. Notably, these places become less safe when they are maintained by those who are not Black and female. Though all of these women were

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powerful and had a strong sense of self, a safe space was important for these women because it allowed them the needed room to further self-define through voice.

Voice and Silence—Author's Story

A combined CRT and BFT theoretical framework was similarly used to center the voice of the researcher, who provides a narrative of the impact of oppressive systems and how these systems silence. Because this study focused on African American women, and because I share the same racial and gender positionality as the participants in the study, my own narrative helps illustrate my personal connections to both the literature and participants' experiences. Indeed, CRT and BFT's focus on voice and storytelling suggest that my personal story is central in understanding how my positional lenses shape and inform the present study. Thus, here I share aspects of my personal upbringing to guide readers into the context of the study.

As a very small child, most immediate and extended family and fellow church members impressed upon me the importance of education. Similarly, the church was very important in my family and within my community. I remember many strong sermons telling us that we were going to hell if we did not "get right with god." Impassioned sermons also synthesized the history of our people, specifically the role of working hard in order to move forward. I remember sermons in which the preacher advised, "Work hard, get educated and be ready to receive."

In my community, African American people viewed education as attainable through hard work. The knowledge gained through education was likened to a commodity, albeit a commodity that could never be lost nor stolen because knowledge is something that can never be taken from you. While knowledge certainly was important, getting that degree was the most important goal. Although the push for education and studying felt like a seemingly constant

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pressure, it was always tempered with projected disappointments—I knew that all my work still might not be good enough. Within my family, my brother and I faced very high expectations to excel at our studies, yet ever-present sidebar conversations whispered that we may not be able to excel because so many obstacles stood in our way, namely discriminatory acts and unjust systems. My family, church, and others in the community told me that I would have to study harder than White people, work harder than White people, get higher degrees than White people, and still be prepared to have less than White people.

Despite my parents having access to some education, their access and opportunity were not on par with what was available to White people. My mama and daddy were born and raised in the South: North and South Carolina, respectively. My daddy was born and raised on a farm deep in the country of South Carolina. My paternal granddaddy was a strong, kind man who believed in the power of education and ensured that all seven of his children were able to go to college and trade schools. My daddy chose to attend a local school and study as a mechanic. He describes his life on the farm as backbreaking work that had him up at dawn so that he could finish his work before he trekked to school. My daddy did well in school and graduated with a technical degree as a mechanic.

In contrast, my mama grew up in a small urban town. My mama was the oldest daughter out of my grandmama's 10 children. While my mama was expected to go to high school, my grandmama also fully expected her to help with the household duties and in raising her younger siblings. Since my granddaddy had died some years earlier, my grandmama was a single parent raising all of her children alone. Though my mama was raised in a very poor family, we grew up understanding the need to have the education to support any form of growth and advancement. My maternal grandmama did not have the opportunity to graduate from high school and neither

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did her mama, my great grandma Ola. My mama gave birth to me and married at a young age. Her marriage afforded her opportunities to pursue higher education at the community college level in the area of finance.

Both of my parents lived in a segregated South until 1974 and in search of a better life, my parents and I crossed the Mason Dixie Line and moved to Virginia. Though this move did provide them with more income, they quickly discovered that Virginia still felt and operated like the South as far as its treatment of African Americans.

Growing up in the South shaped me into the person that I am today. My life in the South provided me with daily exposure to racism and staggering systems of oppression. While I was having these experiences, I kept hearing that the “American Dream” was not intended for African American people. In history classes, I learned that African Americans did nothing but come to America and become slaves. Moreover, the books I read did not show African Americans successfully “living the dream.” None of the television shows I watched had African Americans “living the dream” and none of our African American friends and neighbors were “living the dream.” My daddy worked two jobs 7 days a week and my mama worked 5 days a week to pay the rent and send me to private school; these were their two greatest household expenses. We did not have a house with a two-car garage and a white picket fence, nor did we have two cars to put in a garage even if we had the house. And there were no vacations. I knew that I could live my dream, but it could not be as lofty as the American Dream.

The mixed messages that I received at home and at school struck me with a great deal of dissonance. My daddy always told me I could be whatever I wanted if I worked hard enough, but there was always the caveat that White folks could and would always stop my progress because I could not have as much or more than what they had, ever.

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In Lumberton, North Carolina, I grew up in an impoverished and segregated community of African Americans and Native Americans from the Lumbee tribe. Though my mama's family was mixed Lumbee and African American, we identified as African American. Due to our brown skin tones, White people labeled us as African American. Using a CRT lens, I now see that I was simplified. The intersectionality of my gender and class was not recognized and the intersectionality of being multiracial was also not recognized. Although I was surrounded by other African American children and teachers, I was darker than almost everyone. I noticed at a very early age that I was not treated as well as my light-skinned classmates; light skinned was in, and dark skinned was not. I realized that all of us dark brown children suffered the same fate. I wanted to learn, yet none of us dark-skinned children were chosen to help the teacher. We were never allowed to lead the class as others were allowed. I remember sitting in class with my hand raised, waiting patiently. I waited for the teacher to call on me because I knew the answer. But the teacher never called on me, she always looked at me or looked right over me as she scolded the class, "Let's get an answer from someone that might actually know."

When I reached third grade and still could not read, my parents removed me from public school and placed me in the first of two Christian private schools that my family could ill afford. The first school was very small. My parents hoped that I would thrive at a private school that had smaller class sizes and that they would have easier access to the principals and teachers that were not reachable in the public system. At this school, I learned how to read and finally began to excel. Years later, I moved on to attend a very large Christian school with about 500 students, only 3 of whom were African American. Most of the good experiences I had with the smaller school diminished because Denise, one of the other two African Americans, and I were frequently relegated to the back of the class and ignored. The times that we were not ignored we

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were singled out because we were doing the same things as others, yet we alone faced consequences. Girls passed notes to each other all the time, and yet the one day we did this, we got caught—I was taken into the hallway and paddled. No one else had ever been paddled for any infraction in our class. Among the many emotions whirling through me when she hit me, I mainly felt rage. I knew she had picked on me because of my skin color and that there was nothing that I could do but stand tall. I refused to cry. As I walked back into the classroom, I remember being embarrassed and ashamed because some of the children were laughing at me. I put my head on the desk, covered my head with my arms, and cried.

Growing up as an African American girl, and then a young woman, in the South left me with a childhood and early adulthood riddled with sexist and racist acts, alienation, and isolation. If things were not blatantly occurring, they were covert and often manifested through racial microaggressions or insults and dismissals that have a draining cumulative effect. These microaggressions, when viewed through a CRT lens, supported White dominance in each and every rejection that was metered out (Solorzano, 1998). Not only did the sexism and racism have a profound effect on me, but these oppressive ideologies and assumptions that manifested through microaggressions took their toll as well. I was expected to shed all of the things that made me different than the dominant race and I was, as BFT identifies, an outsider within because of the precarious walk between White and Black worlds. My curly hair—not good enough, so straighten it. My brown skin tone—not good enough, so lighten it. My speech patterns/cadences—not good enough, so speak like the dominant culture. The way I worship—not good enough, just worship quietly. My cultural identity—not good enough, so you must adopt a White identity. Society's expectation was that I assimilate but despite efforts to fit in, assimilation was never achieved.

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My Educational Journey from the South to the Pacific Northwest

I knew that serving time in the military would provide me with a pathway to higher education and ensure that my life was equivalent to or better than my parents. Throughout my educational journey, which started in Chicago, Illinois, transitioned to Northern California and brought me to Washington, the most glaring disparity is that I have not seen myself reflected in the faculty that teach classes, nor the administrators that were leading and establishing policy for the campuses. I have often wondered if my experience might have been different if I had seen and been able to interact with African American women in positions of power on college campuses. What would have been my experience if my educational experience included strong and powerful women providing leadership, mentorship, opportunity, and effecting change? I recognize now that in trying to just make it through and finish my degrees, I operated from a position of silence for so many of my earlier years, but no more.

The constant assaults—meted down almost daily by a racist and sexist system—have toughened me and my resolve to be a great leader that engages in meaningful work that systemically changes higher education. I am an African American woman leader who refuses to be silent and I have identified other voices to join my own. Though I have located my voice and my niche as a leader, the literature suggests that other African American women have had, or are having this very same experience of silencing (Bright & Travis, 2010; Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012). I, as well as other African American women who have aspirations of executive leadership positions, are struggling. In particular, we challenge systems that have created barriers for African American women who attempt to achieve executive leadership roles within the community college setting. And the few that are in these roles, moreover, have not been afforded sufficient opportunities to share their stories.

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Applying a CRT/BFT Lens to My Counterstory

When viewed with a CRT lens, my testimonial here serves as a counterstory to the assertions that there is equality in the United States because my story is based on a foundation of oppression and racism; counterstory is defined as narrative that challenges the dominant story and provides correction (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Within this work I am placing my personal history within a broader historical and social context. My story is an early childhood story strewn with racism, sexism, disempowerment and various methods of silencing that still follow me and I rage against every day. I internalized these callous acts and they were formative and they shaped me. The power in this counterstory is that it lends voice and allows for the silence to be broken. During my early childhood, I learned how to be silent, which allowed me to observe without seemingly being observed. In other words, the act of being silent helped me disappear. I learned to be silent in the public as well as private school setting. Silent, most often, was safe. My elders impressed upon me that children should be seen but not heard, especially in church or in school. I believe that my elders also learned how to be silent as young children as a survival technique and in an effort to protect me, they taught me how to be silent. Though this strategy probably kept me safe in many situations, it stifled me. I did not learn how to speak about the unfair things that I experienced. Things that I felt were being done to break my spirit. I did not learn to rage at the injustice of oppressive acts, always being the “only one,”—being the token, or being identified as the affirmative action centerpiece, even though my grades and test scores were as good as or better than my classmates.

These early behaviors of my parents and my resulting experiences are supported by Grove's (1996) research that recognized that in an effort to protect children, Black households often engaged in strict punishments that served to silence and through this silencing, serve as a

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protective mechanism to shelter children from possible White backlash if they spoke up for themselves. These protective measures often lead to children, such as myself, learning how to operate and navigate from a position of silence and while this adaptation may have kept me sheltered as a child, this learned behavior has made it difficult for me to speak as I got older. Grove (1996) identified that by the time Black girls reach the age of 10 or 11, they have learned how to be silent and by the time they are teenagers, their voices have either been buried or they have become deeply modulated as a survival technique.

The overarching problem with silencing is that when women are silence, they are not speaking their truths. Truths that need to be spoken because it is through the telling that the resiliency and strength is built and enlightenment can be achieved. In what comes next the reader will find the context of the study, followed by the literature review that justifies the importance of this study.

Context of Study

Historical Context of Racism

The United States was established as a racist society that has provided an unjust amount of power, rights and resources to White people, while denying power, rights, and resources to people of color. African Americans, as a group, have faced systems of racism, brutality, discrimination, and debilitating inequalities in the United States. Though these systems of racism were established with the colonization of the Americas, African American struggles are built upon a foundation of 300-plus years of White supremacy, racial oppression, and inhuman conditions that originated with the institution of slavery (Birzer & Smith-Mahdi, 2006; DeGruy, 2005; Feagin, 1991; PBS, n.d.). European enslavers stole African Americans and brought them to the United States en masse during the 1600s. Stolen from their homes, transported in

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deplorable conditions—packed and stacked in the holds of stinking slave ships for months to be brought to the United States to be sold into bondage. The United Nations (2015) recognizes that over 15 million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic in a transatlantic slave trade known as the Middle Passage. During this passage, it has been estimated that half as many human beings died as those that survived this monstrous journey (Franklin & Higgenbotham, 2010; Stannard, 1992; United Nations, 2015). Fifteen million human beings is an astronomical number, especially if one considers that during the 1700s, the total population of the British Isles was estimated at a mere 8.2 million.

From the time that Africans were stolen and brought to the United States, African Americans have been systematically targeted and oppressed (DeGruy, 2005; Evans, 2008; Kaba, 2008; Patterson, 1998). While the institution of slavery ended in 1863 with the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, oppressive and discriminatory practices did not (Feagin, 1991; Patterson, 1998). Though chattel slavery was officially over, peonage, which was debt slavery and servitude, continued until the 1940s (DeGruy, 2005; Franklin & Higginbotham, 2010). Black codes, or laws that Southern states passed to restrict African American peoples' movements, were enforced from 1863 to 1866 (Franklin & Higginbotham, 2010). Segregation was lawfully enforced from 1874 to 1975 by way of various practices and Jim Crow laws that supported the continued subjugation of African Americans (DeGruy, 2005; PBS, n.d.). Though it has been more than 150 years since the emancipation of slaves in the United States, African Americans continue to be negatively affected (Birzer & Smith-Mahdi, 2006; Feagin, 1991; Kaba, 2008).

As far back as during slavery, when African American women were worked like cattle in the fields, forced to serve as domestics to Whites, and used and discarded as sexual objects by

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slave owners, negative, exploitive and “controlling” images of African American women became prevalent (Collins, 1998). Sexual objectification can be dated back to the slave era when African American women were considered subhuman and animal like. “These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Collins, 2009, p. 67). In addition to these images, stories and historical records often represent the dominant culture’s negative portrayals of African American women and offer inaccurate descriptions and representations of Black women (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1993). These colonizing images serve to maintain systems of domination, subordination and continuation of racist systems.

Researchers have identified that these women may face many barriers and experience struggles with self-identity as they internalize the pervasive negative stereotypes that are ascribed to African American women through mass media, school texts and curricula (Bryant et al., 2005; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Henry et al., 2011). The persistent marginalizing images of African American women portrayed as the Jezebel, the Mammy, the Super Woman, the welfare recipient, the baby momma are all stereotypes that these women have to contend with while being assaulted with White standards of beauty that often look nothing like them (Bryant et al., 2005; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Henry et al., 2011). Sapphire is the loud and angry Black woman stereotype that is hurled at any Black woman that shows an ounce of strength and dares to disagree. Jezebel is the loose temptress who is highly sexualized, the Mammy is expected to be a maternal figure to everyone, the Super Woman needs nothing from anyone and the baby momma and welfare recipient are typically viewed synonymously to identify any African American woman that is a single mother.

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These stereotypical images also emerge in scholarly literature as well as public discussions and the media (Baldwin & Griffin, 2015; Bright & Travis, 2010; Bryant et al., 2005). These ascribed images and roles allow the dominant groups viewpoint of African American women as inferiors continue to be perpetuated and these women to be subjugated and hindered personally and professionally.

History demonstrates that the foundation of the United States is one that sits squarely on the backs of the racially oppressed with race and racism embedded in all of America's social institutions, structures and relations (Benjamin, 1995; Birzer & Smith-Mahdi, 2006). Racism is defined as a system of dominance, power and privilege rooted in the historical oppression of subordinated groups that the dominate group views as inferior, deviant or undesirable (Harell, 2000). This racism has been institutionally systematized - institutional racism emerges as a powerful system of privilege and power, based on race, and it is rooted at the core of American's everyday existence. Better (2008) defines institutional racism is defined as the "patterns, procedures, practices and policies that operate within social institutions so as to consistently penalize, disadvantage and exploit individuals who are members of racial minority groups."

Contemporary Effects of Historical Traumas

African Americans are not thriving in America. The cumulative impact of slavery and institutional racism has significantly contributed to societal problems for African American communities and systematically stunted, and often destroyed, the lives of many African Americans (Kaba, 2008). Though the institution of slavery may be thought of as something that happened hundreds of years ago, its legacy continues. Slavery created unjust wealth and privileged White people, their businesses, and their families. This wealth has been passed down

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through the generations and unequal system has created lasting economic inequality that is observable in the conditions of contemporary African Americans (Kaba, 2017).

White privilege emerges in access to housing, ability to accrue wealth, access to jobs, equitable pay; all of which allow for the building of wealth for White people. Conversely, inequitable conditions have been created and maintained to assure that the accumulation of wealth for African Americans is very difficult. These systemic inequities continue to contribute to the inability for the African American community to build generational wealth and perpetuate the ever growing gap between Whites and non-Whites (Mangino, 2010). Tremendous wage gaps persist between Whites and African Americans (Chambers, 2010; Kaba, 2017; Morris, 2014). Wages for African Americans have not kept pace with the wages of Whites that are doing similar work (AAUW, n.d.).

In Crystal Chambers' (2010) article "Making a Dollar out of Fifteen Cents," she identifies that the gap between Black and White earnings has been sustained for more than 30 years. While the median income for Blacks is 61 percent of the income of Whites, Blacks are more likely to be born into poverty than their White counterparts and Black Americans have the highest rate of poverty in the United States. In 2011, the poverty rate for Blacks was 26.3 percent in contrast to the national average of 14 percent (Kaba, 2017). Further, Taylor, Kochhar, Fry, Velasco, and Motel (2011) identified that 13 percent of Whites have no net worth or negative net worth, in contrast to an alarming 33 percent of Blacks and 28 percent of Latinos with no net worth or negative net worth. Wealth is inherited from generation to generation and because Blacks have been systematically subjected to racist systems and practices, the accumulation of wealth for Blacks has occurred at a much slower pace so there is not much to pass on to the next generation. This lack of wealth manifests in the inability for some families to

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provided support for educational expenses for their children and education is key to increasing the possibility of higher salary/incomes (Kaba, 2017). Further, Kaba established that education related to debt is highest amongst African Americans. As African Americans attempt to reach their educational goals, they are going deeper into debt by way of student loans and credit card debt.

These disparities spill over into community health as African Americans have less access to healthcare and are more likely to die from low risk diseases than other racial and ethnic communities (Corollo, 2011). Additionally, Corollo identified that the Center for Disease Control (CDC) found that for many health conditions, African Americans bear a disproportionate burden of disease, injury, death, and disability and are likely to suffer from chronic stress that is brought on by discriminatory practices (Birzer & Smith-Mahdi, 2006; Jones & Cross, 2007; Harrell, 2000). It has also been identified that Black women have high risk for poor health outcomes. The CDC (2015) also identified that new HIV infection rates for Black women are 20 times that of White women and the American Cancer Society (2015) found that a Black woman who is diagnosed with breast cancer is 42 percent more likely to die from the disease than a White woman.

Despite exhibiting incredible resiliency in the face of race related stressors, significant mental health disparities exist for Blacks in the United States (Jones & Cross, 2007). Mental health conditions, lack of access to treatment, and the stigma of seeking treatment creates yet another burden for African Americans. In 2001, the U.S. Surgeon General reported that racial and ethnic mental health disparities are a result of historical racism and discrimination (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

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African Americans are also blocked from fully participating in a democratic society by the disenfranchisement that occurs throughout the voting process. This is done systemically through racial gerrymandering, redistricting, and unreasonable requirements of identification for voting. Additionally, portions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 are being repealed; a 2013 Supreme Court ruling determined that since the United States is “post-race,” and that states, that had a long history of discriminatory practices against minorities, no longer needed permission to change voting rules (Dinan, 2013; Forman, 2011).

African Americans have been denied access to housing and steered into segregated housing that has created racially and economically isolated neighborhoods. These substandard neighborhoods have limited access to resources and underfunded inadequate schools; researchers have identified that communities are more segregated now than they were 40 years ago (Rothstein, 2013; Stopford & Smith, 2014; Strauss, 2013).

Further, mass disenfranchisement is occurring through a criminal justice system that disproportionality incarcerates African Americans (Ghandnoosh, 2015). Kaba (2008) identifies that Black children are nearly nine times more likely to have a parent in prison than a White child. Voting rights are also impacted because of inequitable incarceration rates. Within the general population, 1 in 40 people cannot vote because of felonies. This number is alarming but more alarming are the statistics for African Americans—this number is 1 in 13 (Ghandnoosh, 2015). Gail Thompson’s Special Report, “African American Women and the U.S. Criminal justice System: A Statistical Survey, 1870–2009” as cited by Taylor (2013), identified that African American women, as well as, African American men, were likely to receive longer sentences than any other racial and ethnic group. Further, African American women’s gender

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provided no leniency in their imprisonment rates, unlike White women. African American women imprisonment rates were more similar to those of African American men.

The perceived criminality of African Americans reinforces the discriminatory practices of the criminal justice system, such as perceptions of victimization by the police that then lead to state-sanctioned, unchecked violence on African American communities (Alexander, 2010; Birzer & Smith-Mahdi, 2006; Stopford & Smith, 2014; Taylor, 2013). Though police violence has not been a singular occurrence in the United States, police violence against African Americans has steadily increased over the years (Mapping Police Violence, 2015; Taylor, 2013). For example, from January 1 to December 15, 2015, police killed 1,152 people, with African Americans representing a disproportionately high 41 percent of all police fatalities—69 percent of these individuals were unarmed. African Americans are three times more likely to be killed by the police than White people (Mapping Police Violence, 2015) and African American youth, with no prior arrests, are four times more likely than White youth to be sent to a juvenile facility (Ghandnoosh, 2015). Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, stated that there are more Black men in prison or jail, on probation or parole than there were enslaved in 1850—before the Civil War began (Price, 2011). Taylor (2013) attributes this sustained increase in police brutality on the African American community as the police attempt to maintain White supremacy and control the Black population.

International attention has scrutinized episode after episode of racially motivated violence against African American men by sworn officers of the law: Amadou Diallo, Sean Bell, Alonzo Ashley, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, LaQuan McDonald, Tamir Rice and many, many more (Mapping Police Violence, 2015). The current media narrative highlights the killings that are happening with these boys and men however, the struggle of women that have been brutalized by

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police is rarely talked about and less likely to receive media attention. The narrative infrequently talks about the women that have faced police brutality—Kayla Moore, Miriam Carey, Sandra Bland, Korryn Gaines, Alexia Christian, Adaisha Miller, Meagan Hockaday and many, many more (Lowery, 2016).

Not only do people of color suffer at the hands of police, they are also victims of hate crimes. 2007 data reflects that 34 percent of the hate crimes committed in the United States have been committed against African Americans (Mapping Police Violence, 2015). Further, African Americans are the most frequent victims of verbal as well as physical attacks that include lynching, dismemberment, church shootings, and burning of churches (Finley, 2015; Friedersdorf, 2015).

Black Protest Voice

Racism is so American that when we protest racism the average American assumes we're protesting America. (Anonymous)

The United States' problematic history of racism, discrimination, and oppressive structures has more recently ignited an epoch of protests across the country. Contemporary college students are protesting the longstanding inequities, oppression, and exclusion faced by students of color (Rahamatulla, 2015). In 2015, racist systems and acts against African Americans triggered protests at campuses nationwide: Oklahoma State University, University of California Los Angeles, University of Missouri, University of Michigan, Ithaca College, Princeton University, and Yale University (Jaschik, 2015). While these protests have called for action, institutions and administrators have attempted to placate their voices by carelessly dismissing the initial racist and discriminatory acts (Basile, 2014; Jaschik, 2015). Yet on other campuses, major shifts have already begun. One such example occurred at University of

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Missouri. Student protests and calls for actions to end racism on the campus led to the resignation of the President as well as the Chancellor. Students have protested by marching with their mouths duct-taped to symbol the silencing that persists within the African American community. Similarly, students have held die-ins where they have laid down as if murdered by police (Basile, 2014; Jaschik, 2015).

As students across the nation demand change, students of color in particular challenge the lack of diversity on their campuses and as they demand equity, inclusivity, and the hiring of faculty and staff of color (Jaschik, 2015; Rahamatulla, 2015; Schweers, 2015). Indeed, national data reflects low numbers of faculty and staff of color in positions of power within higher education settings (ACE, 2007; De Welde & Stepnick, 2015; Jaschik, 2015; Strauss, 2013). Protestors are pushing for more inclusivity, racial justice, recognition, and acknowledgement of systems of oppression.

As students raise their voice, so have others throughout the African American community. In particular, activists have expressed their desire to have a voice in how their communities are policed (Petersen-Smith, n.d.). Robinson (2015) shared that the murder of Trayvon Martin at the hands of George Zimmerman sparked outrage and catalyzed Black Lives Matter (BLM). This modern-day social justice movement was formed by three black women who believed in advancing a shared social justice agenda: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi (Khan-Cullors, Bandele and Davis (2018). These women acknowledged that when they started this movement, it was with the knowledge that BLM movement was not the beginning of a movement, but a continuation of a 400 year struggle that Black people have shared. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) identified that it takes a multitude of oppressed people to make voices heard by those institutionalized through social and legal power. The Black Lives

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Matter Movement reflects this multitude, serving as a cry to stop the dehumanization of Black people and a call for Black people and supporters to name the systemic factors that saturate American society and collectively devalue Black lives (Robinson, 2015). The Black Lives Matter Movement has highlighted the racial inequalities in the United States justice system, specifically the inequity in the targeting and policing of Black communities (Petersen-Smith, n.d.; Robinson, 2015). Through protests, interviews with the press, active websites, and the usage of hashtags and tweets, this movement decries the structural racism that has led to non-stop police-sanctioned killings of Black people. Additionally, leaders and protesters of this movement have demanded accountability with an overarching theme of reforming how policing occurs in this nation.

As violence against Blacks increased, so did BLM protests across the nation. A form of White backlash to this group emerged with an online petition that requested that the federal government label the Black Lives Matter movement as a "terror group." This designation was never assigned but it has not stopped the media from discussion, especially conservative critic Rush Limbaugh (Flores, 2016). If BLM was designated a terrorist organization, this nation should be prepared to do the same for the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) as well as the increased White supremacist attacks in the United States. Further, continued White backlash that serves to maintain a racist system is evident in the attempted minimization of the BLM movement with the countering of "all lives matter" or "blue lives matter." As these reactions attest, the Black Lives Matter Movement is centering the voices of the oppressed and silenced, through marches, die-ins, and others acts of resistance in almost every major city (Jaschik, 2015).

Black girl Magic is a term that was created by and for Black women as a form of resistance and to honor the resiliency of these women while supporting the reclamation of

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contributions, identities and success in an uplifting and affirming way (Patton & Croom, 2017).

Kasambala (2018) identifies that the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic was made popular by blogger Cashawn Thompson and that these positive affirmations provide a tangible mantra for the newest wave of intersectional feminism. In this vein of resistance, I now shift to explore the foundation of African American women in higher education and in educational leadership roles.

Literature Review

This section examines African American women's access and enrollment to higher education, the United States community college system, the current state of African American women as students, African American women working within the college setting, and the absence of African American women in executive leadership roles.

African American Women's Access and Enrollment in Higher Education

Traditional higher education was designed in the horse-and-buggy era to serve the young, rich, white, able-bodied sons of aristocrats: the leisure class. Its culture was patriarchal, competitive, and linear, and its approved teaching method was Socratic. (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001, iii)

The United States higher education system is one that is steeped in European and colonial American origins and norms. As this higher education system was created to prepare White males for leadership, these White male-dominated Eurocentric educational structures continue to portray the White male perspective as universal (Benjamin, 1997; Bright & Travis, 2010). This patriarchal system of domination subjugates and oppresses women at every turn (Benjamin, 1997; Wenniger & Conroy, 2001). This patriarchal system similarly does not support the development, progression or empowerment of women of color within educational settings. This oppression is evident as women attempt to access and attend college and as they try to navigate

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obtaining employment and create career pathways for themselves within the four-year as well as two-year college system (Bower & Wolverton, 2009; Wenniger & Conroy, 2001).

Harper et al. (2009) and Tate (1997) postulate that the United States racist educational systems have used intellectual inferiority, based on skin color, as a way to question the worthiness of African Americans and other people of color having access to education. Colonial America's historical legacy of racism has extended into the higher educational setting, where women have been denied entry because of the color of their skin, their gender and often their class. These systemic inequalities have taken place at least since the Civil War (Crenshaw, 1995; Rogers-Ard, Knaus, Epstein, & Mayfield, 2013; Solomon, 1985). Due to legal prohibitions against educating enslaved people prior to the Civil War, African Americans were largely uneducated with no access to formal education (Benjamin, 1997; Wenniger & Conroy, 2001). Most were unable to read or write because the White populace did not feel the need to educate individuals who they deemed to be their intellectual and cultural inferiors. However, some of these men and women—religious leaders, abolitionists, slave owners, and freed African Americans—learned to read and write through various means (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001).

The nation's most prestigious universities were not established to educate women, people of color or the working class . . . While many of the formal barriers have been lifted, academic institutions remain, at their core, profoundly inhospitable to the experiences and points of view of those formerly excluded . . . regrettably, the culture of academia overall remains not only remarkably blind to its own flaws, but deeply invested in a thoroughgoing denial. (Harris & Gonzales, 2012, p. 7)

U.S. educational systems are settings that should be preparing students for active, equitable and full participation in a diverse democracy that allows these individuals to interact

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with differing races and ethnicities (Decuir & Dixon, 2004, Guin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002, Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). However, these educational systems instead reflect the dominant culture's power and privilege and these educational systems have only reluctantly made space within its halls for people of color. White male dominance is maintained through curriculum and teaching, as well as standards for hiring, promotion, and tenure (Benjamin, 1997; Bright & Travis, 2010; Wenniger & Conroy, 2001). This slow acceptance of people of color is represented in enrollment patterns for students of color at primarily White institutions and further highlighted by the lack of diversification within the ranks of faculty and more specifically for the purposes of this study, executive leadership positions for African American women (Nidiffer, 2010; Wenniger & Conroy, 2001).

The journey of African American women entering into the hallowed halls of academia has not been an easy. While women have been historically marginalized in academia and there has been great resistance to allowing girls and women access to K-12 and post-secondary education (Bright & Travis, 2010), the hostility and antagonism of educating African American girls and women has been even greater (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001). Because of the resistance and backlash around educating African American women, African American women have been courageous and bold in their education. In 1793, Catherine Ferguson opened the Kathy Ferguson School for the Poor in New York City. This endeavor, by an ex slave who purchased her own freedom, marked her as the first known female teacher and administrator (Mosley, 1980). In 1836, the first U.S. College to confer degrees for women was created in Macon, Georgia, Georgia Female College, now known as Wesleyan College (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001). Women's colleges continued to grow and in 1960, they reached 296 institutions. Jones (2006) highlights how the "massification" of higher education increased the participation of this

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previously excluded group of women. Women began to be admitted into all-male serving institutions in 1933 (Solomon, 1985) and Ohio's Oberlin College was one of the first colleges to admit students of African descent—Sarah J. Watson Barnett enrolled as their first African American woman in 1842 (Bush, Chambers, & Walpole, 2009).

In 1862, Mary Jane Patterson was the first Black woman in the United States to earn a BA degree from Oberlin College (Harper et al., 2009; Henry et al., 2011). As colleges became co-ed, so began the closure of all-women schools; by 1999 all but 73 of these institutions had closed (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001). In this midst of White women being admitted into some of the bastions of education created for White men, separate educational opportunities were being developed for African American women who faced prejudice and discrimination (Solomon, 1985).

In 1837, the first historically African American institution was created in Philadelphia, Cheyney State Teachers College (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001). The establishment of this college preceded the opening of Lincoln University; by 1920, more than 100 colleges had been established for Blacks in the United States, including the prestigious Morehouse, Fisk, Spelman, and Howard. These Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) offered what had been withheld from the Black community—access and opportunity in an environment that had less bigotry and racism and by 1940, the trend of Black women enrolling in predominantly White institutions (PWI) was reversed.

Though there was forced desegregation in the K–12 system because of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, this had little impact on desegregation at the collegiate level (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001). In 1964, *Hawkins v. Board of Control* attempted to dismantle segregation at the college level, but achieved little success. The Civil Rights Act of 1964,

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however, began the slow change towards integration within the college system (Harper, 2007). While these formerly White and all-male institutions began admitting White women, and some years later, African American men and women, these institutions were never welcoming for people of color. According to Bright & Travis (2010), the 1960s and 1970s were critical junctures for African Americans as they recognized the racism on college campuses as the civil rights movement raged. There were critical shifts in cultural climate across the nation as blacks recognized the systemic inequities and injustices that they faced on a daily basis and they protested. These protests, coupled with the 1967 Civil Rights Act, finally began to crack open the doors to allow entry of more Black students, faculty and administrators on college campuses. Strayhorn's (2011) research highlighted the movement of African American student enrollments and how these students are concentrated in HBCUs, less selective four-year institutions, and community colleges.

The United States Community College

U.S. community colleges have been identified as centers of educational opportunities (AACC, n.d.). In 1948, the Truman Commission recommended an expansion of community colleges. Coupled with the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965, the doors to higher education opened wide for many groups that had previously been denied access due to discriminatory systems and laws (Bower & Wolverton, 2009). Additionally, the Civil Rights Movement advocated equality and access in education for minorities. The demand for skilled laborers also influenced how higher education increased its access. The 1960s featured low tuition rates, open admissions, and nearly double the number of community colleges in a burgeoning national network (AACC, n.d.; Karabel, 1972). This need for increased access coincided with post-war needs for increased educational offerings, as well as women and African

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Americans who sought to exercise their civil rights and become equal members of society (Bragg, 2001).

Historically community colleges have been viewed as a vehicle that promotes opportunity for all people because of their open access and affordability (Karabel, 1997). Earlier research by Karabel (1972) identified that the intended role of community colleges was to ideologically create equal opportunity to education, yet it became a class-based tracking system that was educationally inflated. Educational inflation refers to the expansion of the educational system without changing the underlying opportunity structure. For example, a high school diploma—once a valuable achievement that seemingly ensured employment—has less value than it once did. Prior to the development of community colleges, high schools in the United States educated small numbers and were seen as elite institutions. Additionally, community colleges were described as institutions that intended to absorb and afford opportunity to the masses that the more selective colleges and universities were not interested in serving (Karabel, 1972).

Strayhorn (2011) identifies that 75 percent of White students pursue higher education after they graduate high school. In contrast, for African American students, the number is a mere 35-50 percent with more than 50 percent, roughly one million, of these students choosing enrollment at one of the 1200+ community college across the nation to pursue their post-secondary education (Iloh & Toldson, 2013). Of this number attending community college, only 16 percent persist to graduation and African Americans have the lowest graduation rate of all community college students.

Although community colleges have increased access to higher education, researchers have identified that this system is class-based and maintains structural inequalities (Karabel, 1972). Further, the failures that ultimately occur because of these inequalities usually rest on the

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individuals rather than the system that sustains these inequalities (Karabel, 1972; Rendón, 2000). Rendón (2000) identified that minority students who seek access to community colleges often do this to gain a bachelor's degree; they see the community college as a pathway to the four-year degree. While the intent for some of these students may be to transfer, unfortunately, this may not be their reality because completion rates for students of color in the community college setting are low (Iloh & Toldson, 2013; NCES, 2008).

While it has been asserted that community colleges create access for students (AACC, n.d.; Iloh & Toldson, 2013), these low completion rates suggest barriers for students whose progression and access to four-year colleges is slowed (Iloh & Toldson, 2013; Morrice & Carter, 2011). So, while there has been increased access for students of color generally, there is a need for increased focus on persistence that leads to completion (Strayhorn, 2011). This slowdown supports systems of oppression by increasing the possibility of non-completion, while providing a buffer for the four-year colleges because these masses do not seek entry into their institutions (Fletcher, 2013). Carnevale, as cited in Fletcher (2013), identifies:

The higher-education system is colorblind in theory but in fact operates, at least in part, as a systematic barrier to opportunity for many blacks and Hispanics, many of whom are college-qualified but tracked into overcrowded and under-funded colleges, where they are less likely to develop fully or to graduate.

Current State of African American Women as College Students

Inequality persists across all segments of society in the United States. This inequality cuts across higher educational settings and is evidenced in enrollment patterns and completion rates (Kaba, 2008). The oppressive and inequitable impact of White male centered educational

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institutions begins in K-12 and is continued through to the community college, four-year, graduate and the doctoral level for African American women (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001).

The underrepresentation of African American's in PWIs is a true phenomenon and it has been referred to as a lack of critical mass—this lack of critical mass is highly impactful on persistence; students are more likely to succeed when they are surrounded by peers that share their background (Museus et al., 2015). Critical mass is achieved when there are enough individuals from a particular group that they feel comfortable and confident that they are seen as individuals and not the spokesperson for their particular race (Bright & Travis, 2010; Henry et al., 2011). This before mentioned lack of critical mass contributes to feelings of isolation, tokenism and the perpetuation of inequitable services for minority students on college campus (Moses, 1989). Such inequities are evidenced in how classroom curriculum, instruction and student support services are tailored to support the dominant campus culture. Campus structures do not often consider nor do they meet the needs of African Americans and such structural gaps shatter any possibility of creating a sense of belonging for these women (Strayhorn, 2011). Strayhorn defines sense of belonging as perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness and the feeling of mattering, being cared about, and respected by the group, namely the campus community, faculty, and peers.

African American women that attend predominantly White institution (PWIs) experience many psychosocial factors that impact their progress. These women report that they are assaulted with a deluge of conscious, unconscious, verbal and nonverbal insults on a daily basis and this and many other factors, they are less likely to complete their education than their White peers (Bush et al., 2009; Henry et al., 2011; Kaba, 2008; Walkington, 2017). They are often subjected to inequitable treatment on campuses, racial hostility that lead to feelings of isolation

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and difficulty forming connections with peers and faculty members on campus (Crawford & Smith, 2005). Pair these barriers with a sheer lack of other students of color, African American female faculty and administrators that can serve as friends and mentors, and feelings of isolation can exacerbate and destroy any possibility of developing a sense of belonging (Allen, Jacobsen, & Lomotey, 1995; Henry et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2011).

The negative experiences of African American women students in the classroom also impact persistence. These students experience silencing, feelings of invisibility, they are treated as lessors by their White peers and faculty and they are frequently looked to for participation if the topic concerns an identified Black issue (Moses, 1989). Additionally, race-related incidents playing out across college campuses create hostile learning environments and decrease sense of belonging for students of color on college campuses (Feagin, Hernan, & Imani, 1996).

Though educational attainment has increased tremendously for African American women, this attainment comes at a high financial cost. Without familial wealth as support, African American students often go into debt for their education at a higher rate than their White peers (Kaba, 2017). Examination of scholarship and grant trends by Kaba found that even temporary green card holders received substantially more grant supports than African American women with full citizenship. Additionally, Kaba discovered that grant trends are shifting and more grants are being disbursed based on merit versus actual need. This is a process that will further disenfranchise African American students who probably will not fit into an established merit-based mold, especially if these parameters continue to be set using a White male lens.

In the face of unwelcoming environments, college enrollments for African American women have increased 30.3 percent between 1990 and 2000, and in turn the number of African American women enrolled surpassed the 1 million mark for this period. According to the

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Chronicle of Education (2008), Black women made up 65 percent of the Black student population on college and university campuses across the nation. The research suggests that though these women are entering higher education, they are still struggling with educational equity and this is evidenced in their graduation rates (Henry et al., 2011)—these women are far less likely than their White female counterparts to graduate. However, in spite of these inequities, Black women are still graduating. In 2001–2002, Black women earned 10.4 percent of degrees while White women earned 73.3 percent (NCES, 2003). From 1994–2005, the awarding of bachelor degrees rose by 23 percent and African American's women contribution to this number was an increase of 66.8 percent. Master's degree attainment increased by 52.5 percent and professional degrees grew to 53.2 percent (Kaba, 2017). Primarily in the area of business, professional degrees were earned in the area of law, and education was most often chosen for masters and doctoral degrees (Kaba, 2017). Though doctoral degree attainment translated to more faculty members during this same period, degree attainment did not translate to more women gaining higher education leadership positions, nor more specifically presidency positions (Bush et al., 2009).

African American Women Working in the College Setting

With the diversity of race, gender, and ethnicity within the body of the community college student population, the lack of representation in employment presents a glaring disparity (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001). In short, as the student body grows more diverse, executive leadership positions continue to be primarily filled by White leaders. This lack of representation of African American women is particularly problematic because with such diverse student populations, not staff, faculty and leadership that is reflective of students speaks to how systems of racism emerge and are maintained through institutions' lack of commitment to diversity.

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Aguirre and Martinez (2002) likens diversity nourishing the higher education setting as water brings life to barren lands.

Education is a long-standing strategy of uplift and advancement for people of color (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007) and despite more than 30 years of affirmative action and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission oversight and intervention, African American women remain woefully underrepresented in the higher education workplace because of their race and gender (Kaba, 2008). According to Bright & Travis (2010), there is a consensus in the literature that being Black and female within higher education leads to inequities and struggles—regardless of station within the institution. African American women may find themselves challenged, dismissed, their skill sets minimized or outright ignored by individuals at institutions that view them as an affirmative action hires. These faulty beliefs can lead to these women being disrespected, experiencing resentment and treated as if they are incompetent by their White peers (Baldwin & Griffin, 2015; Bright & Travis, 2010; Fontaine & Greenlee, 1993). According to Wilson (1989):

Women of color in academic administration area recent phenomenon, due to their double oppression as women and people of color . . . their small numbers are intimately tied to American history, legal restrictions and traditional customs.” (p. 85)

Though facing barriers across educational settings, African American women continue to pursue positions in higher education and attempt to gain entrance to positions that lead to systemic change. There are many positive reasons to have African American women on college campuses. Their presence on campuses not only increases the gender and racial diversity of the campus, these women bring diverse perspectives and abilities to institutions. Having these women on campus reaps a myriad of benefits for institutions. Their differing perspectives allow

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them to challenge practices on college campuses, enrich student's educational lives and challenge the dominant perspective that sets the tone for research and curriculum.

Museus et al. (2015) identified that higher education institutions have created narratives that claim insufficient supply of qualified applicants for faculty and key administrative positions. This faulty narrative allows for the continuation of the hiring of White men and women in prime positions on college campuses. However, when these positions are filled by people of color, though they are less likely to gain tenure, promotion, endowed or receive distinguished professorships, they continue to persist (Kaba, 2017).

Benjamin (1997) and Walkington (2017) share that within higher education, African American women in the workplace face unreasonable expectations and burdens because of their race. African American women are constantly challenged to prove that they can work as well or better than their White colleagues. These women often work harder and have more responsibilities than similarly situated White women—namely because their day-to-day work lives are a proving ground in which they need to do better than Whites (Bright & Travis, 2010; Kaba, 2017; Tate, 1997). Such expectations are that they provide mentorship and be available specifically for students of color, handle race related problems and be the resident expert on Black issues. They are paid lower than similarly situated peers and this is particularly true of faculty because African American women are sometimes hired into adjunct faculty roles but not tenure track positions (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012).

Most of the research on Black college employees has focused on faculty in the four-year and not administrators in the community college (Bright & Travis, 2010; Garrison-Wade et al., 2012; Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Jimoh & Johnson, 2008; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Further, researchers have identified that as student population continues to increasingly diversify, faculty

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ranks remain consistently filled with White men and women (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012). Black women faculty face an arduous road in their search for tenure and are still rare in the halls of academia (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., (2012). According to Gutierrez y Muhs et al. (2012), examination of the higher academic faculty ranks for women of color, the numbers show steadily decline. In 2007, a mere 3.4 percent women of color were full professors. In the lower ranks, however, 10.4 percent were instructors and lecturers and 6.6 percent were associate professors and these women were overrepresented in less prestigious universities and community colleges (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012).

Because Black women are so few in number, especially in higher level leadership positions, they are often the only one and in this solo status, and they experience extremely isolating pressures to assimilate (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). These women are hyper aware of their Blackness and are often under a constant spotlight, experience chilly work environments—sometimes outright hostility because of their minority status and assumptions are often made that they are merely an affirmative action hire (Benjamin, 1997; Bright & Travis, 2010; Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012). These women are often expected to represent their race as well as their gender group. For these women, difficulties in the work place can emerge because of stereotypes and faulty beliefs that these women are hired because of affirmative action (Bright & Travis, 2010, Walkington, 2017). Despite research reflecting that White women have been the major recipients of affirmative action legislation (Bright & Travis, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Patton and Croom (2017) identified that Black women have been identified as the “new model minority.” The term model minority has been coined to identify a group of people that have been historically marginalized through education, economic and social barriers and despite these constructs, these groups rise up to be prosperous and admired (Kaba, 2008). While this

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status had been reserved for Asian Americans, it is now being applied to African American women in the post-secondary education arena who for might not fit into stereotypically ascribed roles (Kaba, 2008; Walkington, 2017). This myth is particularly devastating for Black women because it serves to pit these women against other minorities. This label can create divisiveness between minority groups, aligning with Delgado and Stefancic's (2012) term of differential racialization, in which minority groups become individually racialized. This differential can create tensions between and within groups.

African American women in the work setting grapple with stereotypes much the same as students. These women are expected to be quiet and accept the racialized and gendered subordination (Collins, 2000). Further, these women are always expected to be in the position of caretaking, mentoring, constantly self-sacrificing while being available to clean up anytime it is needed. Especially if the things that need cleaning up, involve minority students (Henry et al., 2011). Walkington (2017) introduces the Modern Mammy stereotype in which African American women are expected to allow students and colleagues to question their competence, while in turn these women are supposed to defer to these detractors all while comforting them in times of need. As with African American students, this Super Woman stereotype perpetuates the myth that these women enter and graduate higher education institutions barrier and obstacle free and the continuance of this myth assures that research that could reduce barriers and obstacles for these women do not occur (Bryant et al., 2005; Patton & Croom, 2017). Further, this myth is particularly damaging because it builds division between already marginalized groups and supports the continuation of White supremacy in the United States. This stereotype also creates divisions and isolates Black women while bolstering inaccurate perceptions that Black women don't need anything. Such stereotypes and myths allow institutions to be unresponsive to the

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struggles of this group of women on college campuses. These reported unobstructed successes are incredibly damaging for African American women in the workplace because their struggles are not given any recognition (Patton & Croom, 2017).

Additionally, African American women are expected to support the images of inclusion that the institutions are jockeying to portray all while working to find solutions to diversity and inclusion problems that are occurring across campuses. These are additional responsibilities placed on these women that most their White men and women peers do not have to contend with. These stereotypes paired with unfair and unrealistic expectations such as disproportionate service expectations, particularly with students of color, create campus environments that make it difficult for these women to navigate and thrive (Museus et al., 2015; Patitu & Hinton, 2003).

In addition to being expected to wear the Super Woman cape, African American women face additional barriers as they attempt to ascend into higher ranks. In this attempted ascension, these women are thwarted by a concrete ceiling, a term coined specifically for women of color to reflect the daunting barriers to progression (Griffith & Merchant, 2015). A concrete ceiling is much more insidious than the glass ceiling, which is commonly used to reference the invisible barrier that stunts the progression of women in the workforce (Gaetane et al., 2009; Hironimu-Wendt & Dedjoie, 2015). With a glass ceiling, the material is translucent; it can be seen through and the other side can be visualized. Through this visualization, aspirations and dreams can be developed. As women see through this glass ceiling, it becomes logical that this fragile material can be broken. Conversely, a concrete ceiling does not offer any visualization through to the other side and it cannot be broken without excessive force. (Gaetane et al., 2009). As African American women struggle to achieve their educational goals, they struggle to gain tenure and struggle to garner middle management positions that align with an executive leadership track

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(Bright & Travis, 2010; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Gaetane et al., 2009; NCES, 2008). In short, the higher the academic hierarchy, the less African American women are seen.

Absence of African American Women in Executive Leadership Roles

An examination of the literature reflects an absence of research in the area of African American women in executive leadership positions in community colleges, compounded by an even greater gap in discussions of their racialized experiences (Kaba, 2008; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). What is known about people of color in higher education leadership has not come from African American women, but rather has often been produced and framed through a lens of White supremacy and male superiority (Benjamin, 1997; Bright & Travis, 2010). Butler and Walter (1991) identify that White racial framing is used to highlight the experiences of White middle-class women and all other women are added to and measured against this group of White middle-class women (p. 74). With the utilization of White racial frames and White-framed narratives, Black voices are seldom heard.

Patitu and Hinton (2003) identified that African American are heavily concentrated in low- and mid-level student affairs positions and are underrepresented in senior-level positions. This work is supported by Clayborne and Hamrick (2007), who explore leadership experiences of mid-level Student Affairs professionals. They identified that attention to this group of women is important because executive leadership usually rises from these ranks. Additionally, Bright & Travis (2010) identified that there was a high concentration of Black women in academic support, student services and diversity.

A 2010 report by the United States Department of Education has identified that there are 1,462 community colleges in the United States (US Department of Education, 2010). Bright & Travis (2010) highlighted a report by the American College of Education (ACE) that identified a

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mere 31 African American women were community college presidents in 2007 and this reflects a marked increase – there were only 20 ten years earlier. Further, Bush et al. (2009) identified that the path to the presidency for African American women was so rare that during the 1986–2006 time frame the American Council on Education did not even attempt to measure this number.

Furthermore, there is little in the literature that deepens the knowledge of how African American women lead at PWIs in the face of staggering systems of oppression, isolation, and marginalization (Holmes, 2003). The maintenance of minority existence within in a White majority environment aligns with Collins' (1998) definition of being the “outsider-within.” This status emerges for African American women through their own personal experiences as insiders and their ability to have enough critical distance that allows for critique. As mentioned earlier, within the literature, women are treated as a singular group, even though African American women do not remotely share a homogenous existence with White women (Holmes, 2003; Warner & DeFluer, 1993). Because of this treatment, African American women's experiences have often been absorbed into a mainstream White context and normalized to align with the experiences of White women (Collins, 2004). This phenomenon perpetuates the continual silencing of African American women and within this silence, they are prevented from contributing to the narrative that could help disrupt racist systems (Bright & Travis, 2010; Collins, 2004; Johnson & Thomas, 2012; Museus et al. (2015).

Harper (2012) identified that an analysis of 255 peer reviewed journal articles in higher education identified that researchers who study people of color often retreat to majority established norms and ignore or dismiss the impact of racism. Additionally, much of the literature focuses on either student or faculty experiences, but not leadership experiences of African American women (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012).

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There are many reasons that there are so few people of color in leadership positions on college campuses. Faculty, staff, and administrators of color continue to face significant barriers in their work on predominately White campuses. Their experiences at these unwelcoming institutions include but are not limited to isolation, racism, exclusion from formal networks, and microaggressions that limit their success and impede long-term progression and advancement (Bryant et al., 2005; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Wenniger & Conroy, 2001).

Microaggressions are defined by Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) as verbal, behavioral or environmental incidents that subtly communicate insults towards people of color.

Patitu and Hinton (2003) advocate for more African Americans and other minorities on campus to ensure that minority students see themselves reflected and envision their success in obtaining professional positions. African American women are in an ideal place to lead because of their lived experiences that directly challenge our existing classist, sexist and racist social structure. The unique marginalized perspectives allow for critiques of the dominant culture and offer counterstories (hooks, 1984). Not only do African American women provide critical support for students of color—as mentors, advisors, and role models (Dowdy, 2008)—these women have different lived experiences that can help their White colleagues, if they are willing, develop broader perspectives. They help to enrich the student body's educational experience by exhibiting their success and preparing students for experiences in an increasingly diverse and multicultural society (Jimoh & Johnson, 2008). Additionally, having African American women employed in faculty and administrative positions is also thought to increase the enrollment and persistence of African American students (Jimoh & Johnson, 2008; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). African American women of varying backgrounds foster a deeper, richer tapestry on campus that increases the possibility of different viewpoints that may challenge dominant ideologies and

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deeply rooted social hierarchies on college campuses (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). These individuals with racially diverse perspectives in positions of power can help disrupt racist organizational practices that serve to perpetuate power and privilege of the majority through the development of curriculum, policy, culturally relevant practices, and contribute to the overall culture of college campuses (Patitu & Hinton, 2003).

In what comes next, I clarify qualitative research methods, introduce participants, present interview data, and provide brief interpretive analyses of how African American leaders managed to survive, thrive, transform or be transformed by their experiences. The purpose of these methods was to center the voices of African American executive community college leaders, and my hope is that these voices reinforce the need for supports for such leaders to transform the current community college system.

Methodology: Researching African American Executive Leadership Voices

The purpose of this study is to explore the racialized lived experiences of African American women in executive leadership positions at the community college level in the Pacific Northwest, with a focus on Washington State. In order to understand the impact of this disparity, this study examined the critical perspectives of four African American leaders. In particular, qualitative interviews were utilized to uncover barriers and challenges while homing in on strengths and life experiences that have led these women to become effective leaders. A qualitative narrative research design allowed for a deeper exploration of the stories by identifying emerging themes and patterns. Participants explored the impact of racism and sexism on their personal and professional lives, and ten key themes emerged from the transcripts.

Narrative research allows the researcher to collect and tell stories about the individuals', their experiences and discuss the meaning of those experiences (Clark & Creswell, 2014). These

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stories are important because “they may shed light on the identities of the individuals and how they see themselves” (Creswell, 2007, p. 71) and these narratives create a communal story.

Further, Merriam (1998) identifies that all qualitative research is interpretive with the central characteristics being that individuals construct reality in interactions with their social worlds (p. 22). The lived experience emerged through voice to create counterstories, which aligns with the CRT/BFT analytical frame. Within the African American community, a strong tradition of storytelling has been used as an educational tool and as a means to pass on wisdom and knowledge across generations. In a historical context, African Americans were unable to read and write during and after the ending slavery and storytelling was a viable way to share and deposit information (Ramsey, 2003).

Data Collection

The primary strategy for gathering information occurred through semi-structured qualitative interviews. Data analysis began with review of demographic information provided by each participant during an initial pre-interview. All participants provided a resume and completed an open-ended biographical questionnaire that captured background information such as length of time in position and educational attainment (Plano, Clark, & Creswell, 2010). Once participants agreed to study procedures, in-person interviews were conducted. Interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes, and one was conducted via Skype. Interviews were audio-recorded and a professional transcription service was used. The researcher reviewed each transcript, contrasting notes and memory of the interview to ensure transcript accuracy.

Confidentiality

Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Institutional identities and roles have also been obfuscated through assigned codes (which were turned into

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pseudonyms), to further protect potential participant identities. These codes were used to identify participants and to link them with their information. Once the data were collected, the codes were unlinked and removed for full confidentiality. All documents related to the research were kept within a locked drawer in a locked office; digital files remain in a password-protected computer.

Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were selected from across the Pacific Northwest. Snowball sampling was relied upon due to the scarcity of African American women in executive leadership positions. Seven women were recruited to participate in this study, reflecting the limited pool of potential participants. The few that were already known to the researcher were invited to participate and were asked to recruit others. Four of the seven invitees agreed to participate in the study. Participants were: (a) African American; (b) female; (c) currently working, have worked, or retired from an executive leadership position at a community college; and (d) located in the Pacific Northwest.

The Participants

For the purposes of this study, and because there is a relatively small and publicly identifiable sample of community college executive leadership within the Pacific Northwest, identifiable data provided remain vague so as to further decrease identifiability of participants. Three participants were in the 50–60 age range and one participant was in the 40–50 age range. Three of the participants were married and one was unmarried but had a partner. All participants had or have raised children. Three participants hold doctoral degrees and one was in the final stages of her doctoral degree. One of the participants was a first-generation college student, while the others had parents that had attended college earning various levels of educational

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attainment. All of the participants were strong, powerful women imbued with a quick wit as well as charm. They all have a strong sense of community, passion for student development, need for social justice and equity as well as the skill to unabashedly confront and call out injustices.

Participant pseudonyms were selected by the researcher as individuals who historically have been seen as strong African American women; Maya, Zora, Audre, and Angela. The following profiles offer an introduction of the participants and Table 1 summarizes demographic information.

Table 1.

Participant Profile

Participants pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Years in current position	Educational attainment	Current position
Angela	51–60	M	1	Doctorate	President
Maya	41–50	Divorced	2	Doctorate (in progress)	Associate Vice President
Audre	51–60	M	2	Doctorate	Associate Chancellor
Zora	51–60	M	6 mo.	Doctorate	Chancellor

Angela

Angela is a community college President in a small suburban community. She as well as her parents were born and raised in a segregated south. Her father, a Tuskegee Airman, retired from the military, and both her parents are HBCU graduates. She completed her doctoral degree

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in the Pacific Northwest and has worked at four-year institutions as well as community colleges. She has been in executive leadership positions for more than 15 years and in her current position for one year. Angela presents as warm and welcoming. She is energizing, has a quiet wit and infectious laugh. Angela's approach to needed systemic change is one that is always questioning and challenging while being inclusive at every step. She is married and has step-children.

Maya

Maya is an Associate Vice President of an urban community college and she is a native of the Pacific Northwest. She has worked in four-year institutions as well as community colleges. She has completed her master's and is in the final stages of her doctoral degree. She was raised in a two-parent household with college educated parents. She has been in executive leadership positions for more than five years and in her current position for two years. Maya has a great sense of humor and seems to always be on the verge of laughter. She is curious by nature and very outspoken about most things. Maya can be depended upon to engage in critical conversations, walk up to the line drawn in the sand and step right over it. She is divorced and has children.

Audre

Audre is serving in the role of Associate Chancellor of a community college in a mid-sized town. She is from the South and attended a HBCU for her undergraduate degree. She relocated to the Pacific Northwest for job opportunities in higher education. Audre has worked in four-year institutions as well as community colleges. She has been in executive leadership positions for more than 10 years and in her current position for two years. Audre is warm and engaging. As she speaks, the wheels seem to be visibly turning. She is always thinking of ways to build bridges and make connections. Audre understands systems, is very savvy and

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knowledgeable and she is adept at “the game” that exists within higher education. She is married and has children.

Zora

Zora currently works as a Chancellor for a large multi-campus community college in an urban community. She is a strong, very direct leader with a passion for social justice, equity and increasing access to education for communities of color. She is from the South and came to the Pacific Northwest to attend college. She identifies as the granddaughter of a tenant farmer and a maid with parents that did not attend college. Zora did not finish high school, she is the first in her family to graduate from college, and she was raised in a single-parent household by her mother. She has been in executive leadership positions for over 10 years and in her current position for under a year. Zora has a large personality and a charmingly dry wit. She can be depended upon to be at the center of anything exciting that is occurring. She is married and is helping raise her partner's children.

Data Analysis

In an effort to share the lived experiences of this group of women, narrative analysis was used to interpret the data of this study. Rich descriptions of attitudes, values and beliefs were collected for review and analysis. The first step in the data analysis was to organize the data. Participants provided a biographical interview form prior to their interview and there was a survey that captured basic demographic information. The second step entailed a document analysis of the curriculum vitas submitted by the four participants. The final step in the analysis was transcription of the interviews. Transcript analysis utilized an inductive approach that identified patterns in the data by means of thematic codes. This analysis applied a CRT/BFT framework to examine voice, the centrality of race, intersectionality, and insider/outsider tenets.

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In addition to this inductive review, MaxQDA qualitative data analysis software was used to assist with axial coding and further identification of themes. These analyses resulted in common themes that were identified across the four participants (Plano et al., 2010).

Merriam (1998) argues that developing and assigning codes to pieces of data helps with the identification of categories and themes. To form the stories, I removed the interview questions from text and the data that will be introduced in the African American Executive Leadership Voices section. Themes that emerged from coding transcripts were the basis for the findings reported in this study. In what comes next, I clarify how each participant intentionally situated themselves within community college leadership. I then identify ten emergent themes: (1) being “the only one,” (2) systemic inequities, (3) racial climate, (4) the role of mentorship, (5) professionalizing the challenges of racism, (6) the importance of family, (7) the impact of extended educational attainment, (8) exploring the impact of racism and sexism and silencing, (9) violence against African American women, and (10) centering their experiences.

African American Executive Leadership Voices

All of the participants spent some of their career in the four-year setting and all of the participants identified that the community college system was their niche. The following narratives demonstrate the participants' resiliency and highlights their daily resistance to oppressive systems.

Audre had previously worked at four-year public and private colleges, and shifted to a community college setting. Her shift began when she answered an advertisement that was recruiting people who could work with difficult people. She found this advertisement enticing, in part because she had worked in private school admissions and “if I could tell the parents their

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precious kids didn't get into college, I definitely knew how to work with difficult people.”

Audre explained further:

When you work at a four-year institution, community colleges are always talked about as your safety school. When you're applying for admissions at a four-year, you always apply for your safety school. This was my concept of what community colleges were . . . When I started working at the community college, it was like a light bulb turned on for me. What the community college reminded me of was the environment that I had experienced as an undergraduate at a HBCU—I felt affirmation for who I was, I felt like it was a place for me and people cared whether I came or went. The whole environment was nurturing . . . Because the community college felt like the HBCU experience, it really changed my entire perception of community college. It fed my soul. I became a convert because I was at the place where the rubber met the road in helping people lift up their aspirations, to affirm or reaffirm and in some cases help with the development of self-identity and value.

Maya, like Audre, also worked for four-year institutions during her career, and similarly “always knew that [community college] was going to be the population I wanted to work with.” Though community college may have been a better educational track for her, she attended a four-year institution.

I probably should have gone to community college right out of high school instead of four-year. It probably would have been a better fit for me. I had attended a very strong college with a great reputation and I knew I wanted to pursue a career in higher education. I wanted to work in a college and create the experience I always wanted but never got to experience.

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This desire to create meaningful experiences for students began Maya's exploration of future employment opportunities within the college setting. As she spoke with her college advisors, she faced barriers that reflected both anti-community college and anti-diversity sentiments:

I remember speaking with my advisor and telling him that I wanted to work in diversity/multicultural services at a community college. He told me that "It would be very difficult to become a vice-president going the diversity route." He went on to say that I should look more broadly so that I did not get "pigeon-holed." And, *I got pissed* [emphasis added]. Here I am talking to this older White dude with no community college experience and he was trying to tell me something . . . He had not integrated the theory or practice into any of his programming, but yet, he was trying to tell me.

Similar to Maya, Angela also felt a strong pull towards the community college. Within the community college she was able to see the alignment with her professional orientation. At a young age, Angela recalled how social equity was important to her and the mission of the community college resonated with her:

I grew up in a family that valued education and entrepreneurship. Most of my education consisted of settings that were religious based that asked probing questions . . . Making a difference in the community in which you reside and making a difference in the world in which you live. As I started my work I realized that I loved being in college . . . I've been in community colleges for many years and I feel like I have come home. Every day I get up with joy in my heart because I have this incredible opportunity to transform lives and create the conditions where people can do great work.

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Open access and the possibility of creating more opportunity for people of color through increased access is what attracted Zora to the community college. Like Angela, Zora's strong personal values for equity and social justice are deeply ingrained. Zora's observations of the community college led her to believe that it would be more diverse and equitable than other educational settings:

I love my job, I get to come to work and spend all my time thinking about how I can make education and opportunity more accessible for more people. I think I had the community college idealized it in my mind because I knew that community colleges are the places where people of color could have opportunity. So, I expected that there would be more people of color in leadership roles and this is not true. However, if you compare the community college numbers to large public and private universities, the numbers of people of color in leadership positions at community college are higher.

Being the Only One

All of the participants expressed that their main attraction to the community college was the diverse student body that seeks out community college education. These women expressed that they felt that they could make a difference, create better access, transform lives and help lift people up through their work at the community college. Overwhelmingly, however, what they found were racist oppressive institutions that had high numbers of students of color and low numbers of faculty and staff of color. Also, they each identified that as African American women executive leaders, they were often the only one on the entire college campus. The disempowerment of African American Women within the interacting systems of power, race, gender and class aligns with Collins' definition of (1998) outsider-within status. The low representation of faculty and leaders of color contributed to what the participants identified as

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feelings of isolation and loneliness within the work setting. Additionally, because African American women are constantly assessing and navigating workplace surroundings, they may experience high levels of stress, fatigue and depression that relates to the isolation and loneliness (De Welde & Stepnick, 2015).

These low numbers also contributed to the phenomenon that these women identified as feeling that they always “needed to represent” because they were the only one—the only African American woman in class, the only African American woman at a meeting, and the only African American woman in executive leadership positions. All of the participants identified that at some point in their life, they had the experience of being the only one, the outsider-within. Collins (1998) further defines the outsider-within as the disempowerment of African American women within the systems of power, race, gender, and social class. There was a deep level of sharing by these women as they spoke of their feelings and the struggles associated with being the only one on their college campuses. The sense of loneliness and frustration emerges because of the expectations that are heaped upon them because of this singular status as well as anger at the blatant racism and inequity that exists. These women’s experiences with racism, sexism and other inequities was often minimized and dismissed if shared with colleagues.

Audre shared her experience of being the only Black woman in her undergraduate courses when she first began her career in the university setting. She identified how this early experience was repeated at every juncture of her educational career, inside and outside of the classroom:

When I first started in higher education, I started as an admissions counselor at a four-year private university on the east coast out in the middle of nowhere. I was the only one. Not just the only Black woman, I was the only person of color within administration and

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on the campus. Being the only Black woman, I was the counselor, adviser, mother, father, and sister and everybody came to me to talk about things. Especially all of the students of color. This was back in the '80s and there was a big push to diversify colleges and to get more students of color to attend some of the predominantly white prestigious institutions.

Audre's point here is that she was able to ease the burden of being the only one for many students of color even though she did not have the same supports. Being the only Black woman is difficult but the burden of this singular status can be eased by the presence of women of color who are open to having real conversations about what each may be experiencing. This point reinforces the need and importance of ensuring that there is access to support networks for leaders of color. Audre's perspective adds depth to the burden of being the only one:

It is hard being the only one because that means that there is often no one there for me. It is powerful when you have another woman of color that you can have a real honest conversation with about things that you see happening. Those things that White people don't see. Things that people pretend they didn't see because they really did not want to see it. There is loneliness in that. However, being the only one did not stop me from calling things out as they occurred.

Audre's experience as a recruiter placed her in a position where she had vital connections with students getting into college and she was critical in their retention at the college. She contemplates her role in bringing students of color to an unwelcoming predominantly White campus and how racist incidents within the classroom served as a constant reminder for students, a reminder that they were also the only ones and they were not welcomed. Audre detailed how

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faculty members seldom appreciated her student advocacy because they did not feel that she knew her place:

One of my recruits, an extremely bright African American woman that came from a family of doctors came to my office in tears. She told me that she was being challenged and called an affirmative action admission and she was worried that she was not as smart as the white students were . . . I tried to talk to her but she had lost confidence in her abilities so she ended up leaving the college . . . About a year later I worked with this same young lady and her parents to get her back in the university. But I knew that I need to talk to the professors about what was going on in the classroom . . . These professors were not happy that I challenged them and they went to my boss and told him that I should not be telling them how to do their jobs. He defended me . . . This was, once again, one of those points in my career that I started to think, what I'm doing? Am I setting these students of color up for failure by bringing them to this university where people might not care about them, where they too are the only ones?

Audre's work and experience with students that were the only one on campus stands in direct contrast with by Zora, who took a step back to examine her personal life and familial relationships and how this relates to being the only one. Zora realized she was often the only one at her institutions in a leadership position advocating for equity and an examination of her family life allowed her to conclude that she often felt like she was the only one that made it out of the impoverished home environment that she was raised in:

I have always felt like I was the only one that had made it—personally and professionally. I even had these thoughts before I got to executive level positions. If I look at my family, I have one sibling that went to college but I am really the only one that

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made it . . . When I was in the four-year system, I was often the only person of color sitting at the tables that made policy and decisions. Sometimes I felt awkward . . . I was the only one lending voice to issues around equity and inclusion. Most of my staff were people of color so when I went back to my office, I had my posse of people who looked like me and cared about the things that I cared about . . . So, I never had feelings of isolation . . . That changed when I obtained an executive leadership position at a community college.

Angela's experience of being the only Black woman within the work setting was similar to the other participants. However, Angela was able to contrast being the only one in her current work situation with a time when she was one of many on a diverse and dynamic leadership team. While the other participants identified the impact of the isolation and loneliness of being the only one, Angela had a differing response:

As a Black woman, I almost always have the experience of being the only one. The only exception was when I was at a community college back east that had a majority student of color and I was a part of a diverse leadership team. This diverse team was one of the best work experiences I had. That was a golden age in the 90s, and the only reason this team existed was because of intentional hiring of people of color. Though I have frequently been the only one, I can't say that I have ever found myself to be lonely. It helps that I find myself endlessly fascinating (laughter).

While other participants shared experiences of being the only one within familial, leadership, and executive leadership settings, Maya related an experience that aligns with the student experience shared by Audre. Maya identified that her university student experience was a defining moment for her that set the tone for her educational experience inside the classroom as

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well as within the work setting. Maya also spoke of the isolation and loneliness that she found to be inherent in being the only Black student on a college campus:

I remember my first undergraduate classes. As I looked around, I noticed I was the only Black person there and all of the other students seemed to be on it. This was the recurring theme throughout my entire experience at this university. Even though my advisor and some of the other programs provided some specialized support. I still felt so isolated and alone.

Systemic Inequities

Systemic inequities emerged as the second theme, demonstrating the nuanced ways inequities systematically impacted each participant, including disparities in pay, the need for increased social justice, no faculty of color, and limited opportunities for African American women on campus. The common thread for all four of these women was the recognition of inequitable hiring and promotion practices that exists within institutions. These practices perpetuated disparities that eliminated opportunities for people of color. The educational system sustains inequitable hiring and promotion practices and if this is examined through the CRT framework it highlights how White dominance supports and maintains the status quo. These women expressed frustration as well as anger at the various discriminatory practices that sustain these inequities. Additionally, it is clear that participants offered resistance to the oppressive structures at their institutions. They spoke out, they challenged inequities that were intended to devalue their work and in turn, them.

Maya shared observations of the blatant hiring disparities that occur within the higher education system, as well as the positive impact of affirmative action for White women. Maya

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also delved into the lack of access to Black women and the myriad of obstructions that block the path to a presidency for people of color.

I see the structural barrier in higher education when colleges run these fakey fake searches; they already know who they want, they just try to show a system that is fair.

Otherwise, people of color, women of color would be more proportionate. So it is obvious that something is happening. We are overrepresented by White women and we can go back and look at affirmative action, right? Clearly, White women benefited.

Traditionally, the path to the presidency is through instruction. Namely, through tenured faculty members, which you do not see many people of color. Though we are seeing some shifts, a look at institutional data shows that most of the people of color are not in instruction. They are in student services administration. So, we are not even in the pipeline. Perhaps this is what my advisor was trying to tell me in my undergraduate years.

Maya shares how she questioned a salary adjustment to equitably compensate and recognize the work that she was doing. Maya's low institutional value was put on display by her college president through a blatantly discriminatory practice that ensured that she would not receive the salary that she had earned. She described an unjust top down male dominated environment that was flexible in its ability to constantly shift to suit the needs of the oppressor. Though she knew that the practice was discriminatory, she also knew that complaining or lodging a complaint could create a situation that could get her blackballed within the system.

The inequities that occur within the work setting are unreal. At one of my previous institutions some salary increases were made at the Deans level and being one of the lowest paid Vice Presidents (VPs), I was impacted because these Deans were almost

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making as much money as me! I took on additional duties to make sure that a salary adjustment would not be questioned, but when I asked about an adjustment, I was told that I would need to go through the “process.” A “process” that no one else had to go through. I knew this because my peers told me that the President had a practice of adjusting salaries for the VP’s and some of them had received significant salary increases . . . I was just done. I was so angry that as a woman of color, I was the lowest-paid VP of a division that had few resources and the smallest budget while the college espoused that they were an institution that used a lens of social justice and equity—right.

Maya assessed the success of affirmative action for people of color. Her voice shined through as she spoke of how affirmative action has brought people of color into the workplace and how courage is needed to ensure that they are able to stay in the work place. She identified that this can be done only when people step up and speak up. If organizations are going to be transformed, Black people need to be out front leading this transformation. Maya urged:

Something has to be done about the systemic issues. One of the jokes I had with another person of color on campus is that we came in through affirmative action. We came in to integrate, we came in to kick the fucking door down and we don’t just want a place at the table, we want the whole table. Yes, the whole table (laughter).

The intersectionality of race and gender emerged in all of the stories and impact of class was woven through Zora’s story. As Zora shared her thoughts about systemic inequities, she addressed the impact of racism as well as class on her family. Zora grew up poor and once she got herself out of poverty, she was able to look back and see all of the barriers that held her family in an impoverished state that left her continually struggling as she pursued her education. Since Zora could see these inequities, though, she began questioning and wondering why African

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Americans were not thriving. Her search for answers led to the realization of the profoundly devastating impact of racism on the African American community and, in turn, the pipeline to education. Zora summarized:

My life's work has been trying to figure out how we can remove some of those structural barriers that have prevented access to education. It is because there is a history of institutional racism that we have these barriers. These barriers to early learning begins as early as K-12, particularly for young African Americans. Who gets access to those experiences that are the questions on our standardized tests?

The mass incarceration of Black men have resulted in more Black men being in prison, jail, on probation or on parole than were enslaved in 1850 when the Civil War began (Alexander, 2010). With 1 in 10 Black men in their 30s being in prison or jail on any given day, it is no wonder that Black men are not reflected well on college campuses (Ghandnoosh, 2015). The impact of these convictions have devastating long term consequence as they often take away voting rights, ability to live in public housing, exclusion from jury duty and decreased access to federal financial aid programs that support pursuit of higher education. The continued impact of racist systems is reflected in the low number of African American men in the college setting and Zora explored the impact of this injustice within the context of the power of education:

Our criminal justice system is just really screwed up, particularly when it comes to African American men. The injustice of this system spills over to our women and our families and creates economic, housing and family stability. Incarceration has devastated our community . . . I could see the power that education had on communities and families. I saw what education can do to empower people and provide stability. When I

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was growing up, I wondered why are African American people and communities not doing well economically? What's happening around us?

For the people of color that do make it and are able to attend college, systemic inequities emerge through racist practices within educational institutions. Some of these institutions have large student of color populations even as they have complex practices that block the hiring of people of color. Zora explored this unfairness:

I suppose I had idealized community colleges because I knew that the students were racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse. I incorrectly assumed that the faculty and the leadership would be just as diverse. At one of my institutions over 70 percent of our faculty were White and more than half of our students were of color. How the heck does that happen? Where are the faculty of color? It all goes back to hiring. You can't keep searching in the same place and expect a different outcome. You can't have language in your job announcements that excludes people. You can't have search processes that invite bias, whether it is intentional and unintentional. These are structural issues that have to be addressed if we are to achieve equity.

Audre's experience supports Zora's thoughts on unequal hiring practices. The college systems faculty and staff seldom reflect the students of color that they serve. Audre's experiences with unequal hiring practices emerge as she details how positional authority can be used to mitigate such practices on college campuses:

I love when you get into a position with the authority to hire and the buzz starts circulating that you are going to try to make the college Black. It is my responsibility as a leader question and change the hiring practices at the college. I am working on things in my division to increase equity and transparency. At my current institution, there are

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no full-time faculty of color. With 18 percent students of color, there is something wrong.

Bright & Travis (2010) identifies that in their fear of losing power, White men who are at the highest levels of positions on campuses, often act racist and sexist and create institutional practices that oppress people of color. As African American women gain positional authority, they are able to help address some systemic barriers, but they cannot, in their discrete positions, change the system. This authority often bumps up against a patriarchal educational system that is deleterious to the advancement of women of color. Audre identifies it is because the network is not built to support or develop women of color that this group is constantly navigating the gauntlet in an effort of obtaining a leadership position—once they are hired into a leadership position, so begins the next promotion gauntlet. Women need to unapologetically take control of their own work careers and their own needs, which Audre explored in detail:

There are so many obstacles that prevent full participation for women of color such as structure, policies or informal practices. The good old boy network is alive and well. If things are really bad at the institution that you are at, you'd better get out from under because it is not going to be healthy for you to try to fight it. You better believe that the good old boys are not going anywhere. But you can.

Angela's experiences and observations of workplace inequities have emerged at her current institution through the hiring practices. Because of her executive leadership position, she, like Audre, has positional authority that she has been using to move her organization towards a more equitable and diverse educational environment that reflects the diverse communities that are being served. Angela described:

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There are inequities in some of the hiring practices at my current institution and we are working on them. You have probably heard the adage that two things right is not the same as doing the right things. Well, you can do things right, but sometimes it's not really the right thing to be doing. People had followed a process for many years and when people would say that things did not seem right, others could say, well we followed the process. The institution was hiding behind process. There was enough feedback and input for the institution to recognize that a change was needed. We're doing a total overhaul of our employment system . . . If we want to change the experience of students we've got to hire in a way that we are reflective of our communities.

Racial Climate

The third theme that emerged was racial climate, and this was discussed through identification of microaggressions, stereotypes and caricatures, workplace policing, and White privilege. A commonality that emerged through all four stories centered on microaggressions and the need to confront them as they occur. All of these women have a strong sense of self and are dynamic leaders that give and demand respect in their work environment. The ability to confront injustices that emerge through microaggressions is a shared skill. Audre clarified:

When faced with microaggressions, you have to make a choice on whether you say something or let it go. Will saying something advance the discussion or waste time and leave you more frustrated. If it will advance the discussion, you have got to address it. There are a lot of stupid things that people say under the guise of, "Oh I didn't know," or things that they do intentionally, there are just so many of them. You have to move forward and you have to decide what you are going to do because if not, it's going to eat your soul up.

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Audre then defined microaggressions as a relatively new word for something that has been happening “forever and a day”. It is a word that has been coined to reflect that what people are saying and doing as racist. The emergence of racial climate as a theme mirrors the CRT/BFT framework. The reflections of the participants affirm that race is socially constructed and that most racism exists under a layer of normality. Racism is normalized not only in American society, but within the community college. Audre shared the damaging consequence of microaggressions and how titles can be used to define a person and their abilities—in particular, a title can be used to narrowly delineate a person. Audre’s story highlights the impact of a White woman’s minimization of her and her position, based on her job title and skin color. Audre recognizes that she has been fortunate to have White supervisors that have acted as allies to ensure that she has been able to successfully navigate and do needed work across college campus’ to increase diversity and access. Audre elaborated:

I was at a recruitment event and this woman came up to the table wanting to speak to the college representative. Once she got over her surprise that I was the representative, we had a great conversation and as we closed, I gave her my business card that had my title of “Assistant Director of Admissions and Minority Recruiter.” This woman returned my card and told me that I couldn’t help her because, even though I was pleasant, I was only the *minority recruiter* [emphasis added].

When I returned to campus I told my boss that though my primary job was to help students of color/minority students attend, having minority recruiter on my card was interfering with me recruiting white people. His response was “Well, we’ll just take that off.” This interaction helped me realize the power of titles and how as a woman of color I’m automatically put into a box that reflects what I can and can’t do because of a title.

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Audre further shared her frustrations of being a woman of color who has had her abilities doubted and questioned—simply because of her gender and skin color—and how these marginalizing acts can wear a woman down. Audre illustrated a situation of disempowerment when her skills and abilities came as a surprise to an administrator on campus and she shared her reaction strategy. Audre being hired as the campus minority recruiter placed her in a position where she was often on the defensive to disprove the assumption that the only reason that she had the job was because she was Black.

There have been people that have tried to put doubts in my head and barricades on my pathway. On one occasion, when I was alone in the office, the Dean of Students brought by a distraught student. I did my job and when the student left, this Dean commented that I had a skill with people and then thanked me for doing my job. His response told me that he had not thought that I could do the job that I was hired to do. His interactions with other white folks that surrounded me were not the same—because I was held to a different standard.

While all the women identified microaggressions as normal and part of their day-to-day lives, reinforcing CRT's recognition of the everyday nature of racism, Zora spoke of how she handles these daily insults by being direct. It is because she is so direct, it has taken her some time to master confrontations. She has worked on developing the skill of shutting down microaggressions without driving people away. Zora reflected:

I call people on their stuff [emphasis added]. But, I have learned in my career how to be soft so that I don't totally alienate and/or emasculate people. I was facilitating a meeting and there were folks at the table that kept looking at one of my male employees for direction. My response was to tell them, in a light tone, that they could look towards him

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all they wanted but in the end it all comes back to me, because I am the boss. It is so frustrating to be in meetings and not be heard. You can say something that is not acknowledged and ten minutes later somebody else, usually White and male, says the same thing and the group thinks it's the best idea that they've ever heard. Or, when you make a suggestion and someone says, well, that might work for minority affairs but that's not going to work for the rest of the campus. As if the personnel in minority affairs are any less than the personnel in instruction, or business affairs or other places on campus.

Maya like Zora identifies as being very direct in her interactions. She shared her experience and frustration with White people, in less senior positions than her own, feeling that they had the right to question her about things that they would never question a similarly situated White colleague. Additionally, frustration emerged at the workplace expectation that she should accept her White colleagues' behaviors, but in turn, she was not given the same courtesy. Maya discussed how others had attempted to normalize her White colleagues' behavior while minimizing Maya's own experiences. Yet Maya pushes back and resists these actions. This resistance is manifested through confrontation of these various acts:

At one of my institutions, we had a white counselor . . . And everything that he said and did was excused. Frank would always try that low level policing with me, the kind that a lot of people of color experience on the job. Frank would ask me, "Oh, you're leaving early again today?" . . . Frank would be reported for saying racist and sexist things . . . It was always minimized . . . We needed to understand Frank. Why did I need to know everything about his experience but he did not need to know anything about my experience? . . . He didn't have to pause and say "I wonder what Maya's experience is like as the only person of color at her level of position?"

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Maya continued to share how microaggressions in the workplace can be a longstanding practice, disempowering and incredibly damaging. She described how she attributed some of her workplace successes in her ability to shut down these insults:

The messaging that occurs through microaggressions is so harmful. You can go back 20 years and people remember microaggressions like they happened yesterday. Email is a classic vehicle for microaggressions. People are their real self in email and they can be buttheads. When I get those long emails, I'll pick up the phone and call the person . . . I let them know that in reading their email, I am interpreting their tone as X and I am not sure if that's how you want me to interpret it. People don't expect you to pick up the phone because this level of directness is not expected.

Though she has been successful with her confrontations of microaggressions, Maya is able to identify that part of what makes her effective is her skin tone:

I think as someone that is light-skinned, I get some skin privilege. Even if I don't want it. On the surface, I am not as threatening as a sister who is darker than me. There are a lot of negative stereotypes in the workplace setting. In fact if I try to think of the positive stereotypes around being a woman of color, I just can't think of any.

Maya has strategically enlisted and engaged allies to help combat microaggressions and insults in the workplace. By engaging others, especially White males, in conversations, she is not the only one that is confronting. There are things that Maya can say in meetings that will be completely ignored but the very same thing can be mentioned by a White colleague and then it is heard and often identified as a great idea. Though she finds this dynamic frustrating, she described how she uses these allies to her advantage:

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I had a White colleague who had observed some of the dismissals and he wanted to know how he could be an ally. I told him that he needed to boost his awareness and when he saw me being interrupted, he needed to say something. Something as simple as “I just noticed Maya had a point but she didn’t get to finish it, or Maya was interrupted.” That’s part of White privilege that he was ensconced in, these things were not happening to him . . . He was a rough around the edges guy in a very high-level position. I have learned over the years that there are a lot of unremarkable people that get pretty remarkable jobs.

Angela has worked in different states across the PNW and in these different settings she has been able to bring together teams to engage in conversations about stereotypes and microaggressions. Angela’s approach, much like Zora and Maya, is one in which she confronts; within the confrontation she attempts to engage people in necessary but often difficult conversations. She shared her experience of being in a new leadership position and attempting to help the campus navigate years of oppressive systems while dismantling language fraught with microaggressions. In this work, she found that she needed to help people see each other.

Being new, Black and in a senior position at my current institution, I had all the people who had been oppressed for so many years coming to me and wanting immediate remedies. I told them that we could get there but we needed to get everybody there. There were a lot of micro-aggressions going on and people of color wanted to get way up in this intellectual, dominate narrative. When we start conversations at this very academic place it starts to separate people by language. We've got to get to people's story. This human-to-human, person-to-person understanding. When you arrive at this place you can then say, that is what is called a microaggressions. How do you think what

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you just said makes me feel? To me, that is educational. I always try to give people grace and I've moved from being very militant.

Angela went on to identify the power held by interview committees and the role of bias and how impactful stereotypes are in the hiring of African American women in the workplace. She establishes that stereotyping systemically locks Black women out of hiring opportunities and if they do make it in, they have to work harder to receive even a modicum of acceptance within the work setting (Kaba, 2017):

African American women . . . Are hindered by the caricatures of us that are portrayed by the media . . . These stereotypes manifest in the work setting. During a recent hiring process, we had a Black candidate who said exactly the same things as the white candidate. The Black candidate was characterized much differently and more negatively than the white candidate. The White candidate was characterized as professional and assertive . . . People that are in charge of our interviewing processes are like hall monitors, they are advocates in the process and they need to be watching for and addressing these biases. As a person of color, you have to talk to people so that people see you and not their stereotype of who they think you are. It is incumbent upon us as people of color to do this and that within itself is a double burden on us, a double taxation so to speak.

Mentorship

Mentorship, and the positive impacts of mentoring and sponsorships, emerged as the fourth theme. The role of mentorship and sponsorship were discussed by Zora, Angela, and Maya. A sponsor is identified as an individual that would be willing to vouch, make recommendations and connections for an individual. Sponsorship was identified as that extra

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step that someone could take to help with an individual's development and professional growth. The ability and willingness of a senior leader as a sponsor is particularly useful for administrators that are trying to progress (Allen et al., 1995; Moses, (1989). Participants shared that mentors may see things within a person that they may not see in themselves and mentorship is important to have. The importance of mentorship for women of color has been explored by many researchers and the lack of access to mentors has been identified as a barrier for progression of African American women (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007). Mentorship is one of the most salient factors for professional success for African American women (Allen, Jacobsen, & Lomotey, 1995; Moses, 1989). The need to establish networks that advance other women of color was also explored and strong feelings emerged that reflected a shared need to give back by becoming a mentor. There was a strong desire to use mentorship as an avenue to open up doors for other women of color. Zora is very confident and she identifies that she can be assertive about the things that she wants. Having mentors and sponsors in high-level positions within the system is needed for access and advancement.

I'm pretty assertive and aggressive about things that I want and I have had incredible mentoring . . . In addition to mentors, you need to have sponsors, people who recommended and nominate you for jobs and other opportunities. They may see you being a good fit for a job and make a call on your behalf. We have to really see ourselves as greater than we are and sometimes it takes mentors to do that... I would have been content to work on policy . . . But a mentor needed to tell me otherwise . . . You need to find people who believe in you and then you need to dream big because we limit ourselves too often. I had this secret little wish in my heart that maybe one day I would be a Chancellor, but it wasn't until I started verbalizing it that it could actually happen.

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Once I could speak these words to the universe, or even speak them to myself, things started to come together. If you don't let people know what you want to do, they don't know how they can help you.

Zora clarified how, as leaders, African American women need to give back to other women of color by way of sponsorship and mentorship. The “good old boy network” is a system that has been established and maintained by White men and it is not intended or available for women and especially not for women of color. By establishing networking and mentoring supports, women of color can create their own system of needed supports for other women of color. Zora shared how she mentors:

While you need good sponsorship and mentoring, you need to mentor too. I am mentoring a talented young woman but she has no confidence. I have a hard time reconciling this because I have never lacked confidence. This young lady is so smart, she's talented, she follows through, she gets stuff done, she knows how to build teams and bring people together. However, because she cannot see herself moving up, she stays and excels at low-level jobs. I think her barriers are self-imposed and this is not unusual for women of color.

Maya's mentorship experiences have served as a reality check that has motivated her and kept her moving forward towards her educational and career goals. She also recognizes that White males are taking care of each other within higher education and she has some thoughts about what needs to occur to support more women of color. Like Zora, she does not lack confidence and she knows what she wants for her life and her career.

My advisor has been a great mentor to me and he really has kicked me into gear with my doctoral work. One day we had a great conversation that helped me level set. He said,

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“Well, a couple of things are clear to me. You have a full-time job and you're a parent, and neither of those are going to change. So?” He then said a string of bad words and then he summed the conversation up by saying “*So, what the fuck are you going to do? You do know that they are not just handing Doctorates out*” [emphasis added]. You need to find those mentors and make those connections. You better believe that men are building those connections and those networks. When someone has something open up, they will be like, “Oh let me give Henry a call.” It is a male-dominated model. Now that I am in a position of power, I can open up access for other women of color interested in progressing in higher education. It is cool to see young ladies of color and have them say that they would like to work for me.

Angela's thoughts about the role of mentorship were similar to the other women.

However, Angela went one step further as she spoke about the need for professional development opportunities to further enhance and build women up within the higher education setting. These thoughts are supported by De Welde and Stepnick (2015) and Clayborne and Hamrick (2007) when they speak of the impact of marginalized populations that are often disconnected from professional development, networking opportunities, advancement and other institutional opportunities:

It is important to have mentors. Not mentors on paper, people that you can actually access and turn to. My mentors are people I have a really high regard for. You need people that know you and can really help you think through issues that are happening for you. I had mentors that came along side me and told me that they saw me as a president or a chancellor. In addition to great mentors, find leadership development opportunities.

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I love the Thomas Lakin Institute. This is an institute that is put on by and for African American Presidents.

Professionalizing the Challenges of Racism

The fifth theme identified behaviors that supported or impeded these women's progression. Consequently, sub-themes emerged that related to managing perceptions, ability to bring people together, having courageous conversations, being assertive, and ability to confront and verbalize your needs. Examining this theme with a CRT/BFT framework highlights the impact of the intersectionality of race and gender on the behaviors of this group of women. These women were constantly striving to meet and exceed expectations or battling stereotypes of race and gender in an effort to break down barriers and change perceptions of their character, ability and leadership. The tenet Insider/Outsider reflects that these women working in such predominately White institutions (PWI) have developed coping strategies and behaviors that allow them to function in the academy despite being an outsider without the full rights and privileges as others within the academy (Collins, 2004.)

Audre shares her thoughts about how African American women express themselves in the workplace and how active engagement, disengagement, and anger can have detrimental effects on how women are viewed:

Sometimes as African American women, we get in our own way. We get so angry with the way of the world that we can't let it go and we can become very negative. Even though we don't think we are, we might come across as such. This lends to the perception of the angry Black woman that is perpetrated by the media. Any time we show some level of frustration the response is "*Oh here we go*" [emphasis added]. So,

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we have to learn how to temper ourselves so that we don't get in the way of ourselves and not let how the world around us affect how we live.

Audre further clarified how such anger manifests as brashness in the workplace and the resulting impact for one of her colleagues:

There is an African American woman that works at the college, she's smart but she comes at people with attitude. She is always telling people what they're doing wrong and she wonders why she can't ever get anything done. If you're the smartest person in the room and you've made everybody else feel like they are dumb shits, they are never going to give up anything for you. Then this woman becomes frustrated because she can't get folks to do anything.

Audre is adept at navigating complex situations and understands the power of networking. She shared how she navigates her outsider-within status as she straddles her own reality and White institutions while remaining true to herself:

Temper yourself, figure out the environment and find out how to get what you need. I have a friend who would insulate herself with other African American women or other women of color. There is nothing wrong with that except you are leaving so many people out of the circle. People need to see that you are able to move in and out of circles. You have to be fluid. However, when I go home at night, who I'm inviting over to have a glass of wine will be someone like you [Audre is speaking of the researcher] I'm not inviting a whole bunch of people over. At a cocktail party, things are different yet again because I am talking to everybody. I'm not just going to talk to my best friends and the brown people. One of our problems is that we haven't quite figured out how to navigate society.

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Zora expanded upon Audre's thoughts about how Black women navigate our educational institutions as well as the impact of societal expectations of how women should speak and act while in the workplace. Zora explored subjects that would be acceptable for a man to say but cannot be said by women:

There have been times when my directness and assertiveness have not been received well, especially with some men of color. There is an expectation that I should be subservient. I did get feedback early in my career that I was too blunt and that I needed to be more thoughtful in how I engage with people because I hurt their feelings. I was like, "Really?". . . I can't be as direct as I would like to be and definitely not as directive as I would like to be.

Zora self-identifies as being very strong willed and driven. In turn, Zora shared how these traits have both supported and impeded the progression of her professional career:

I'm one of these people who is constantly pushing myself and I can never be satisfied with the status quo. I remember laughing with tease my sister and saying that I wish I was one of those people who could just do the same thing over and over again every day." But I can't do that because I'm just not wired that way. So, I am never satisfied with myself what's going on around me. I am always examining things and thinking that we could be doing that so much better.

Zora reflected on how low confidence and low internal validation can be a problem for Black women.

Zora further examined the devastating impact of the systemic barring of Black women to experiences that would allow for progression. This barring paired with low confidence can result in stagnation for Black women:

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Black women often have these self-imposed barriers that we put in place for ourselves.

Barriers in which we can't see ourselves moving and in these leadership roles. There is also a lack of access to experiences, training and connections that allow us to move up.

Couple this lack of access with the self-doubt and low confidence and you have

stagnation . . . One of my experiences with self-doubt emerged when I was offered a Vice

President job that I did not even apply for. My immediate response was that I didn't

know if I was really qualified to do the job. And it was a mentor who said, "Are you crazy? You better call those people back and tell them you're going to take that job."

Sometimes we need people to push us to reach further than we think we can go.

Zora identified that Black women need to develop the ability to allow themselves to make mistakes and then grow from these mistakes. Zora shared:

I do a lot of self-messaging and self-talk about priorities, I do not internalize things. I give myself permission to make mistakes. There are times that I have had to say, I totally blew that one and pick up and keep going. I recognize that I am only human and that I am not going to be able to get everything right all the time. As a matter of fact, nor will my team. We're all going to make mistakes. I have learned to forgive myself, learn from the mistake and keep things moving.

Zora then expressed that there is no need for them to beat themselves up over errors that are made because there will be plenty of others waiting to do this for them.

By immersing herself in research, Maya was able to arm herself with critical tools that allowed her to land the job that she is currently in. Like Audre, she discussed behaviors that may be detrimental to African American women and their progression.

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I have gotten better at my job by reading and getting more familiar with current research on the Black experience. It has changed the way I think and it has helped me step up and apply for higher-level positions. Initially I had some doubts about even applying for my current job but I applied and I got the job. After the first week, I knew that I could do the job and that I could probably be a president. I am always worried going into a new job. I am worried about disappointing and letting people down. So, I keep telling my staff, you need to lower your expectations. I work from an under-promised, over-delivered model so if you lower expectations I won't disappoint you (laughter). Anything above that, you're a rock star. This has worked for me up to this point.

Maya recognized how Black women can inflict this self-harm through minimization of the work that is being done because they do not want to be seen as a braggart.

In time, though, the need to take credit is realized as well as the need to develop skills that help with the management of frustration. Maya recounted:

I have seen Black women get frustrated in the working environment because of the various difficulties that we face. Disrespect is a real trigger for Black women; if we feel disrespected, we want to execute justice. However, it's not always going to help you to go in and execute justice. So one of the things I have to do is ask myself what is my ultimate goal? Sometimes that goal is indeed to execute justice because that is what needs to happen. Another thing that I have noticed is that as women of color, we do not do a good job taking credit for our work. Other people don't have a problem but we do. People can say, "Oh, great job." And our response will be, "Oh, no, no." Upon reflection, I have to say that I have done this myself. At one point I was a one woman office and I always talked about the work that "we" did. Who is the we?

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Maya spoke of attempting to manage people's expectations of her early in her career.

She also shared an early realization of the strong gender differences in workplace interactions:

I remember early in my career, I used to come home and I would be like, did I interrupt that person? Was I rude? Did I challenge them too harshly? Did I . . . ? I began asking male colleagues of color that worked in similar positions if their interactions and responses made them feel bad . . . They all responded with a resounding, no! I realized that it was not a Black thing, it was a gender thing and that I was spending far too much energy trying to manage people's perceptions. You cannot manage perceptions.

Angela discussed the behaviors that supported her ascension to her current presidency position. She attributed her success to skills that allowed her to think broadly about what was needed for success and then her ability to hone down on the particulars that needed to be in place for her success. Angela echoed Maya's discovery that the need to have confidence is a needed behavioral attribute:

You have to feel confident in yourself and you have to have people around you who can support you through some of the tough stuff. I always think that I'm enough. I don't know, maybe that's too confident but I feel like who I am and what I'm doing is enough. In addition to being confident, you need to know yourself. I remember my dad would say "just be yourself, and why would that be? Because everybody else is taken." I am a planner. My very first boss told me, "Over planning breeds spontaneity." Because if you really know what the plan is and you set things up, then you can be in the moment. I wanted to be a President so I decided to learn about being a president. The role has a lot of things that are not natural to me because I am an introverted feeler. Being on point, talking to people, departments, cabinets and being outward facing can be emotionally

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exhausting . . . I want to know you and I want to be known by you. A President's job doesn't always allow that.

Importance of Family

Family emerged as the sixth theme. Each participant relayed the importance of family and how these members have journeyed with them. Family status was also extended to mentors, colleagues, and sorority sisters. Participants spoke of the bicultural reality of their positions in these PWIs and the impact of family keeping them grounded as they navigated their work expectations and home and community expectations.

Audre shared how important her children have been for her on this journey. She also identified that African American women will often choose family over career progression and this may be another reason that there are fewer African American women in the pipeline. Audre identified a key struggle that she has seen with African American women—the struggle asks African American women to do more and be more to meet the expectation that has been set by racist and sexist educational systems. As African American women attempt to progress on the leadership track, moreover, this struggle amplifies. This struggle to be more may have proven impossible for some women, which also contributes to the low number of African American women in executive leadership positions. Audre expounded:

The biggest challenge for me personally was trying to raise a few wonderful kids, get a doctorate and still have a full-time job. It was just brutal but I'm so glad that I did it. I have been fortunate because I have extended family in my sorority sisters. There have been times I wanted to give up but I remember one of the things that one of my sisters said was "If not you, then who? If not now, then when?" So, yes, if not me then who?

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Audre also shared the need to have women of color to speak with about what is going on in their work as well as their lives. Having a good work life balance has been critical to her success:

If I need to vent and get some stuff out there, I have people that I trust. I use my husband a lot because he is a great listener. He doesn't know the people that I am talking about so he can just listen and I don't have to worry. I make sure that when I leave work, I leave work and when it is time to go home, I go home. You have to go home and be with your family . . . Otherwise it becomes work all of the time and that is not healthy.

My kids are number 1 in my life and that's probably one of the things that people would say is a downfall for African American women. The fact that we will choose family over career so we may not progress to these higher-level positions. As I self-reflect, this statement is correct because I was competitive for several presidencies. But, then when I thought about all of the things I would miss out on, I just could not do it. At the end of the day when I am 80 years old, are those people at the college going to come and see me? No. But my kids will.

Zora's sense of humor emerged as she spoke about her relationship with her husband and how his care and support allows her to do the work that she needs to do:

My husband and I we've been married fifteen years and he is my greatest champion. I met him when I was working at one of my earlier institutions . . . He will say to me "Well you may be madam doctor boss lady on campus, but don't bring that stuff home." He worries about my health but sometimes he just worries too much and he can get all protective. Sometimes it feels awkward because I am thinking wait a minute, I am a grown ass woman (laughter).

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Zora's familial relationships have been a struggle for her and this is partially attributed to the earlier identified theme of being the only one. She identified that she is the only one in her family that has financial stability and while having money is great, it creates challenges with her and her family:

The relationships with my siblings and extended family has been awkward at times. I am the only one who has financial stability so the relationships are sort of awkward; when I do for them it is almost like survivors guilt. They ask for too much and I give and spend too much. Right now we have arrived at an unhappy medium because they know not to ask me for anything.

Maya reflected on the stress of not feeling she is doing things well and how she manages these feelings, especially as it relates to familial obligations. Though she knows that she has great familial support, she still struggles with self-doubt:

I don't feel like I am doing any of my jobs well. I'm not doing my mommy job well, I'm not doing my partner job well, I'm not doing my pay job well, I'm not doing my school work well, I am not doing my friendships well, I am not doing my fitness well. I'm not doing anything well. So, I'll have a glass of wine and put on Real Housewives or Top Chef and think about how I should actually be taking this free hour to go into my home office to work on my dissertation.

As Angela discussed the importance of family, she acknowledged that she is also fortunate to have a supportive husband. Further, she defines family in a way that extends outside of blood connections. This extension includes mentors as well as work colleagues as part of her family circle. She offered her perspective on how they have helped guide her success:

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I'm lucky to be with a lovely husband who's very supportive . . . I have been fortunate to have family, my parents, my husband, my friends, and mentors to guide me, but not so much my immediate supervisors. My family has told me, yes, that is a good fit or, no, you shouldn't be in the current job that you are in, they have helped me. In addition to my family I have great support from colleagues. I belong to the Presidents Round Table, which consists of African American presidents and chancellors at the community college level. Belonging to this group has really helped me because I have a network of a hundred plus presidents. I can identify about 20 of them I could call up in the middle of the night . . . You really need this level of support.

Extended Educational Attainment

The seventh theme of extended educational attainment, namely the need for a doctoral degree in order to progress on the executive leadership track, was mentioned by all of the participants. There has been longstanding recognition and emphasis on education as a means of progression for people of color (Collins, 2000). An examination of extended educational attainment with the CRT/BFT framework allows for a critical look at the participants' feedback about oppressive disparities. These women felt the dual subordination placed them in a position that they needed to be more and do more than White women in the similarly situated roles. This need to be more and do more was also reflected in their thoughts and expectations of extended educational attainment. These women knew that if they did not achieve their doctoral degrees, they would not be competitive against Whites with the same credentials and some with less credentials.

Zora shared how money struggles were a hurdle throughout her pursuit of educational attainment. Although she knew that she needed a doctorate, the question revolved around how to

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pay for it. Zora also identified the need for professional development opportunities along the way and the need to find voice to push and advocate for oneself.

I knew that in order to have upward mobility in higher education, I really needed a PhD and I didn't have one or the money to get one . . . Getting through undergrad and a master's degree was very difficult. The financial barriers were huge. After all, I was the first of my family to go to college. I knew that education is the lever that could bring about the change that I wanted to see in my career. You need to have access to professional meetings and state-wide committees. These are the things that are going to give you the visibility and the connections that you need to move up. No matter where you are in the organizational structure, push for the professional development, experiences and leadership opportunities . . . Here on our campus, we tap the same people over and over again, they get all the opportunities, and more often than not these are not African Americans.

Maya also reflected on the need for a doctorate for progression. She knows that whether or not she stays at the college or works somewhere in the educational setting, she is going to need an advanced degree:

I know that getting my doctorate will help me be competitive with the presidential opportunities that are out there. Before I got into my doctoral program, I remember thinking, I'm so busy, just so busy . . . Now that I am in a program I am thinking, damn, I had a lot of free time. There are days when I think, maybe higher education is not for me. I think I may want to interact with education differently. Perhaps I will try the Gates or Lumina website and see what jobs they have available. I would like the opportunity to

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think more globally about education. But, whether I stay or go, I will still need the credentials.

Audre spoke of how people's perceptions and how they change for the positive once an individual gets their doctorate. She found that she was always pushing and mentoring other women of color and she offered words of encouragement to the researcher to complete her doctorate:

My greatest professional success was getting that doctorate. Once you get it, it's done, and it really changes things. It does not change you personally but it changes how people perceive you. If you're working on getting that doctorate you need to finish it because it sets you apart, professionally, from everyone else. There are so many people who are All But Dissertation (ABD) but if you look at the statistics of African American women who have doctorates, we are few and far between.

Angela recognized that within the workplace the support for the needed education and professional development may not be offered. She also discussed the struggles she experienced when she attempted to access needed opportunities. The need for a doctorate was also expressed as being necessary for progression:

Getting my doctorate was absolutely necessary. When I got done with my master's degree, I started working at a university. I told myself that if I really wanted to understand and be a part of the academy, I needed more education, so I finished my doctorate. I remember one of my previous bosses telling me that there was a training opportunity I should look at. I asked if he was paying for it because he recommended it and his response was "No, I'm not paying for it." My response to him was that he would

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indeed pay for it and he did end up paying for it. How can you say, here is something you should be doing and then not want to pony up the money?

The Impacts of Racism, Sexism and Silencing

The ninth theme of intersectionality and silencing examines how the intersections of race and gender most heavily affect African American women and how these women's voice can be silenced. For African American women, gender and race are inseparable. While White women may experience sexism, they do not experience the additional layer of racism that African American women do. This intersectionality emerges within the below passages as well as a blatant attempt by a colleague to annihilate a participant's voice. The participants are able to depict how systems of oppression and racism come crashing together in a way that their marginalized identities of womanhood and being African American come together. These women are expressive in their depictions of how race and gender have framed and continue to frame their personal as well as professional interactions. By dealing with the effects of the interlocking systems of oppression, these women have created a viewpoint that is not often seen in the literature. Systemic inequities that reflected the need for organizational change within the college setting were perpetuated in the identified lack of emphasis on social justice, disparities in pay, exclusionary hiring practices, need for faculty and staff of color on campus, and the need for opportunity for these diverse groups. The blended CRT/BFT lens identifies the intersectionality of race and gender, which was a recurring conversation throughout the interviews with these women.

Zora's observations of male dominance in presidential roles is supported by data provided in Kaba's (2017) on African American women in higher education. Kaba (2017) reports that in 2011 a mere 6 percent of all college presidents were Black and of that percentage,

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only 34 percent were women. Zora goes on to explore her observations of the intersectionality of race and gender in the mostly male higher education settings:

I haven't really paid as much attention to race as I have gender in leadership. As I said earlier, when I went to the AACCC meeting and I looked around, I noticed that most of the presidents of color were men. Observations such as this reinforce my experience that it is hard to be a woman in leadership and it's so much harder if you're a woman of color. Color just adds another layer of complexity. You just are not taken as seriously when you have the layers of race and gender. If you are too assertive, then you are considered to be a "you know what." If you are too vulnerable you are seen as weak.

Zora continued to share her views on how the differences in expectations of men and women play out in the workplace:

People interact with women differently simply because they are women. People think it is okay, because you are a woman, to ask you questions that they would never ask a man. When I was unmarried, I had people ask me "what is wrong with you?" Once I got married the question morphed into, "now that you are married, when are you going to have children and once you have children, are you going to abandon your leadership track?" These questions came up for me over, and over, and over again.

Maya's musings run parallel to Zora's thoughts about the impact of perceptions, stereotypes, and the disrespect and disingenuousness that is exhibited towards Black women within the workplace.

In particular, though, Maya went one step further to talk about not having voice and the difficulties that women of color face and how these challenges are reflected by the lack of women of color in high-level positions. Maya's reflections explored how structural barriers

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impede Black women's progression and the impact of the intersectionality of gender, race, and age.

I remember moments in meetings when I thought, why are women getting interrupted? Interrupted time and time again and going mostly unheard . . . As I reflect, I think I have had more negative experiences around gender than race. The two have been balled up together and it is hard to separate them. I do not know which one came first the structured inequity or the stereotype that women can't lead. Whichever came first, it is there and it persists. I think women of color face a more difficult path and you can confirm this by looking at the numbers. If there were not something going on structurally, we would be more than two. So, you have race and gender being impactful, why not slap on one more, age? I remember earlier in my career thinking that I need to get to VP as soon as possible because ageism is going to kick in. For males, moving around for career opportunities is seen as being seasoned but let female candidates doing the same thing and it is framed as women are unstable and we are jumping around.

Collins (1998) identifies that Black women are silenced when they are restrained from confronting racism, sexism, and elitism in society. If systems and power are examined, African American women that break silence are performing an insubordinate act within the system.

Audre had an experience with silencing that had a profound impact on her:

I come from the South so I have a tendency, especially when I get excited, to split a verb. I will run my words together, I will speak in a way that might sound very southern to people in the PNW. I was working on a high profile project and I had just finished a presentation and someone gave me some feedback. They said you did a good job but I needed to be careful of how I said things . . . I thought offended somebody but the person

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said, “No, it’s how you speak. You know you have this Southern accent, sometimes you do not use the right verb and noun agreement . . . I was in shock because this was somebody that I liked and I valued their opinion . . . I realized that this person was trying to silence me. For a while her criticism worked because I felt a little intimidated and I became very self-conscious about how I spoke . . . I was so self-conscious I did not even want to present anymore . . . I avoided speaking for about 6 months. Then I remembered something that one of my master’s degree professors, an older White man, said to me . . . My professor said to me, “Always remember it’s not how you say it, it is what you say that matters. Because content is more important than the delivery.” This memory brought me to a point of clarity that helped me accept that I was not going to let this woman, this white woman, silence me on work that I needed to get done.

This incident could have proven to be the life-changing act that left her powerless and muted, but Audre did not let this happen. This racist act made her stronger. Audre’s story and the researcher’s earlier story highlight these systems of power and the deleterious impact of silencing.

Violent Racism Against African American Women

Violence against African American women is the tenth theme. Neither violence nor racism are new phenomena for African American women. These have occurred for hundreds of years and have been perpetrated both outside and within the home, which is sometimes the only place of respite a woman has. In addition to the physical manifestation of violence, verbal violence transcends microaggressions and can be identified as a verbal assault and even a hate crime. Two of the participants of this study displayed compelling and significant vulnerability as they shared deeply moving stories. One of these women shared her struggles of being in a

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community that was so unwelcoming that she feared for her life, and the other participant shared her experience of being a victim of a hate crime. These stories are not uncommon stories for African American women; rather, these stories are usually not shared because they are so very real and personal. Since the sharing of these stories can be traumatic, this trauma results in a re-traumatization in the remembrance and in the telling.

For instance, Maya's story begins in a seemingly mundane mall and takes a stark turn:

This happened a couple of years ago at about 10:00 on a Friday morning when I had the day off and a friend and I were walking in the mall. It was crowded and we were having a really good conversation. All of a sudden, I felt something warm on my face and hands. My first thought was that there must be a leak somewhere and I looked up and not seeing anything. I looked to my left and there was this 20 something, nondescript young white dude standing there. He had spit on me. He was enraged and screaming "Fuck you, nigger bitch, fuck you, nigger bitch," at the top of his lungs. Everyone just stopped . . . I was not the only Black woman in the crowd. He then said "that's right," and wound up again and spit a big old loogie that got on my girlfriend, who is also African-American . . . A White woman told the clerk, "You may want to get a manager, your customers are getting spit on and they're being called racial slurs." She was the only one that did anything . . . He said it again, "Fuck you, nigger bitch. Fuck you, nigger bitch." And he slowly waltzes away. I tried to clean up but I had spit all over me. Though he left, he kept looking back and yelling . . . Rage, there was pure rage all over his contorted face. Like I took his parking spot . . . The police were called and it took them 45 minutes to arrive. My friend and I were in shock. I've been called all those names before but

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usually something proceeded the incident, but not this time . . . I thought that he was going to kill me, I saw it happening. I asked myself, why me? Why not me?

After Maya spoke with the police, she realized that her experience was not singular. She had heard her very own story—and heartbreakingly worse stories—told over and over again from students, family members and friends.

Furthermore, this nation's desensitization to violence and the value of Black life emerges from Maya's continued reflections:

Over the years, I have worked with so many students . . . Some experiences more horrific than mine. This incidence was a good reminder around empathy and trauma. Even though I wasn't physically, beaten, punched, raped, it was still assault. The police stated that they would rather be hit than spit upon . . . They asked if anyone tried to intervene. . . . But, no one intervened on our behalf. It was at this point that I began thinking about the race dynamics around what occurred. What would have happened if I was a White woman? Would it have been different? What if I was a White woman and a Black man had done this to me? . . . It would have been a different scenario. All of those people just watched this happen to me. Where was the compassion? Where was the basic human decency . . . When I told one of my work colleagues about this she said, "Experiences like this impact all of us, particularly Black women. We feel devalued, dismissed and not worthy of being protected."

Maya experienced feelings of anger, fear, devaluation and she is still dealing with the blistering knowledge that observers did not try to intercede on her behalf because they looked at her skin color and did not see her value. She recognizes that if she were a White woman, there would have been a swift outcry and response of protection for her.

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Though Angela did not experience a direct assault, like Maya, she had a devastatingly traumatic experience. Her experiences were harrowing and impactful on her personal as well as professional life. She elaborated on the sacrifice that is made to work within racist and sexist systems and she explored the impact of working within a largely White community that did not appreciate the work that she was doing:

I did not realize how different people and communities were across the PNW . . . I made the mistake of focusing on the college and not the community in which the college was seated. There was a lot of racism in this community and it was really hard to be the target of this racism. People would say things about my color all of the time or they would make statements like "You're really smart for being a Black person." I became the embodiment of what it was to be Black because there were so few. This was especially challenging and I felt that I had to leave because I feared for my safety. While there, I got some threats against my person. At the time I was living there without my family, I was alone. I thought, here I am trying to make it better for the school and our community but I lived with fear. Every day I had to go home, go into that garage and look to see if anyone was there and then I had to go up to my apartment, alone. I would bolt my door and for the first time, I felt vulnerable. I felt afraid. I realized that though my work was here my life and my family was somewhere else, so I had to leave. This was really hard for me because I had never really run away from anything . . . I made a decision to leave based on the lack of a community and diversity . . . At the college we were doing so many things and having conversations that were moving out in the community, and this made the community uncomfortable.

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Because the African American community has experienced so much violence dating back to slavery, these acts of violence were perpetrated on these women was par for the course. For these women, such acts of violence demonstrated that despite ascension in class as well as employment in a highly respected profession, there was no escape from oppressive systems. In addition to being fearful for their lives, participants expressed profound feelings of vulnerability, loss and devaluation. Within both of these stories, once again, Black women suffered, their humanity was disregarded, and once again, nothing was done about it.

Centering the Experiences of African American Women

As Collins (2009) identifies, there is no homogenous Black women's standpoint, however there are core themes and issues that develop from living as a Black woman. The final theme emerges as participants offer advice and share what is at the core of their success. Notably, they all spoke of the importance of being clear about who you are and what you want in your life and in your career.

We begin with Audre who shared strong feelings about African American women knowing who they are and being steadfast in their work. She challenged African American women to be okay if they choose not to pursue executive level position.

Be clear about what it is you want because you can get sideways all along the way. If you have a goal in mind be willing to move and be steadfast about that goal. I thought at one point I wanted to be a college president and then I began to look at the job and I did not like what I saw. I wasn't ready to choose a board meeting over a basketball game. You have to be clear about what you want and then to be okay with that decision. I'm okay with the decision that I am not going to be a President. But wait, after I just said that out of one side of my mouth I sometimes wonder what would it have looked like?

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There were two presidencies that I got recruited to apply for. The community in one of them was a diverse community; in order to be a president, you have to be able to work in that community. But I would not have wanted to spend the time at the other one.

Sometimes I wonder if I had just gone for it, would I have gotten it? That's the one thing I don't know. I might have regrets later.

Zora provided some final words on being successful and how African American women need to surround themselves with the people and the things that they need to support them in their success:

I'm the granddaughter of a sharecropper and a maid and my parents didn't go to college. I did not even finish high school and I'm sitting here with a PhD and I am in charge of a major institution. Me, sitting here, that is my biggest accomplishment. I am able to do what I love and I can use this position to influence the lives and the community that I care about. As I was going through my PhD, I surrounded myself with African American women to support me. You need to do the same, let them be your rock. You need to find those that are going to go through it with you, the ones that you can lean on through thick and thin. Women that are going to celebrate with you, cry with you and rejoice with you through it all. If you want to be in the academy you have to find those supports because it's too hard. Even in places like community colleges where you think it should be easier to find these supports, they may be hard to find.

Angela offered some final thoughts on how she leads and the standards that she holds herself to. She stressed the importance of being true to oneself and knowing oneself because lack of clarity will lead to challenges. She also offered some points of reflection similar to Audre that offer women of color permission to be okay with not seeking executive level

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positions. However, she tempered this statement with the suggestion that African American women need to stand strong and do good work wherever they are within the organization.

Angela explained:

Right is right all by itself, and wrong is wrong all by itself. You need to be able to know the difference because eyes are on you all of the time. You need to know yourself and be true to yourself. If you do not know who you are, someone's going to snatch you into knowing who you are and that is not pretty. You have to bring your best self every day. There is a higher expectation of you . . . Executive leadership is a lifestyle. It is immense responsibility for the quality of work and learning that goes into it and it all rests on you . . . So if you're up to that and you've got good support, then this may be the role for you . . . If you are not finding joy every day, find something else to do because this work is way too important.

Maya confided some closing words that encourage women of color to push and reach for the things that they want because as a Black woman in leadership, they need not try to fit into the system. Maya asserted that these women need to resist this system and transform it.

Women of color do not need to be apologetic for who we are. We need to push, we need to reach! As women we have to have integrity, create good relationships and respect people, even when we are in disagreement. When you see a position open up, don't opt out because you don't have all of the little boxes checked for their ideal candidate. No one has all of the boxes checked and women of color, we doubt ourselves and we step back. Men will look at that same description and say, I have done some of that and they will apply for the position without a second thought. Network! I wish I had spent more

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time investing in networking. We need to network better and build those connections so that when someone has something open up, perhaps they will give you a call.

Through the 11 themes that emerged, these women were able to express, through their unique individual voices, the difficulties they face as African American women in executive leadership positions at the community college level. Though they identified layers of struggles because of the structured systems of oppression, these struggles were also coupled with joy. They found joy in knowing that the work that they are doing is transformative for themselves as individuals as well as the institution.

Discussion

This study explored the racialized lived experiences of four African American women in executive leadership positions at the community college level in the Pacific Northwest with the guiding questions of: a) How have racism and sexism impacted the personal experiences of African American female executive leaders? b) How have racism and sexism impacted the professional experiences of African American female executive leaders? And c) What coping mechanisms and methods of resistance have been utilized to successfully navigate while leading?

This research has placed four African American women in executive leadership positions in the community college setting at the center of this analysis and allowed for the uniqueness of individual voice to emerge. As the researcher I attempted to present the passages that provided a rich description of these dynamic African American women's experiences. The stories capture the essence of the biographical information, interviews, personalities, and the passion of these women.

Since there are so few African American women in these positions, one of this study's most formidable challenges was finding participants and sharing their counterstories while

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keeping their confidentiality. These questions were explored using a blended CRT and BFT lens because of these theories ability to address the impact of race and class while lifting up the voices of oppressed groups. With these theories the centrality of race, intersectionality, insider/outsider, interest convergence and the African American women's bicultural reality through voice was explored. This examination is accomplished through the telling of stories by those that have been marginalized, usually not heard from, and/or completely ignored (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Harper (2012) identified that higher education researchers have failed to adequately describe the role of racism and racial problems that exists within higher education. This should not come as a surprise because it is in alignment with the centrality of race tenant. Racism is embedded in all of our societal institutions and higher education is not an exception. In a systematic review of 255 articles that were a study of people of color in higher education, there was a tendency to regress to White racial frames, narratives and norms that dismiss the impact of racism. With the application of a blended CRT and BFT framework of centrality of race, interest conversion, intersectionality, insider/outsider, and voice this study allowed for an examination of how race and gender were used to define, segregate, and oppress these women.

The centrality of race and the impact of racism, which CRT identifies as pervasive for people of color everyday all of the time, is expressed though all of the identified themes. All of the participants recognized the impact of racism on their day to day lives though they may not have all used the term racism. The intersectionality of their race and gender was recognized by each of the participants and within their narratives they reflected upon how race as well as gender played out daily within their work.

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Through CRT, voice and narrative was used to challenge systems of oppression. By sharing stories, the unique voice of color is realized through narratives or counterstories that often go unreported and unrecognized in mainstream society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Knaus, 2014). As Patton and Croom (2017) aptly identify by providing narratives that share their stories and struggles, these women who are largely invisible and rarely celebrated, are writing themselves into existence. They are defining themselves for themselves and they are able to demonstrate over and over again, through their own language and voice, the existence of that Black girl magic.

Because the experiences of African American women leaders are neglected and largely unrecognized and unreported, this reporting of shared lived experiences provides their unique viewpoint, breaks the silence, and adds to the small body of literature of African American women in executive leadership. When viewed through a CRT lens, these counterstories highlight the impact of racism and sexism on the personal and professional experiences of African American executive leaders as they struggle for equality and justice on their leadership path. This group is not homogenous. They share the same race and gender but their many other facets—class, religion, sexual orientation and disability—all impacted their educational leadership journey. Through their stories, they provide insight and hope to other African American women that seek upward mobility within the community college system. These women provided needed narrative that can help others understand some of the shared lived experience of African American women.

Though this group is not monolithic, the participants, in a limited scope, provide a great level of understanding of African American women in leadership positions with the community college setting in the Pacific Northwest. The results of this study confirm the devastating impact

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of being the only one, systemic inequities and racial climate, and how these largely external factors impacted the participants in this study. Though these women who are agents of knowledge and change worked to address the burden of being the only one, systemic inequities, and racial climate in various ways, the maintenance of these conditions support the supremacy of the White majority and thereby minimize the effect of their individual impact. The things that were within their scope of control—behaviors, family, mentorship, education and professional development that they engaged in—reflected great passion, intelligence, reflexivity, resistance and fearlessness. In spite of racist oppressive institutions and systems, moreover, these women continue to fight for equality, thrive, and offer hope and opportunity to other people of color. Each one of the participants recognized that not only were they leaders, they were persistently held to a higher standard than their White colleagues.

These, frequently inhospitable, educational institutions need to work on campus racial and sexist climates if they desire to recruit and retain African American leaders that can help create transformative learning environments, in which all can learn and thrive, in the midst of an ever increasing diverse student population. Each one of these women were able to speak of the hard work that they were doing on a day to day basis to shift the discourse to reflect equity and inclusion. All of the participants operated from a position of “racial realism,” which is defined by Bell (2005) as a recognition that racial equality is not a realistic goal because race and racism are dynamic and persistent structures in American culture. By operating from a racial realism construct, these women are able to focus on strategies that lead to personal successes while addressing inequities. There is a need to establish a critical mass for these women. More women of color would help with the feelings of isolation and being the only one. Within their work because they were often the only one at the leadership table, they frequently found

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themselves alone on a precipice lending voice to critical conversations that impacted institutional practices and change. The frustration, anger, and sense of injustice with these oppressive structures erupted multiple times throughout this study. Maya expressed her feelings most aptly when she said that Blacks no longer just want a place at the table, they want the whole table.

Because institutions do not necessarily become places that allow people of color to be people of color, we have to find and create these space and places. By conducting these interviews, the researcher created a place where these participants felt comfortable sharing their stories. The intent of this study was not specifically to talk about trauma or to recreate trauma for these women. But through the interview and ensuing conversation and questions, trauma was uncovered and these women were given space to share what has happened to them. The impact of being able to share these traumas was healing for these women; they had a safe place to speak their truths. Laughter and tears were shared and one of the participants realized that she needed to find a space to continue processing her trauma.

According to the participants, talking about the systems of oppression and the impact of discriminatory practices helped ease the pain of attempting to thrive within oppressive racist and sexist systems. Their experiences emerged through powerful stories that allowed for the development of needed narrative of the African American woman executive leader experience that can serve to support and guide other women of color; there is a lot of knowledge to be shared by African American women. Their stories explored racial climate, behaviors that have led to success and failures, the role of education and professional development, being the only one, the role of mentorship, the importance of family, and how systemic inequities shaped and framed their experiences. Based on these themes, opportunities exist for additional research of the intersectionality of race and gender for African American women. Participants identified that

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race and gender were so fused together that it was often hard to determine which was having the most impact.

These women have learned how to navigate and thrive within oppressive systems and structures in the higher education setting. Because African American women are not the mainstream and because their experiences are often minimized or ignored, these counterstories are not intended to be generalized to the larger population. These counterstories are intended to fill the gap in the literature of African American women's experiences. These women spoke of loneliness, a sense of isolation because they are often the only one and that in being the only one and the need to know oneself. They expressed that African American women need to be clear about who they are and what they stand for because if they do not have this defined sense of self, someone else will attempt to define them. These thoughts are supported by W.E.B. Du Bois (1970), who stated, "Be yourself and not the white man's image of you. Let the world catch your light as from a beacon rather than from a mirror's pale reflection" (p. 7). Attempts at redefinition occur every single day because who African American women are simply is not good enough for the dominant culture. For instance, this is evidenced in the systemic inequities and daily grind that stifles progression and attempts to extinguish voice. Yet within the knowing of self comes the knowledge that African American women need to stop trying to manage others' perceptions of who they are and who African American women, as a whole, are. Indeed, who they are is enough.

These four women have made work at the community college their life work, despite the fact that none of these women attended a community college. The open access of the community college system created an environment in which these women felt that they could work and give back to their communities of color and actually make a difference. All of these women

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expressed their belief in the power as well as the necessity of higher education for the development and advancement of people of color. In the midst of their isolation, they still found a way to resist oppressive systems while affecting needed systemic change. In this fight for systemic change, they each recognized the importance of their work and the need to continue pressing and fighting for these changes to enhance the student and employee experience on community college campuses. These women were able to share times when their positional authority enabled them to make changes within their own college structures and culture that increased access as well as equity. These women recognize the work that needs to be done to change the status quo on their campuses and that they are at the center of the needed disruption that will allow for the diversification of staff and faculty on their college campuses that more accurately and responsibly reflects their student body.

Future Research Opportunities

The impact of silencing for African American women can be devastating and ways that these women resist through voice is an additional area of research that could be explored by researchers that have the passion and ability to provide that safe place that allows voice to develop and emerge. Though the study was not designed to dig deeply into the role of microaggressions and how women move through them day to day, this is an area that could be incredibly beneficial helping to expand the narrative. Such research could help fill in the gaps as to how these women move in the face of adversity. An expansion of semi structured interviews that occurred outside of the Pacific Northwest should also be endeavored. It is through stories that we are able to break down walls, inform, empower and encourage. The stories shared here had resistance at their core, as well as empowerment however, the role of mentorship and sponsorship needs additional research. As the participants of this study explored factors that

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contributed to their success, they identified the necessity and power of mentors and sponsors that have traveled the pathway and are able to help identify, diminish, and remove barriers for those that come after them. Research in this area could be combined with exploration of successful ways to create safe spaces that support the development of African American women on college campuses. Also, because African American women are not honored or protected in the United States, the impact of racial violence and how it effects personal as well as professional growth for African American women is an area of future research.

The challenge with future research of African American women in executive leadership in Pacific Northwest community colleges is that there is not a large sample size for additional research. A larger scale project that could identify a broader group of participants could delve deeper into the impact of racist and sexist system and provide more opportunity for open dialogues because a larger sample provides more anonymity for participants. The usage of narrative research and counterstories are powerful research tools that can highlight resistance to the dominant story.

Limits and Affordances

This study was intended to center the voices of an oppressed group, African American women. By centering African American women's voices, experiences have emerged through stories that can support and guide other African American women. Though this study did a deep dive into the experiences of these participants, there are limits to this research, primarily because it only contained four participants. By having such a small number of participants from a singular region, the study lacks generalizability. Because African American women are not the mainstream and their experiences are often minimized or ignored, these counterstories are not

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intended to be generalized to the larger population. Namely, this research is not broad. With such a small number of subjects the possibility of transference must be considered.

Conclusion

With the election of the 44th President of the United States, there were musings by the mainstream that as a nation, the US was entering into a post racial era (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). After all, this nation could not possibly have a problem with race if it elected a Black man as President of the United States. Scholars are discussing how Barack Obama's election was largely symbolic and the current political and racial climate reflect that the United States history of institutionalized racism is still alive and well and that we are not post-race (Dinan, 2013).

Fast forward to the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States, who ran on a platform that made it abundantly clear that the US is not post-racial. The nation has seen a surge of bigotry and hate crimes that are a spinoff of Trump's campaign platform of "Make America Great Again" that has been embraced by a segment of White America that has interpreted the meaning to be "Make America White Again" (Yan, Sgueglia, & Walker, 2016). The emerging racism is nothing new to America. Once covert, racism is now gaining footing and acceptance of its overt nature. Racist, sexist, xenophobic, and misogynistic speech has erupted and become the common speech of some of the White United States population that has felt that their voices have been oppressed and silenced by liberals. Kolowich (2016) identified that Donald Trump pledged to eliminate political correctness on college campuses:

In the past few decades, political correctness—oh, what a terrible term—has transformed our institutions of higher education from ones that fostered spirited debate to a place of extreme censorship, where students are silenced for the smallest of things. You say a

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word somewhat differently, and all of a sudden you're criticized—sometimes viciously, we will end the political correctness and foster free and respectful dialogue.

As free speech and actions that are more racist, misogynistic, and intolerant are encouraged on college campuses, there will be a need for strength and courageous voices to ring loud in an effort to maintain strides and progress that have been made by people of color on our college campuses. African American women will need to armor themselves. They need to continue to resist injustice, lend voice to conversations, take care of each other, and practice self-love in spite of the constant assault against the essence of who they are and all that they bring to these college campuses.

PWIs are a reflection of an inequitable system that privileges the White majority's agenda in the development of policy and culture which emerges in the beliefs and actions of the institutions and individuals within these institutions. These institutions struggle to create places that all people are welcome, thriving and persisting. Particularly, people of color. In a speech given at the American Council on Education Conference, Kenneth Shaw, President University of Wisconsin System, asked:

If there are no people of color – if there are no women- on the president's or chancellor's executive team, no amount of rhetoric will obscure this deficiency. People in organizations not only listen to whatever leaders say, they watch clearly what is done.

Though the quote by Kenneth Shaw is dated to July of 1988, the words still ring true.

Organizations need to not only be able to orate their commitments to equity and diversity on their college campuses, they also need to be able to demonstrate this commitment at all levels of leadership.

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On a more personal level, this research experience has had a profound effect on me. The process of identifying this topic, examining the literature, finding these women, hearing these stories and finding my own voice has situated me on a path of additional questioning. These women's stories were similar to my own in so many ways and expectedly dissimilar in other ways. There are so few African American women in the PNW that have achieved these executive level positions and hearing their stories paired with my own experiences working as a community college Dean brought me to a place of questioning. Working on college campuses that speak of equity, inclusion and a commitment to students, faculty and staff but do not demonstrate these values, has taken its toll on me. Throughout the process of this research, feelings of hopelessness emerged as I realistically examined the possibility of progression in an unsupportive work environment. The barriers that that I have experienced getting to this point of my doctoral educational journey have rocked me to my core and have changed my community college career trajectory.

I have found that I have run into the earlier identified concrete ceiling at the Dean's level. My negative work experiences have significant overlap with the 10 identified emergent themes that were brought forth by the participants. Oppressive structures within educational institutions of the Washington State Community College system do not provide equal opportunity for Black women. These systems discriminate, perpetuate disparities in pay between Whites and Blacks and are unsupportive of Black women pursuing doctoral degrees that are necessary for progression. Additionally, there is a general lack of succession planning that recognizes our community's increasingly diverse student population and the need to create institutions that are reflective of these changing demographics. Opportunities for professional development are limited, lack of said opportunity is often framed as a budgetary constraint, and the critically

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needed mentorship and sponsorship is not available. I have identified the bar for executive leadership in the community college as too high and the expectations for women of color as unrealistic and to this end, no longer see this trajectory being a viable option for me. However, my hope is that through this research aspiring leaders may use these stories to support and guide them on their journey to a position of leadership within the community college setting, for the explicit purpose of breaking these concrete ceilings and transforming higher education.

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