Not Your Average Brotha: Examining the Educational Lives, Literacies and Masculinities of Black Males

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Abstract

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Current educational research shows that Black males are underperforming in urban high schools across the nation (Noguera, 2009). Typically over-disciplined and underserved, the schooling experiences of Black young men continue to be highlighted by violence, machismo and high drop out rates. There has been a push by scholars to reframe the dialogue and pedagogical strategies for Black boys in order to transform teaching and learning (Morton & Toldson, 2012). However, little research has been conducted on how adult Black men remember their high school experiences.

Using a Critical Race Theory epistemology that draws upon sociocultural conceptions of literacy and poetry as research, this dissertation explored how former Black male students aged 20-30 remembered their secondary schooling experiences and how their respective literacies (New London Group, 1996) impacted their perceptions of Black masculinities and education. Through the qualitative method of portraiture, visual images of four participants were constructed through poetry, journal entries and recorded face-to-face conversations. Because "understandings of Black men and boys are scripted and made legible in the United States within the context of the lowest expectations" (Neal, 2012), the ongoing conversations with the men were meant to explore that stereotypical representation while recreating perceptions of who Black men are in a multifaceted way. It is critical to look at how the secondary classroom is remembered and how it may impact an individual's conception of self and life outcomes. Considering Toni Morrison's rememory (1987), which refers to the ability of an individual to

both remember as well as reconstruct the past, the men were asked to recall their experiences in New York City public schools over the course of a four-month period. The study addresses these questions specifically: 1) How does a select group of men who identify as Black, (re)member the secondary English classroom? 2) What do these (re)memberings indicate about their interpretations of their respective literacies, teaching/learning and their lives? 3) What are the participants' perceptions of what counts as literacy? 4) How do they critique (if at all) their public educational experiences and how does this impact their understandings of their own masculinities? Some key findings as a result of the research questions include: 1) Black male literacies are not honored in New York City Public high schools 2) Black masculinities are a constant threat in schools and urban communities 3) Black men have collective racialized memories about experiences in NYC public schools and 4) English educators often avoid discussions of race in their students' lives.

These key findings reveal that the intersections between race, masculinities and literacies play a pivotal role in English education while challenging some of the current research in the field and can have transformative implications for researchers, policy makers and practitioners as reflected throughout the data and analysis.

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Dedication

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Chapter 1
Poetic Introduction

When Schools Ain't Enough for Black Boys

his words don't fit with the curriculum sometimes 'cause
he be writin' rhymes for reparations and slingin' street metaphors
to open lyrically locked public school doors.
lost and found literate chores
make him lost and found in between the lines
like crack vials in concrete
but nobody speaks
when the teacher talks
and nobody moves
when the principal walks
into the room

disciplined and invisible classrooms dictate Diaspora trades
of bodies and minds, brains and mirrors,
black and bruised, blue and used
up like old chattel
on salty shores
where tourists take pictures to remember the slaughter,
click-click, click-click
but now the chattel are today's children
and parents send them to school hoping to fend off deficit
models and standardized lies,
while the demise of little black boys
are encouraged via detention
that eventually becomes detention centers
centering their histories in mediocrity
do you hear me?

my brothas never finished high school.
two brilliant minds defined by who's bad?
except their futures were not as bright as Michael Jackson
and there were cells not classrooms waiting for their arrival.
my mother was in denial
that someway, somehow, her lessons didn't stick
and the tricks of urban realities proved to be stronger than her tongue.
her sons were the sun
but the industry of urban schooling equipped with metal detectors
proved to be brighter and stronger
producing longer effects
of what it means to be a black man
trapped within white supremacist patriarchal systems

that systematize before they recognize,
he was a good kid. he IS a good kid.

and now there is me,
sifting through books and theories to set my brothas free,
while i be
looking at the masculine from a feminist gaze
trying to understand the haze clouding public education
steadily accepting that it was my academic indoctrination
that made me a success and not a statistic
and my use of cultural capitals made me culturally accepted
superficially
so now I'm free, right?

I know how to use APA citations
and I seek out grants for the liberation to write these words
when I please, so therefore I am free... right?
Free to decipher why my brothers quote Dolemite
while I quote Dostoyevsky
Free to understand why my brother's decision to dye his hair
was also a reason for him to get beat down by other boys
Free to understand that my brothers and me
still ain't free...

Academic Introduction

"I mostly thought of school as a place one goes so as not to be eventually killed, drugged, or jailed. These observations cannot be disconnected from the country I call home, nor from the government to which I swear fealty." ~Ta-Nehisi Coates

Similar to the speaker of the poem and the author of this quote, *Atlantic* journalist Ta-nehisi Coates, my mind is overflowing with concern for the lives of Black men and how they navigate schools. Black men who are often viewed as stone-like bodies that dominate urban spaces like concrete. I begin with poetry as a way of grounding myself in the research. As a poet, educator and scholar, I make sense of the personal and political through poetic verses and stylistic stanzas. In many ways, this research begins with me. I am one of three children and the only girl. My Black brothers had very different schooling experiences than I did and their lives thereafter have been impacted because of this fact. I remember my brothers being labeled as

"bad" because they were very opinionated and confident. This led to one of my brothers being held back in the second grade because according to his teacher at the time, "all he does is talk." My brothers' disconnection from school continued until they both dropped out of high school. How do two highly intelligent boys go from being excited and garrulous, to disgruntled young men in the New York City public educational system? This is a general question that is essential to my research, which I will continue to expound upon during the data collection and analysis process. What was it about the behaviors and literacies of my brothers that did not match the desires of the public school system where they often found themselves misunderstood and misrepresented? This question haunts as well as inspires my desire to understand the secondary schooling experiences of Black males in urban New York City schools.

As I write these words, it is the summer of 2014 and another young Black man has been shot down, this time in St. Louis, Missouri. His name is Michael Brown. Witnesses allege that Brown was walking with a friend when a police officer shot at him from inside of a car and then continued to shoot after Brown had his hands up. This happened just days after Renisha McBride's murderer, Ted Wafer was found guilty of her death. McBride, a 19-year-old African American woman was shot at point blank range after seeking help due to a car crash. Michael Brown was 18 years old and had just graduated from high school. Writing this dissertation during such historical and racialized American events certainly evokes the sense of urgency for this study.

Statement of the Problem

Current educational discourse continues to suggest that Black males are experiencing high levels of disengagement in U.S. urban schools, in part due to extreme discipline codes, which could begin to explain augmented drop out rates (Noguera, 2009). It is imperative to think

of ways to engage Black males in urban schools socially, culturally and academically, especially considering how their secondary schooling experiences affects their lives thereafter. With a predominantly white teaching force in k-12 schools (Lewis, 2006), it is evident that there is also a racial dynamic affecting the schooling experiences of Black males. In order to help transform damaging schooling experiences, educators must be willing to investigate the ways that race, culture and gender play a role in all aspects of education writ large and how these aspects shaped and are shaped by larger societal structures.

Explanation of Dissertation Study

My study interrogates mainstream perceptions of Black masculinities and its impact on secondary schooling experiences, literacies and identities. There is currently a great deal of national attention about Black males as represented by President Obama's 2014 initiative, "My Brother's Keeper" (MBK), which is tailored to "create opportunities for boys and young men of color" since "data shows that regardless of where they come from — are disproportionately at risk from their youngest years through college and the early stages of their professional lives" (Taken from the White House "My Brother's Keeper" website, 2014). However, such language reinforces prejudiced ideologies of who Black men are, "in a society that already upholds Bigger Thomas, a Black youth living in poverty in Richard Wright's *Native Son,* more than Kwasi Enin, a New York teen who was recently accepted to all eight of the Ivy League colleges. It is easy for someone like President Obama, the "good" Ivy League educated biracial brotha to insist that Black men 'reject the cynicism' that is certainly a product of structural and institutional racism" (Belle, 2014). When I think of my own experiences as a high school English teacher, it was incredibly hard for my Black students to simply ignore all of the racist and socioeconomic hardships they faced on a daily basis.

I used the qualitative method of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) to conduct multi-layered and fluid conversations with four Black men over the course of four months, as a way to explore how they made sense of their lives during and after high school. The men were recruited by posting a public announcement on the Teachers College homepage about the project, as well as via social networks, particularly Facebook and Twitter. Based on the men I recruited through public announcements, I then asked them to refer me to anyone they knew who might have been interested in the work. Through the utilization of Critical Race Theory and the concepts of masculinities, rememory and intersectionality, I created multifaceted narratives about each of these participants as a way to challenge the current national discourse that reinscribes essentialist constructions of supposed Black male deficiencies.

Rationale and Significance

My rationale for this project stems from current research which shows that high school aged Black youth ages 13-19 are not experiencing academic and social success in school which possibly stems from racial discrimination and feelings of disconnection in the classroom (Howard, 2013). Many scholars note that the root of this disconnection is partially linked to the absence of culturally relevant pedagogy in school curriculum. Educational scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) defines culturally relevant pedagogy as "a pedagogy of opposition specifically committed to collective empowerment " (p. 160). Ladson-Billings' conception of this pedagogy is in opposition to Dominant ways of thinking and knowing, while incorporating the multiple cultures students bring into the classroom. Such a pedagogical approach includes affirming students while valuing the positive assets they bring to the classroom every day, as well as incorporating material into the curriculum that they care about in their own lives and communities. I employed many of the tenets of culturally relevant teaching and learning during

my tenure as a high school English teacher in order to give my predominantly Black students the spaces to be socially and academically successful. Academic and social successes were determined by increased student engagement in school as well as significant improvement on class assignments and state test scores. However, I do understand that these measures are subjective and I can never fully know if every student truly felt successful.

My interests have become immersed in the lives of Black young men due to my personal experiences with Black men in my family and in my classroom. After years of working with highly intelligent Black male students as an English teacher, I found that a large number of them still dropped out of high school. Part of my fascination to do this study in particular, was in order to explore why they dropped out. One of my main objectives was to look beyond generic, deficient mainstream narratives, while developing an elongated qualitative inquiry into specific Black males' perceptions of schooling in New York City that may help to alter teachers', educational policymakers', scholars and parents' understandings of the schooling experiences of Black males in this nation. To be clear, my goal is not to offer a study that is reductionist in any way, while propagating stereotypical notions that Black men are "an endangered species" which is the pathologizing rhetoric often heard in news media outlets and throughout educational research alike. More importantly, we rarely hear the voices of young Black men in English education literature and it is even rarer to have in-depth portraits of Black men in educational research literature.

At the same time I cannot ignore that current research continues to imply that the high school graduation rates of Black men are lagging behind other racial groups. The Schott Foundation for Public Education (2013), which has tracked graduation rates of Black males from public schools since 2004, reported "37 percent of Black males who entered ninth grade in the

2012-13 school year graduated in four years, compared with 78 percent of white, non-Latino males in New York City." What is it about public schooling that continues to negatively impact the academic success and high school graduation rates of Black boys? Reflecting on this essential question through an exploration of identities, literacies and masculinities, can serve as one model for educators, scholars and families.

Scholars from the likes of Pedro Noguera (2009) to David Kirkland (2011, 2013), focus on the educational lives of Black boys. The national discourse around Black males is deceptively negative, focusing on learning disabilities and an overall disconnection with school, often stating that, "African-American and Latino males are more likely to be classified as mentally retarded or to be identified as suffering from a learning disability and placed in special education" (Losen & Orfield, 2002). They are also more likely to be "absent from gifted and talented programs, Advanced Placement and honors courses, and international baccalaureate programs (Noguera, 2008)." With such deficit language surrounding the educational outcomes of Black men, how does one find a place to effectively and positively navigate many of these realities while re-examining the conditions under which Black men, particularly those in urban environments, learn and explore their respective identities?

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to contribute to current and past theoretical and educational discourses (Howard, 2013; Kirkland, 2013; Noguera, 2009; Young, 2007) about Black masculinites, literacies and identities that will broaden the conversation to incorporate more nuanced social and cultural understandings of Black male experiences. Because Black masculinities continue to be at the forefront of American popular culture (Harris, 2005) and considering the fact that we, at this particular moment in U.S. history, have a Black president, it

is crucial for English educators to acknowledge how these current realities impact the lives of our students. My research can be helpful in particular to English educators in thinking of multiple ways to engage Black males in urban schools through a non-deficit, non-stereotypical lens. I believe the conversation for and by Black males may be constructed through an understanding of masculinities and literacy practices. I became interested in masculinities because I believe that conceptions of what are deemed as masculine continue to impact the identities of many men, which was clear throughout this project. In conjunction with that idea, literacies offered multiple insights into the personal, political and situated experiences of my participants. My hope is that this study will contribute to efforts to transform what often gets positioned as deficit academic discourse surrounding the education of Black male youth. Hopefully, it also contributes to a process of learning to understand individuals and ask questions rather than make presumptions about them. Although many quantitative studies around public schooling reflect dismal graduation and literacy rates for Black students (particularly young men), few qualitative studies have focused on complex individual narratives and possible implications for policy and educational reform to which these stories may point.

This chapter highlights the relevance of this work in English Education research , as well as the inspiration behind this dissertation, which began with a qualitative study during my tenure as a high school English teacher. I explain the goals of the work and conclude with my research questions and the organization of the dissertation.

Why Literacy?

Traditionally, literacy has been used as a tool to reproduce the educational status quo, perpetuating race and class distinctions. To be literate is often described in “traditional” ways as the abilities to read and write Standard English, often with the goal of climbing the social ladder.

Particularly, from my situated perspectives, I am motivated by the assertion that "literacy acquisition is intricately bound up with the learning of White privilege" (Prendergrast, 2003; p. 52). Such a narrow definition of literacy often marginalizes Black men, who may identify with what may be considered counterpublic literacies (Hill & Abu-Jamal, 2011) such as speaking African American Vernacular English (AAVE), or not identifying personally and emotionally with canonical texts.

As an English teacher, I have continuously witnessed Black male students attempt to navigate their multiple literacies in the classroom, but to no avail. Because of the Dominant educational structure of teaching Standard English through texts, such teaching and supposed resultant learning explicitly renders many Black students' ways of knowing and being as invisible or anti-intellectual. Theoretical and pedagogical strategies to consider in the English classroom, as a result of this reality, include thinking about how literacy has been socially constructed to keep Black men at the margins of society and at the very edges of "what most often counts" in terms of educational and financial opportunities, as well as considering the roles of Black masculinities in the English classroom.

Reflecting upon these personal experiences as a teacher drove me to further deconstruct the popular mainstream narrative that Black men are endangered. Because literacy is such an integral part of our society, it is very rare that one asks the simple question: What is literacy? The first time this question was posed to me, I stared incredulously at the interrogator. However, as I continued to reflect on the question, I realized that my conception of literacy was tied to a very constricted definition. I thought of literacy as a way to communicate in oral and written forms, often tied to Standard English. I did not take into account the idea of multimodal literacies and multi-literacies (New London Group, 1996). The Multimodal Literacies Issue Management

Team of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) posit, "Multimodal literacies are 'multiple ways of knowing' which include art, music, movement, and drama and should not be considered curricular luxuries. All modes of communication are codependent. Each affects the nature of the content of the other and the overall rhetorical impact of the communication event itself" (2005). Considering the multiple literacies of all individuals, particularly Black people, is important especially when considering that, historically, slaves were not allowed to read or write. Although the argument put forth was that slaves were not fully human, removing literacy from their lives was a way to maintain total domination over their minds and bodies. This legacy of literacy and humanity is still prevalent in urban communities and schools, where certain literacies are privileged more than others, literally stripping away students' respective multiple literacies, as well as the ways in which they wish to ascribe their particular identities.

In order for literacy to be more than a social construct of injustice, English educators need to incorporate multimodal and new literacies strategies in the classroom that extend beyond decoding and context clues (Street, 1984; Morrell, 2008; Kinloch, 2010). It has been argued that, "literacy needs to be seen as providing not just technical skills but also a set of prescriptions about using knowledge. In this sense, literacy is a socially constructed phenomenon, not simply the ability to read and write" (Cook-Gumperz 2006, p. 25). Therefore, educators who primarily teach African American students should keep in mind that "culturally relevant teaching requires the recognition of African American culture as an important strength upon which to construct the schooling experience" (Ladson-Billings 2000, p.142).

Inspiration for the Work

I conducted a brief qualitative study while completing my Masters in English Education in 2008. During the time, I taught English Language Arts to mostly Black male ninth graders in a low-income community in Brooklyn, New York. The said students (30 in total) were described as "low-level" readers and writers and "at –risk" students, and as a result, many suffered from low self-esteem about their academic capabilities. Over the course of two months, I conducted a qualitative, teacher-as-researcher based study on the intersections among race, literacies and masculinities through the teaching of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Through the usage of the original text and Spike Lee's film, the boys became more invested in literacy as well as more engaged in school overall. Pedagogical strategies included:

1) Continuous discussions of Black masculinities as a way of promoting the current and ever-changing realities of the young men,

2) Using literacies (reading, writing and speaking) as a self-exploratory tool through the merging of a powerful historical text and popular film,

3) Encouraging students to openly and honestly navigate their multiple literacies in the classroom, which included speaking AAVE, using social networks, and digital literacies (Facebook and the Internet) to name several (Belle, 2008).

Many students internalize stereotypes, particularly Black boys, who believe that they are unable to succeed because they are from a low-income background and because educational statistics "show" a history of academic failure (Steele & Aronson, 1995). However, classrooms can also serve as a pathway to achievement for students of color. In order to do so, conceptions of educational achievement must acknowledge multiple and fluid identities, cultures and literacies. It is important for teachers to learn about their students' respective histories in order to

contribute to positive academic outcomes.

During the teaching of *The Autobiography of Malcolm* X, I came up with an array of academic actions and interventions for the classroom, to foster multiple facets of literacy. These included surveys, discussions, peer interviews and a day where students celebrated one aspect of their respective cultures. These multiple modes of literacy helped broaden, I believe, students' understanding of what literacy/literature can entail.

1. *Introductory Survey on Race/Identity/Masculinity* (Appendix A)

- Students reflected on the relevance of race/masculinities in their own lives.
- Students answered questions about their families, communities, and school environment.
- Students defined masculinity in their own words.
- Students reflected on whether or not they thought their race/gender was connected to their success.

2. *Discussion of the Achievement Gap*

- We learned about the achievement gap in American society.
- We discussed specific statistics that "prove" the achievement gap exists.
- Students had the opportunity to brainstorm why and how the gap continues to widen.
- Students produced written pieces explaining if they think they play in the achievement gap.
- Students read a plethora of articles that have been written about the achievement gap.

3. *Student Interviews*

- Students interviewed other students in their class, as well as in the school community about race/masculinity in the classroom.
- Students recorded the answers of their interviews and provided it as data to be used.

4. *Peer Evaluation*

- Students monitored their progress by writing daily reflections about what they learned about race/identity/masculinity in the classroom, and whether or not they believed it had an impact on their achievement.
- Students shared some of their writings with another student once a week, in order to view someone else's thoughts and views, as well as provided feedback to that student, based on what we covered in class regarding race and identity.

5. *Self-Assessment*

- Students assessed themselves constantly not only by the use of surveys, but also by journaling at the end of every lesson. The journal log served as a way for students to monitor their own progress and understanding of themselves and their identities/masculinities.

I noticed that many students became more motivated in class while reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X.* Considering the fact that most of my students were African American boys (Many of the over-aged Black male students were ostracized and put into separate classes. Out of 30 students, there were 25 boys in the class.), the focus of the text on Black power, self-love and Black masculinities seemed to strike a powerful chord in my classroom. Some students admitted when asked that they were extremely motivated when reading literature that was a reflection of their race and respective experiences.

Coupling the text with Spike Lee's film *X* (1992) not only increased student engagement through the use of the film medium, but also expanded the notion of what literacy is and can look like. My students had been taught that English class only entailed the reading of novels, followed by reading comprehension questions. This was an extremely narrow view of literacy that actually

hindered the success of many of my students in the past. In order to accommodate all students, literacy must incorporate multiple genres and mediums in order to truly engage in culturally relevant teaching and learning. New Literacy Studies highlights "the range and variation of literacies, as well as the multiple contexts in which they occur, and the communities of learning that are built as a result of them" (Staples, 2008, p. 379).

This short qualitative study was pivotal to my focus on Black masculinities in the English classroom and beyond. I was always interested in Black identities and the ways one must negotiate these identities in institutional spaces. However, upon reflecting on teaching this group of thirty, mostly Black men, and the principal's ominous message that this was a "tough group," propelled me to examine why the narrative about Black males in education and beyond continues to be increasingly grim.

Poetic Pause: The Fear of the Black Rose(s)

have you ever seen a black rose? beautiful and rare
like equality, standing as bold as the bosom of Sethe and Paul D's love?
I have. Seen many, many black roses,
in my home, in my bed and in my heart
trying to be seen, while being cool, mean and brilliant at the same damn time.
Parting lips legs and layers of self
in order to survive the passage.
This skin i am in is kin to the sounds of Beloved.
Where mothers cannot keep their babies for the fear of stolen milk.

Have you ever seen a black rose? dancing like Huey on Harlem streets
before gentrification
gazing at black skin like the sun. where the texture of a sista's hair
did not scare the brothas away and when brothas could hug one another
without fear of being sensual in public.

Heternormative sandwiches packed in neat patriarchal bags for lunch
by women.
She birthed a black boy on a Sunday and named him Kwasi.
His skin was sparkling chocolate, shining as bright as the floors

her momma used to clean before the concept of black feminist thought
came to be.
Only the bible could explain her anger.
And she saw her son,
looking like rage and black roses rolled into contradictory perfection.
The protection he had in the womb was gone
and now she had to teach him that sometimes being both black and male
was more dangerous than capitalism. or was it?

Knowledge used to be more like common sense. nothing to be studied
or labored over for titles. But now brains make theories and theories
create questions and questions create mirrored messes of essentialized
truths
that dictate masculine and feminine categories
that tell people black men are dangerous, hypersexual and hyperviolent
nothing like Paul D or President Obama
but former slaves and first black presidents
don't count
because one never learned how to read
and the other knows just the right words to win elections
so hegemony is safe and white supremacy still reigns.

I have always loved black roses
not only because one helped create me
but also because it was this rose that grew from
mango trees and shady tourism
that taught me how to love like water,
pure and unfiltered
in the face of structured fear.
This love is proud and prone to passion
that has no name
and cannot be tamed with stereotypes and social constructs.
Instead this love is worn boldly, although
restricted by invisible intentions.

Positionality is relative to time, spaces, money and
gendered language
clothed in ontological madness
wrapping itself around minds, bodies, lovers and things
just to fit into academic dictionaries.

Her womb was filled with black roses she often considered
giving life to. but the fear of Trayon Martin's blood prints
was enough to make her swallow contraceptives. She did not
want Sethe's life. She did not want Sethe's life, ever again. So she
kept her lovers leveraged between her sanity and her safety.

But secretly, she wanted a black rose of her own.

They called him feminine because he cooked, cleaned, scrubbed
and only thought of love. But his love was rough and rich
with feminist manhood and masculine conventions
that would never be considered masculine. But he loved red roses,
with extra sharp thorns and rigid petals that only moved when kissed.
His friends did not know this because he had identities to perform
and masculinities to put on display.

Have you ever seen a black rose? smiling because he is loved, never feared
or asking to be free? I have.not. at least not in public. So many of my roses
hiding behind doors with no hinges or handles. My roses, sexualized,
pathologized and mythologized at the expense of research designs and grants.
My roses, twisted, contorted and distorted for Syphilis experiments.
My black roses.

Stop touching them... you hear me? Don't look at them, you hear me?
They belong to me, to us, to Sethe to Paul D. you have had enough
and i'm tired of sharing and caring about your privileges and your power.
This is mine, mine, mine, birthed from the womb of a woman who chose
love over fear.

When i came home today, my black rose was still alive
after 32 years of struggle. his petals stand firm,
as blatant as his walk. And we embrace in private
protecting our seed.

<u>Wo(MAN)</u>

"Black boys became criminalized. I was in constant dread for their lives, because they were targets everywhere. They still are." ~Toni Morrison

A question one may ask me is, as a woman, how do you plan to conduct valuable research with Black men? In fact, I find myself answering this particular question often. Positionality has been defined in a range of disciplinary fields; however, I am using the definition often used in sociological and qualitative research, which asserts that "all researchers are positioned by age, gender, race, class, nationality, institutional affiliation, historical-personal circumstance, and intellectual predisposition" (Chiseri-Strater, 1996, p. 115). My positionality

reveals both an "insider/outsider" status (Collins, 1986). My insider status is my race, which did give me a partial way in, with regard to my connection to Black men. Many of my perceptions of Black masculinities stemmed from my personal and professional interactions with Black men in my life. However, it is important to note that just because I am Black and worked with Black participants does not imply the process was any easier. In fact, one of my goals for the work was not allowing my "insider" status to lead to the essentialization of my participants. On the other hand, my "outsider" status was my gender. Because I choose to identify as a Black woman, I constantly thought about how I could conduct reflexive research regarding Black masculinities and schooling, when I am not a Black man? I do not use the term reflexive in a self-indulgent, researcher-centered way, but in a way that pushes me to engage in "uncomfortable reflexive practices" (Pillow, 2003), that encourage me to raise critical questions about "the politics of gaze." I agree with scholar Wanda Pillow's belief that "practicing uncomfortable reflexivity interrupts uses of reflexivity as a methodological tool to get better data while forefronting the complexities of doing engaged qualitative research" (2003, p. 175).

I was also interested in the implicit ways that racial performances and the politics of authenticity impact Black men's lives, as specifically expressed in scholar Vershawn Ashanti Young's *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy and Masculinity* (2007). Young explores the role of racial performances specifically among Black men in various settings including schools and institutions of higher education. He uses literacy as a vehicle to uncover the workings of Black masculinities in institutional settings. Young also draws on the philosophy of Carter G. Woodson who emphatically states in his classic text *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933) that "when a Negro has finished his education in our schools, then he has been equipped to being the life of an Americanized or Europeanized white man" (p.5). Although my

study does not specifically explore racial performances and notions of "acting white" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) which claimed "schooling is perceived by Blacks as learning to act white" (201), I understand how education is often tied to constructions of whiteness, and how this may be implied in the data. This is particularly why Critical Race Theory is at the center of my research.

Because this study is gender specific, I believe that many who identify as a man or woman subscribe to aspects of gender normativity and performativity, including myself. Although I realize that "being" a woman does not imply that I am incapable of doing this significant work, it was important to think about how I was be perceived by the study participants, although the goal of my work was not to specifically focus on how I was being perceived or how I assumed I was being perceived, to be clear. I want to note that I was not thinking of "insider/outsider" identities in a static, fixed way. Instead, I was drawing on some postmodern theorists that assert, " that identity and difference are social constructions whose meanings shift and slide across times and places" (Ellsworth & Miller, 1996; Butler, 1993). When thinking of gender as a socially constructed category, it raises the issue of how Black men reckon with that which is being produced and reproduced socially about their intellectual and life chances as gendered and raced beings.

I tackled these challenges as a Black female researcher who genuinely cares for Black men by constantly questioning my positionality and motives during the research process in the form of journal entries, memos and poetry. My focus on my own positionality draws on some of the ideas and concepts of several scholars (Richardson, 2000; Pillow, 2003 & Williams, 1991). Understanding one's position is much more than acknowledging race, class and gender but also making sense of how one continuously negotiates and (re)negotiaties the world, based on various personal, professional and social experiences based on labels that are placed upon you and that

you may place upon yourself.

Both my Blackness and my woman-ness are characteristics of myself that I own boldly. In a heartbeat I will say the words Black and woman, proudly reflecting on my ancestors who made it possible for me to write this dissertation. In the same vein, the word feminist is one that I have struggled with claiming and one that I continue to struggle with. I draw specifically on works around Black feminism by scholars Kimberle Crenshaw and Hazel Carby. Two of their seminal pieces have served as critical lenses for the way I see myself (not) fitting in traditional feminist frameworks.

In my own personal studies of feminist theories, even those written by Black women such as Audre Lorde and Kimberle Crenshaw, there is always a piece of the puzzle missing for me, although I must admit that Crenshaw's intersectionality (1989) comes closer to my views on the intersections of being Black, female and from a working class background. Sometimes I feel the voices in the writing are either overly theoretical or exclusionary and I feel stifled by the fact that the women in my own family and various communities do not necessarily feel their experiences are reflected in this work. That is not to say that I do not appreciate or value the work. However, it is to say that my own personal struggles with representations of Black women within feminist theories consciously make me hesitant to claim the title "feminist."

The fact "that Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender"(Crenshaw, 1989, p. 58), led me to a space where I felt like although I was a Black woman doing research with Black men and my femaleness coupled with their maleness touched upon social, cultural and political implications of gender and power, the lenses I chose to use such as CRT helped navigate these lived

experiences in a more holistic way.

The historical realities of Black womanhood have also impacted my decision to forgo the feminist lens, particularly in the ways that gender constructions for Black and white women are drastically different. Scholar Hazel Carby captures this sentiment when she states, "The way the gender of Black women is constructed differs from constructions of white femininity because it is also subject to racism. Black feminists have been explaining this since the last century, when Sojourner Truth pointed to the ways in which 'womanhood' was denied the Black woman" (1997, p. 112). So yes, there is much work to be done around feminist theories and Black womanhood and I agree that much has been done since Sojourner Truth's essential "Ain't I A Woman" (1851) speech. However, I am not yet ready to claim the feminist title or the feminist lens in my work due to the personal and political. Because after all, "when feminist theory and politics that claim to reflect women's experience and women's aspirations do not include or speak to Black women, Black women must ask: 'Ain't We Women?' If this is so, how can the claims that 'women are,' 'women believe' and 'women need' be made when such claims are inapplicable or unresponsive to the needs, interests and experiences of Black women" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 67). I want to be able to feel comfortable using theories that are clear reflections of my experiences as I firmly believe that the researcher and the researched are very much intertwined.

Goals for the Work

My goal was to conduct a modest qualitative research study with a select group of Black men in order to reflect on mainstream discourses and stereotypical beliefs about Black masculinities, and how they critiqued and thought about their high school experiences. There is a continuum of essentialist mindsets attributed to Black men, which I like to call the President

Obama/Curtis Jackson spectrum. Living in the era of our nation's first Black president in conjunction with the proliferation of hip-hop music and culture offers an array of Black masculinities that can be simplistically viewed in strictly binary ways. Either you are an intellectual Black man who succeeded in adhering to middle class values of schooling, similar to President Obama, or you are a mainstream rapper, flaunting physical strength, hypersexuality and money, similar to Curtis Jackson aka 50 Cent. I want to complicate this seemingly perpetual narrative in the media and educational research alike, by presenting my interpretations and constructions of the personal narratives of a select few, in order to highlight specific voices of everyday Black men who are not your average brothas.

Reframing the ontological and empirical discourses about Black men that reinscribe notions of deficiency will require qualitative work that is self-reflexive and humane.

Assumptions

- Black males in NYC public schools are being mis-educated due to stereotypes about who they are perceived to be.
- High school English curriculum fails to acknowledge Black male literacies and cultures**.**
- There is a collective memory attached to the experiences of Black males in urban public schools.

Research Questions

- How does a select group of men who identify as Black, (re)member the secondary English classroom?
- What do these (re)memberings indicate about their interpretations of their respective literacies, teaching/learning and their lives?
- What are the participants' perceptions of what counts as literacy?

- How do they critique (if at all) their public educational experiences and how does this impact their understandings of their own masculinities?

Dissertation Overview

I want to acknowledge that this dissertation intentionally pushes against traditional notions of what can be deemed as academic or scholarly. As such, there is a combination of poetry, theory and the daily realities that continue to impact Black men in this nation. My dissertation is divided into six chapters. This first chapter has provided an introduction to my experiences as an English educator and as the daughter/sister of Black men, which led to my interest in this particular topic, the rationale for the study and its significance overall. Chapter two provides a background of the literature that has aided in my understanding of the intersections between literacies, identities and Black masculinities in education and the secondary English classroom. Chapter three breaks down my research methods, theoretical and conceptual frameworks and how data was collected. Chapter four presents empirical data sketches of my participants, data analysis, research findings and coding procedures. Chapter five is a poetry analysis chapter that specifically examines poetry I wrote at the beginning of the research process and at the end, as way to challenge my assumptions before and after data collection. My use of poetry as research also interrupts what is traditionally counted as data. Chapter six discusses conclusions (as it pertains to the four participants), next steps for future research regarding this topic, as well as possible implications for English educators and policy makers.

Chapter 2
Review of Literature

In this chapter I review empirical, theoretical, pedagogical and literacy based texts as a means of highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of this work, which I argue is fundamental to the progression of the field of English Education. My research study explores the intersections among masculinity studies, Black masculinities, literacies and education. As such, this literature review investigates each of these fields in order to fully explore my research questions. Unlike many educational literature reviews, my review is philosophical, drawing on multiple thoughts and ideas as a way of honoring the layers and influential theoretical lenses that have inspired me along the way. Additionally, I ask many probing questions about each text throughout my literature review, as a way to challenge my thinking about Black masculinities, identities and literacies. Because being an English teacher is very much connected to my identities, I also write extensively about what this work might mean in the English classroom.

Masculinity Studies

The words feminine and masculine have become such normalized words, that both are mentioned in a matter-of-fact way. However, it is critical to consider what has been constructed as either masculine or feminine and how those constructions impact how we see and interact with the world around us. I am particularly interested in notions of the masculine, masculinity and manhood. Masculinity studies came about in the early 70s as a result of the second-wave feminist studies movement (Nicholson, 1997), which asserted that gender roles were social constructions. It has been noted that, the most important accomplishment of 20th-century feminist theory is "the concept of gender as a social construction; that is, the idea that masculinity and femininity are loosely defined, historically viable, and interrelated social ascriptions to persons

with certain kinds of bodies---not the natural, necessary, or ideal characteristics of people with similar genitals" (Gardiner, 2004, p. 35).

There are two essential texts that serve as the foundation for my understanding of masculinity studies. In this section, I will outline the texts and its purpose in this study in relation to Black masculinities. I do not aim to provide the history of masculinity itself, for that is a very complex topic that will take this writing in another direction. At the same time, I do believe it is important to address the historical implications of masculinity, especially with regard to race and patriarchy.

The Masculinity Studies Reader (Adams, & Savran, 2002) is a collection of essays that touches upon the emergence of masculinity studies, representations of manhood, race and masculinity, and the sociology of masculinity to name a few. The rise of masculinity studies in the 70s, which coincided with second-wave feminism, was very pro-feminist and dedicated to personal and institutional change (Adams & Savran, 2002, p. 5). It is important to note that the significance of masculinity studies is intricately tied to feminist studies since, "in the second half of the 20th century, varied theories developed to explain the causes of male domination, to correct erroneous assumptions about both women and men, and to imagine new kinds of men and of women in new circumstances. These theories charged that cultural ideologies favored men…"(Gardiner, 2004, p.36). As a result, men and masculinity play a crucial role in feminist theory.

The text is divided into four sections that connect to notions of masculinity, which include: eroticism, social sciences, representations, empire and modernity and borders. There is a focus on masculinity not only from a Western context, but a global context as well. There are two essays in the text that are critical to my understanding of masculinity and Black male

subjectivity, which I will discuss at this time. In Frantz Fanon's essay "The Fact of Blackness" taken from his postcolonial and psychoanalytic book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), he specifically address the objectification of the Black male body and its connection to white supremacy. Black men are often compared to white men in what appears to be trivialized binaries as opposed to critical explorations that tackle the institutional permanence of race. The binaries limit our understanding of Black male experiences, as addressed by Fanon when he states, “Ontology-once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by wayside-does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (p. 232). Within a European context and as an immigrant from the former French colony, Martinique, Fanon traces historical perceptions of Black men as the uncivilized and inhuman brute and challenges those beliefs by asserting his love of self and Blackness, while exposing his own vulnerabilities in the face of living in postcolonial, oppressed spaces. There are layers of poetic devices throughout the piece, merged with critiques of race, class and justice through the lens of Black male subjects. Poetic language both obscures and elevates the ontological framing of the piece and it becomes increasingly clear that Fanon does not consider himself exempt from the daily oppressions that are imposed upon him as expressed through his words: “My Blackness was there, dark and unarguable. And it tormented me, pursued me, disturbed me, angered me” (p. 236). Although Fanon’s experience is relative to Black male subjugation in France, his experiences directly connect to many aspects of the Black male experience in the United States.

What Fanon’s piece offers my work is an historical and intellectual voice of Black masculinity that challenges societal norms, while investigating the self, simultaneously. There are few texts today that are academic and poetic, critical and reflexive, vulnerable and vigilant. I

find the weaving of these elements crucial to the kind of research I am analyzing about Black male participants under the gaze of a heavily racialized and gendered world.

Constructing critical dialogue around Black male subjectivities is directly tied to understanding how Black men have been historically feared as a result of racist institutions. Although I will not use a psychoanalytic or postcolonial lens similar to Fanon, reading his work grounds the historicity of Black masculinities in relation to oppression, especially the constant surveillance of Black men as expressed here, "I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me." (p. 243). It is interesting how this obsessive surveillance of Black males is very much apparent in a United States context, as well, more than half a century later.

Continuing with an historical thread, innovative masculinity studies scholar and sociologist R. W. Connell focuses on the historical aspects of masculinity as depicted in western civilization and beyond in her essay "The History of Masculinity" (2002, p. 245). Connell refers to a "gender order" as a system that has become more and more dominated by men over time and asserts that, "masculinity exists only in the context of a whole structure of gender relations..." (p. 245). Making sense of the structure of gender relations requires one to consider in what ways race plays into this construction.

A key theme in the essay is that the production of capital was central to the production of masculinity. Connell states that, "In the period from about 1450 to about 1650 the modern capitalist economy came into being around the North Atlantic, and the modern gender order also began to take shape in that region" (p. 246). From a contemporary perspective, manhood is often defined by one's ability to make money, specifically large sums of money in order to be

respected. When considering the overrepresentation of Black men in sports and the entertainment industry, due to significant financial gain and power, one has to ask, could constructions of masculinity exist without financial capital? To push this further, forms of capital are also social and cultural (Bourdieu, 1986). It is impossible to identify social and cultural aspects of society or individuals without acknowledging race. Considering the history of the Black male body in the United States, once as a slave, and now supposedly as a "free man" who still has less access to housing, wealth and fair education nationwide, how much of generalized perceptions of Black masculinity are an extension of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy?

Connell explores various masculinities that evolved over time, particularly the history of American/European masculinity cloaked in violence and social hierarchy, which eventually became hegemonic masculinity, followed by subordinated and marginalized masculinities, as experienced by men of color, gay men, those with disabilities, etc. (p. 249). My work explores how hegemonic masculinities impact Black male subjectivities and identities. Inspired by philosopher Antonio Gramsci's power analysis (1957), the concept of hegemonic masculinity is defined as "the pattern of practices (i.e., things done not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allows men's dominance over women to continue" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). Although hegemonic masculinity embodies a manliness that is seen as the ideal and is distinguished from other subordinated masculinities, I would argue that it does not fully take into account the realm of the experiences of many Black men, since hegemonic masculinities do not account for the social inequalities and racialized ways that power works. In order to have the privilege of asserting what would be considered hegemonic masculinities, one would typically be a white, wealthy male.

Similar to Connell's historical explorations of masculinity, Herbert Sussman's *Masculine Identities: The History and Meaning of Manliness* (2012), interrogates historical and contemporary assumptions about who men are and can be. He claims, "we don't often think about manliness. Mostly we consider the behavior of men as simply natural" (Sussman, 2012, p. 1). The book traces the historical conceptions of men in Homer's *Iliad* to pre-industrial Europe and ends with what would be considered subordinated masculinities as experienced by African American men as well as gay men. Although my work does not interrogate sexuality specifically, considering how heteronormativity factors into constructions of masculinity, is important to reflect on since men are constantly scrutinized based on heteronormative standards.

A key theme in masculinity studies, as outlined in the text, is identifying essentialism vs. social construction. Considering the language of gender studies, "the issue lies between essentialism, the theory that behavior is determined by innate biological qualities; and social construction, the belief that the behavior of each sex is constructed or shaped by society" (Sussman, 2012, p. 3). I do understand that masculinities are much more complex than essentialism and social constructions, yet still, my current perceptions of masculinities are influenced by and remain straddled between these spectrums. Social constructions continue to impact formations of masculine identities, and I occasionally wonder *if* biology plays into these formations. I am not trying to choose a side as to whether I believe in essential vs. social constructions of masculinities; however, the differences and intersections between the two is important to consider throughout my research process.

Critical elements of the text are masculinity performances and masculinity as identity. Similar to the essentialism vs. social construction debate, I am thinking of how masculinities are performed and linked to identities. If we think of gender as acts that are perpetually interrupted

and reproduced by multiple spaces, histories, and identities, then we can begin to question the concept of masculinities, as well. As I think of my work, I am wondering about how all of these layers of ideas and concepts, including: masculinities, essentialism, social construction, identities and race, may lead to the construction of participant narratives that can contribute to complicating the discourses and practices that are most prominent in the English classroom. More importantly, how can these lenses shed new light on the conversation around Black male identities and literacies?

Black Masculinities

Entering the conversation on Black masculinity means considering an array of disciplines, dogmas and degrees of varying perceptions about Black male experiences. With an abundance of information on the Internet, in books and articles, one has to sift through the perceptions with a critical eye and an open heart. A current Google search (done on several public computers) with the words "Black men" reveal immediate hits of sexually suggestive photos as well as a nonprofit organization called One Hundred Black Men located in New York City, that seeks to "capitalize on the collective power of community to address issues of concern, inequities and to empower African Americans to be agents for change in their own communities." Automatically, Black men are perceived as hypersexual, pathologized individuals who are in need of reform. These negative perceptions are also explored in other research studies regarding the impact of media on Black males (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011; Heinz Endowments, 2011). I did a parallel Google search entering the words "white men" and the images mostly were of men in suits. The first hit indicated a wiki page discussing "social constructions of whiteness," followed by so-called definitions of whiteness and its relevance to history from an American and global context. The need of pathologizing white men does not

seem relevant in this very basic search, which I would imagine is conducted often in the United States. Although the goal of my work is not to post Black men up alongside the normalization of whiteness per se, I use these binaries as a means of understanding the social, cultural and political contexts associated with stereotypical dialogue regarding the lives of Black men.

I begin with Frederick Douglass as a way to connect my work to the historicity of Black men and literacy. Douglass once said, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free." Reading is an emancipatory act, because an individual has the opportunity to explore texts that were unknown before, leading to increased *knowledge* and understanding of the self and the world. In Douglass' autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1843), he tells the story of his escape from slavery to freedom. The underlying trope throughout the text was that Douglass' desire to learn and to read is what gave him the courageous strength to escape his dire conditions as a slave. Thus, Douglass' quote is a direct reflection of his own life.

Douglass constructs a masculinity that is rooted in his literacy as a means of survival and progress. He explains how slave masters intentionally wanted to keep slaves ignorant, as a way of limiting their understanding of their dismal and downright inhumane situation, because apparently, "learning would spoil the best nigger in the world" (p. 93). He is only able to be critical of his masters when he uses his literacy as a source of power. Reading the words of Douglass over a century later, reminds me of the state of the public educational system today. The miseducation of Black male students continues, increasing the gaps in humane teaching and learning. Douglass contends that many slaves were afraid to tell the truth to others about their experiences on plantations. It was as if stifling the truth would improve their shackled conditions someway, somehow. Limiting students' knowledge of their own histories in the classroom is a form of mental enslavement, evoking the same dogma that kept slaves silent. African American

students deserve to understand their respective histories in the classroom, in order to aid in their educational progress. Freedom begins with breaking the silences and allowing people to discover their own truths as supported by Douglass when he asserts, “I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than be false, and incur my own abhorrence” (pgs. 89-90). Educators must think about the ways we can teach our students Douglass’ story, particularly Black males, as a way of making connections with the legacy of literacy and Black masculinity.

In a supposed “post-racial” society with an inaugural Black president and continuous representations of the Black male body via Hip-Hop music and culture, it is important to think about what Black masculinity is and how that connects to patriarchal ideals and traditional notions of masculinity. In his critical text *Black Masculinity and Sexual Politics* (2010), Anthony Lemelle Jr. defines masculinity as “the socially constructed characteristics that society expects for the male sex" (p. 3). To push his working definition further, a question I am exploring implicitly in my work is, how do societal expectations for the “male sex” differ across racial lines? Lemelle asserts, "Major social institutions managed the domination of Black males. The basic four cultural institutions are military, jails, organized athletics, and the entertainment industry. In each case, masculinity is an image of machismo spectacle. In each role, expectations for Black males are to produce a particular brand of masculinity" (p. 52). The exploration of what Black masculinities variously mean to Black men and how they believe (if at all) it has impacted their educational lives is essential to my research.

In conjunction with institutional domination of Black male bodies, one must consider the fear of Black men embedded in the American consciousness and sub consciousness. Adjacent to the Obama era is also an era of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed teenager in Sanford, Florida who

was shot to death on his way home in a gated community in 2012. His killer, a biracial man embodying white male privilege as a result of his white father and light skin, is eventually acquitted in the murder. His supposed fear of a teenage boy ten years his junior justifies his right to "stand his ground" which is a law in Florida that allows one to shoot to kill in self-defense. Even unarmed Black boys are deemed dangerous. In Jody David Armour's thought-provoking work *Negrophobia and Reasonable Racism: The Hidden Costs of Being Black in America* (2000), he defines negrophobia as the fear that Blacks are innately dangerous and violent. He argues that many Americans are in fact negrophobic. The Black male body is continuously painted as one that is dangerous and in need of restriction, which is evident considering the current mass incarceration of Black men in this nation (Alexander, 2012). How may negrophobic mindsets hinder teaching and learning, possibly contributing to high dropout rates among Black men? Is it possible to overcome negrophobia, in a nation that was built upon the institution of slavery and Black inferiority?

Central to Armour's argument is the idea that "the most disturbing source of dread in modern America is Black violence" (2000, p. 12) thereby promoting the need to fear Black people, especially Black men who are products of a patriarchal society. Although I understand his assertion of the way the media and other institutions propagate the criminalization of Black men, I thought his argument did not go further into unpacking how race works as a social construct as well as a profiling mechanism. Too often, people think of racism in individualistic ways. "If I have Black friends then I can't be racist…" Or, "as a white person I don't realize when I am being racist." These popular statements allow people to hide behind alleged ignorance. However, it is possible to educate yourself and become more active regarding race relations, in order to understand how one can claim to be "colorblind" while benefitting from

institutional racism. I think Armour's argument would have been stronger if he talked about the history of the fears of Blacks in a more nuanced way.

Although the word natural disturbs me I think it is "safe" to say that when talking about men, "naturally" the word patriarchy comes to mind. I define patriarchy as male dominated social and organizational structures that were created by [white] men and continue to be upheld by both men *and* women. My emphasis on both genders is relevant here, because I think there is a tendency to believe that if one engages in discussions on masculinity, then one should be a man, and similarly if one engages in discussions on femininity, then one should be a woman. However, I argue that in order to understand masculinity, there must be an understanding of the feminine as well-- or, rather, what is perceived socially and discursively and thus historically constructed as masculine and feminine.

In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004), bell hooks examines several tropes central to prominent concepts of Black male identities such as the concepts of authenticity and coolness. Her positionality as a Black woman writing about Black men helps blur the lines of the masculine and feminine. Further, the idea of authenticity, which refers to essentialized notions of the "strong Black man" calls attention to the politics of representation among many Black men. The major argument in the text is that masculinity implies asserting a kind of agency in the world as a result of what hooks refers to as "white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy." Patriarchal systems that have been in place for centuries continue to impact conceptions of Black masculinities and Black male identities. However, the text fails to discuss the concepts of masculinities and identities. In other words, one cannot think of masculinity or identity as monolithic but as multivalent and ever changing. As a result, some of hooks' writing comes across as essentialist at times, regarding perceptions and performances of Black men in the

United States. Yet still, the idea that Black men are constantly portrayed in the media as ignorant, hypersexual and hyperviolent is a significant thought to consider during my research of Black male subjects. As stated in the text, "At the center of the way Black male selfhood is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the image of the brute---untamed, uncivilized, unthinking and unfeeling" (p. xii). Similar to Armour's concept of negrophobia, hooks touches on these negative portrayals, yet fails to mention how to reframe discourse around Black male subjectivities.

Mainstream narratives about Black male identities are rampant yet limited in their complexities. Too often, the average Black man is thought of as a stagnant, flat character, performing masculinity like a minstrel. What is lacking in many academic discourses about Black men today is the inclusion of literature and film to unpack understandings of Black male subjectivities. Vivian May's "Ambivalent Narratives, Fragmented Selves: Performative Identities and the Mutability of Roles in James Baldwin's *Go tell it on the mountain*" (1996) critically investigates Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. In Baldwin's text, the representation of two young Black boys, John and Elisha, offer multifaceted understandings of Black male identities. It is obvious that 14-year old John is coming to terms with his sexuality, which the narrator insinuates, may be outside of the heteronormative narrative. Elisha, a 17-year old, has more of a masculine identity since he is a leader in the church and is clearly liked by all of the girls who attend the congregation. Baldwin constructs these two characters as a way to push the reader's ideas about what masculinity is and how it is taught within families and religious institutions. May addresses how Baldwin "points to the impossibility of a unified self" (p. 102); in other words, masculinity is not static, nor a fixed notion of manhood. Because humans are always changing, it is impossible to think of identity and the self as something that is permanent.

However, it is evident that dominant social and discursive constructions continue to impact how people see others, as well as how they see themselves; "thus racial, sexual, and gender constructions can all be seen as discursive ideologies which regulate people's actions, and not as presocial or inherent givens" (p.109). May explores how identity is often a masquerade of sorts and it is very difficult to decipher how much of identity construction is determined by the individual or determined by social norms. Is it possible to ever decipher how much of one's identity is "real?" I believe that possible insights from my study can help reframe inadequate representations of Black masculinities in the media, the Academy and in communities nationwide. My study also challenges and interrupts these representations while exploring the ever-changing spectrum of Black masculinities that exist.

To further broaden this conversation, beyond the academic jargon and neat boxes that keep many Black men appearing like puppets in the American imagination, I look to film to unveil the layers of the lives of Black men, particularly in urban communities. Ernest R. Dickerson's film *Juice* (1992) highlights the lives of four Black male teenagers growing up in Harlem, New York. The need to prove that they can survive in an urban environment impacts their schooling experiences and relationships with one other. Each man is intent on constructing a masculine identity that will earn him respect in the community as well as the attraction of women. There are two particularly compelling characters in the film, Q and Bishop. Q has respect because he is intelligent and has an older girlfriend. Yet still, he does not attend school often, so he can hang out with his "Wrecking Crew." Bishop gains respect because he plays the role of a hypermasculine Black male, resorting to violence and rage to intimidate others. Ultimately, the crew is disbanded due to a fatality. The running theme of the construction of Black masculinities in urban environments is what makes this film powerful. Although these

young men were clearly talented and intelligent, their urban realities clouded their decisions. I struggle with the fact that Dickerson highlights some stereotypical aspects of Black male selfhood. The ultimate objective of my dissertation study was to achieve balance in the portrayals of my participants by revealing honest, real and sometimes conflicting representations. My purpose was not the construction of bland victory narratives, but stories that are muddied with the heart of human experiences.

As I ponder the many questions and very few answers that each text seems to lead me to, I find my way back to poetry, because that is how I see the world, in stanzas, verse and rhymes. It is impossible for me to make sense of my research question without poetry. Gwendolyn Brooks' timeless classic "We Real Cool" (1960) paints a portrait of the "cool" factor that is ~~stereo~~typically (strike out intended) associated with Black men. The hypothetical, hypersexual, hyperviolent and anti-intellectual Black man allows us to veer from the real problem, oppressive narratives that stifle multiple truths. In the poem, the speaker identifies a group of Black male youth who have left school to go to the pool hall: "We real cool. We/ Left school…" The persistent theme is the ways that Black male youth adhere to representations of who they are supposed to be and what they can accomplish. It is apparent throughout the poem that the young men feel a sense of hopelessness that explains why the poem begins with the image of a "golden shovel" and ends with the line "die soon." There is a fatality attached to being a Black male in America, which is being explored throughout the poem and similar to the message conveyed in the film *Juice*. Now my brain is haunted by this question: How can poetry be used as a tool to further understand Black masculinities? Poems are constructions of the real and the imagined, the experienced and the inexperienced, the past, present and future. I hope to explore the complexities of my research participants in 2014-- and beyond—in ways similar to how Brooks

managed to depict through poetry in 1960. Poetry will continue to be my entry point into this ongoing conversation with and outside of the research literatures about Black men.

Considering the multiple identities of Black men, connected to historical remnants of slavery to modern day urban schooling inequalities in this nation, it is important to consider the work of C.P. Gause who wrote the article "The Ghetto Sophisticates: Performing Black Masculinity, Saving Lost Souls, and Serving as Leaders of the New School (2005)." The author is a Black male professor who uses Freire's (1970, 1993) notion of the "fractured self" to understand the ways that Black men suffer from duality as both oppressed and oppressor. In other words, individuals who have a history of oppression often embody qualities of the oppressor. From a Freirean perspective, the path to freedom begins by having a holistic education that magnifies the individual's personal history (Freire, 1970, 1993). Gause expands upon this duality by discussing the ways Black masculinity has been constructed through popular culture in which Black men "enacted a Black identity (masculinity) that not only challenged whiteness but also exiled it to the (cultural margins) of Blackness" (p. 19). Although I do believe he has a point with regard to the ways that Black masculinity challenges conceptions of whiteness, I do not agree that it completely managed to exile "whiteness to the margins of blackness." If that were true, there would be no need to challenge whiteness in the first place. Challenging a structural power indicates the dominance of that power and the "fractured self" that exists because of it. In many ways, this representation of Black masculinity in popular culture is similar to "white patriarchy."

The author also investigates how heteronormativity is associated with Black masculinity and the conflicting shades of gray that come along with social constructions of manhood: "[black masculinity] challenges and disturbs racial and class constructions of blackness; it also rewrites

and reinscribes the patriarchal and heterosexual basis of masculine privilege (and domination) based on gender and sexuality" (p. 23). His framing of Black masculinity helps explain the interviews he conducted with young Black men who were high school dropouts or those who were formerly incarcerated. The prevailing message was that none of the young men liked school due to the teachers and educations they received. Each young man revealed perceptions of school that were unanimous: something pushed them out of school. Although the responses he provides from the youth are all lumped together under the title "Young Black Males" which is certainly problematic, their negative feelings toward school reminded me of many of my students whom I taught at the high school level.

bell hooks expands on issues of patriarchy and hegemony and its impact on Black males in her book *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love* (2003). She defines patriarchy as "a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence" (p. 18). In other words, it is impossible to understand the concept of masculinity without understanding the workings of patriarchy.

The author also examines how feminist literature has failed to fully address issues of masculinity, and why this is problematic and further separates men and women. She pushes feminists to incorporate masculinity within feminist studies in order to create a larger space for the understanding of patriarchy and its impact on boys and men and their relation to women. Patriarchal thinking that influences masculinity is not only found throughout families and mass media representations, but also in literature: "Literature for children is just as fixated on furthering patriarchal attitudes as television. There are just a few books with male characters

focusing on boys that challenge the patriarchal norm in any way. Since these books do not abound there is no way to know what impact they might have in teaching boys alternative masculinities" (p. 53). It is important that educational experiences highlight various aspects of masculinity that include self-reflection and mutual respect.

Thinking more about Black masculinity and development, Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940, 2005) captures the life of Bigger Thomas, a young man growing up in Chicago's South Side during the 1930s. Everything about Bigger's life speaks to the impoverished, unjust racial conditions prevalent in Chicago during the Depression era: rundown tenement housing, urban decay, little economic opportunity unless one worked under whites as domestic laborers, etc. The author essentially makes the argument that it is because of Bigger's existence as a young Black man in a racist society that leads him to commit the ultimate crime: murdering a rich white woman in the most gruesome way. Although Bigger's lawyer, a white communist, tries to save Bigger's life pointing out the ways in which his life has been marked from his very birth, his fate is still inevitable.

Considering the role of gender performances and Black masculinities, the pivotal text *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, rap and the performance of masculinity* (2011) by Miles White addresses the performativity of Black masculinity and how hip-hop serves as a way to co-opt this performativity in order to sell a particular brand of Black manhood through mainstream culture. He argues that the fetishization of the Black male body in the media is vital for economic consumption in a capitalist society. White makes valid points about the politics of representation and its connection to Black male identity within hip-hop culture specifically: "Rap music performance's signifying practices may likewise be liberating and subversive, but even so, they rely on fantasies of the racialized Other and idealized tropes of racial deviance in pursuit of

identity, meaning, and pleasure" (p. 30). Although I see the author's point with regard to the representation of Black men in the media and its direct connection to economic gain, I think the author fails to address possible solutions for the reframing of Black masculinity in the media and beyond.

Literacies in the African American Community

I would like to take a moment to identify how I am using the term literacies, which is inspired by the New London Group (1996). A group of scholars representing three continents were concerned about the ways that literacy pedagogy might address the changes in literacy due to increases in globalization, technology and social/cultural diversity. As a result, they came up with the term "multi literacies" which includes "literacy in audio, visual, gestural, spatial, and multimodal design in addition to the standard literacy of linguistic expression. Such literacies will occasion new speculation about the complex interrelation of literacy, technology, thought and society" (Cushman, Kintgen, Kroll & Rose, 2000, p. 5). I agree that literacies can be thought of in multiple ways related to the mind, body and speech. I conceptualize literacies as ways of being, acting, learning and living depending upon particular social and cultural contexts, which is what I will focus on throughout my dissertation.

The New London Group focuses on the ways that "effective citizenship and productive work requires that we interact effectively using multiple languages, multiple Englishes, and communication patterns that more frequently cross cultural, community, and national boundaries" (1996, p. 63). One of my major concerns is, who exactly has to adopt multiple literacies and why? The New London Group proposes that in order for students to navigate a fast-paced, capitalistic economy, they will need to have a firm grasp on multiple literacies, allowing them to balance work, school and home. I cannot help but wonder if these "rules" only

apply to students of color, who may come from communities and families whose languages and dialects are not valued in schools (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). From my own personal lived and institutional experiences, I am often navigating languages constantly as a way to preserve my multiple identities and cultures as opposed to some whose communities/families speak and communicate most in the Dominant Discourse. Although it is clear that the New London Group advocates honoring "different subjectivities- interests, intentions, commitments and purposes- students bring to learning," (1996, p.72), I am wondering how educators can do more than acknowledge multiple literacies? How can we enact literacies in a way that fully embraces the multilayered lives of students? The New London Group does in fact propose a "metalanguage of multi literacies based on the concept of 'design'" (1996, p. 75), where teachers and students can reproduce and transform "forms of meaning" but I am wondering more about how this could possibly reify educational status quos. Teachers, after all, are in positions of power to determine which meanings they believe are valuable in classroom spaces. Thus, I am using the term literacies throughout this work because it has certainly framed my thinking. At the same time, I am posing questions about ways to possibly push my working understanding of literacies further.

Because literacy is such a vital instrument for societal navigation as well as for personal, political, socioeconomic and educational development, it is critical that we continue to expand our conceptions of the term. Why is it that standardized test reports continue to reveal that African American students are underperforming on these exams? Is it because they have low literacy skills and/or is it also because these exams only consider a quite traditional conception of literacy? Or is it because they are not connecting with the literature? I believe that students feel disconnected to the curriculum in schools, due to the lack of culturally relevant pedagogy in

classrooms, leading to substandard schooling experiences. Scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings asserts that culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria: a) students must experience academic success; b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (1995; p. 160). Radical pedagogies such as CRP, committed to serving all students, must also be employed on standardized exams that reinforce the Dominant Discourse (Gee, 1990). The Dominant Discourse refers to languages like Standard English, which are upheld above all others. Students are expected to reproduce trite answers on these exams, which is dehumanizing and degrading. How can African American students begin to see themselves as powerful, intellectual students within institutions that continue to reify educational inequity?

In order to move forward, educators must be willing to revamp the current system that continues to push African American students on the outskirts of the classroom. Yes, students must know Standard English in the world we live in, but students can also use AAVE simultaneously (if in fact they identify with this discourse), in order to have more diverse academic lenses, that may reflect many of their experiences (Smitherman, 1977). Language is only a piece of the literacy puzzle. Students must also be able to read a variety of texts in classrooms, canonical and non-canonical alike, in order to become critically conscious thinkers, learners and doers in the world. In addition, students must also feel comfortable enough to add texts of their own to the curriculum, such as urban fiction, hip-hop and poetry. These are some of the ways educators can begin to expand the notion of literacy, in order to improve the educational lives of African American students in urban communities. Much of this work has been reflected throughout English education over the past ten years (Richardson, 2006; Kirkland, 2011; Winn, 2013).

Scholar Elizabeth McHenry brings the history of African American literacy to the forefront in her groundbreaking book *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002). African American literary societies consisted of groups of people (mostly freed slaves) who were interested in literature and texts of several genres, and wanted to come together to share their thoughts, ideas and writing. This was considered to be a radical act during the nineteenth century, when there were still many Blacks who were enslaved in the south. Focusing specifically on the antebellum north, McHenry traces the history of African American literary practices, disproving many contemporary myths that African Americans never had a history of reading, nor do they care to read. The rich history of the literary societies included participants like Frederick Douglass and scholar/historian W.E.B. Du Bois.

In addition to reading texts, members of the literary societies also wrote texts of their own (poetry, essays and short stories) to share with other members to be critiqued and often published in Black newspapers at the time like *The Liberator* and the *Freedom Journal*. Literary societies created a Black public sphere and scholarly community: "Through their reading and writing, members of these literary societies sought effective avenues of public access…" (p. 18). Students can use the example of African American literary societies to create book clubs of their own, in order to read, write, critique and discuss each other's work. In the age of technology, students have multiple ways of sharing information whether it is virtually, in the classroom or in their communities.

It is significant to note that the literary societies were developed by free Blacks as a means to be considered citizens in the United States. Thus, literacy was used as a crutch for freedom. The ability to read and discuss literary texts were markers for citizenship in the

nineteenth century: “The earliest African American literary societies fulfilled the demands of the vision of democracy that circulated in Jacksonian American; they were schools in which free, northern blacks could learn the skills that were essential to good citizenship” (p. 19). The history of African American literary societies reveals the significance of reading, writing and speaking in Black communities in conjunction with citizenship and humanity. Thinking of the English classroom, this powerful historical fact can be an incentive for student engagement in school, while also encouraging them to use literacy as a tool to explore their history, as well as their lived and future experiences.

Literacy as Power

“I live in a world of other’s words. And my entire life is an orientation in this world, a reaction to other’s words (an infinitely diverse reaction), beginning with my assimilation of them…”
~Mikhail Bakhtin (1986, p. 143).

In order to foster critical consciousness in our students, we must provide them with educational theories that allow them to fully examine themselves and the world around them. One of the most significant educational theories is Freire’s conscientization. In his article, “The Adult Literacy Process as Freedom and Education and Conscientização,” (1970) Paulo Freire, Brazilian educational theorist, argues that the sense of man’s belonging in the world is directly tied to language. Freire insists that reading should not be an alienating process, but one that grounds individuals, while opening up their minds to a specific sense of place in the world.

Freire describes a study that allowed him to work with adults who were considered "illiterate." Instead of choosing the words for his students, he allows the students to bring in words connected to their realities, in order to develop literacy practices that were grounded in critical consciousness. The project had five phases that began with generative words and went through phases of codifications and the breakdown of phonemic families. In just a few days,

people who were considered "illiterate" at the beginning of the study, could write and understand words, while making critical and conscious connections to their everyday lives. It was clear that learning through a critical consciousness lens improved the students' academic success.

Many educators are encouraging "digestive knowledge" in which students are "filled with words the teachers have chosen...It is the profile of a man whose consciousness is 'spatialized,' and must be 'filled' or 'fed' in order to know" (p. 206). We must trust our students' and ways of knowing more so that their education can fully belong to them. Educators should incorporate similar constructivist theories, as a means of building upon what students already know in student-centered spaces. It should never be assumed that students are coming to the table with a blank slate, for as long as they are living day-to-day they have experiences that should be valued in the classroom.

Similar to Freire's exploration of the connection between literacy and the individual, scholar Louise Rosenblatt was fascinated by the way readers interacted with texts. In her seminal book, *The Reader*, *The Text*, *The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978), Rosenblatt investigates how reading is an act that is directly connected to the reader: "The reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of a particular reader" (p. xii.) Therefore, reading is a process that not only involves reading the words on the page, but bringing oneself and one's reality to the text as well. John Dewey's transactional theory is highlighted, as Rosenblatt examines a series of poems, while providing potential ways of reading into the text, depending on the reader. Her idea of the transactional theory of reading is that "the reader looks to the text, and the text is activated by the reader" (p. 18). Having a grasp of this transactional theory can be helpful in developing

culturally relevant literacy practices because students can be taught how they can bring themselves into a text, while recognizing the power of their multiple lenses.

Culturally relevant pedagogy asserts that students must draw on their prior cultural experiences in order to make sense of their education since "culturally relevant teachers utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). Rosenblatt's transactional reading theory can be used in the classroom as a way for students to make critical text-to-self connections that can enhance their relationship to reading, as well as help develop critical and analytical reading skills.

Rosenblatt describes the reading of a text as a particular event drawing on the past and the present moment stating that, "the reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader. The transaction will involve not only the past experience but also the present state and present interests or preoccupations of the reader" (p. 20). Allowing students to bring in their perceptions of themselves, their communities and the world into their reading activities, can encourage positive understanding of the self and critically conscious reading habits. It is only when one can read critically and freely, that one becomes truly invested in the power of literacy in everyday life.

As Rosenblatt was concerned with textual events, linguistic anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath was concerned with what she referred to as Literacy Events. Heath conducted a study to determine the literacy practices of African Americans in a community referred to as Trackton, which she discusses in her article "Protean Shapes in Literacy Events: Ever-Shifting Oral and Literate Traditions" (2001). She investigates the historical distinctions made between oral and literate practices and argues that the oral and the literate exist on a continuum and overlap in their similarities and differences at certain points (p. 461). Essentially, Heath explored the ways

in which the concept of literacy could be reconceptualized based on the social and cultural practices of different groups of people.

Heath coins the term Literacy Event, which incorporates both spoken and written language as a means of examining oral and literate traditions in specific environments. This was the first use of the term in a publication and paved the way for ethnographic research in New Literacy Studies. Heath explores how an "examination of the contexts and uses of literacy in communities today may show that there are more literacy events which call for appropriate knowledge of forms and uses of speech events than there are actual occasions for extended reading and writing" (p. 446). Her study in Trackton, which was predominantly African American, revealed that members of that community mostly participated in literacy events when social occasions in their community called for it, such as: writing prayers in church, going to banks and employment offices, women shopping together for groceries, etc. Overall, Trackton had examples of both oral and literate traditions, but Heath poses a powerful question: "Because they do not frequently and intensively engage in reading and writing extended prose, is their literacy restricted and what has this meant for them in socioeconomic terms? " (p. 463). Although this question is relevant with regard to economic mobility, I think the question educators can begin to ask is: How can we use education to dismantle class structures that limit the diversity of literacy practices? I believe the literacy habits of Trackton residents that employed African American oral traditions, such as evoking the written word (proverbs, biblical quotations, etc.) through speech events, successfully aided in the socioeconomic survival of the people in the community. Based on Heath's question, she recognizes the social privileging of standard literacies such as the reading of extended prose as a more sophisticated and acceptable literacy event. Although we live in a society in which those who can read and write extended

prose are most valued when it comes to economic mobility, does that really imply that those individuals have more "full literacy" skills than the residents in Trackton?

Heath does, however, expose ideological conceptions of literacy (reading, writing and speaking Standard English only) that may hinder the success of working class African American students in school. Language socialization greatly impacts one's schooling experiences, and as long as the majority of teachers nationwide are white and middle class, it is imperative for educators to acknowledge the interdependent relationship between literacy and orality, especially in African American communities.

Heath's work led to that of many educators/scholars of New Literacy Studies. One noteworthy scholar in the field is James Paul Gee. In his article "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction" (2001), he claims that in order to understand literacy, one must understand the social practices that are inextricably tied to it, as well. The author uses the term Discourses to describe "ways of being in the world: they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (2001, p. 526). In other words, one's literacy practices go beyond reading and writing, and also embody cultural practices connected to identity. Gee discusses the distinction between dominant Discourses that are learned and taught in schools, and primary discourses, which are acquired in homes and local communities. Discourse with a capital "D" signifies the language power of in a society and discourse with a lowercase "d" represents those enacted in homes, families, and communities. Gee claims that it is imperative to be fluent in the dominant Discourse in order to avoid social and economic alienation. Although I understand Gee's rationale, I also believe that one form of literacy should not be privileged over another, which is the case in our society. Students in institutional settings are expected to read, write and speak

Standard English exclusively, as a measure of their intelligence and literacy skills. The argument is that once people begin to understand that Discourses are intrinsically tied to identities, there will be room for more fluid conceptions of literacy.

Gee's work highlights the significance of creating multiple modes of literacy practices in the classroom. In order to ensure that schools are not replicating economic and educational status quos that impede the educational progress of African American students, a broader conception of literacy must be acknowledged. According to Gee, "Very often dominant groups in a society apply rather constant 'tests' of the fluency of the dominant Discourses in which their power is symbolized" (p. 528). This sums up what is happening in many schools today. Students are being asked to imitate Standard language and literacy practices as opposed to bringing in elements of their languages and cultural literacy practices that may deviate from the "norm," which is oppressive.

Liberatory classrooms are spaces where student voice is valued and treasured, promoting the reorganization of the literacy paradigm. There are many ways of reading, writing, speaking, learning and being. Using Gee's example, it is crucial that educators consider "liberating literacies that can reconstitute and resituate us" (2001, p. 529). Recognizing literacy as pluralistic is only the beginning of honoring the multiple identities of students. In order to ensure true change and the creation of classrooms that are more democratic, educators must allow students to incorporate both secondary and primary Discourses throughout their educational experiences.

Another renowned New Literacy scholar, who has promoted the concept of multiple literacies, is Brian Street. In his article "Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy" (2001), he discusses the dangers of assuming a single literacy that "imposes assumptions derived from one's own cultural practice onto other people's literacies" (2001, p. 430). Street examines the role of

literacies in identity construction. The argument is that literacies vary according to cultural context and that it is important for all scholars of The New Literacy Studies to take this claim into consideration. There is a distinction between autonomous and ideological models of literacy, which Street defines (2001, 431-4). An autonomous model of literacy is primarily functional and removes the practices associated with it, from social contexts. An ideological model of literacy embraces literacy practices as permanently linked to cultural and power structures in society.

Embracing Street's ideological approach to literacy provides room for a plethora of student identities and literacies. Similar to Gee, he incorporates the ways in which dominant power structures influence literacy and identity construction: "Any ethnographic account of literacy will, by implication, attest its significance for power, authority, and social differentiation in terms of the author's own interpretation of these concepts" (2001, p. 434). Being literate is a political act; therefore, the concept of literacy itself is one that is always in constant tension between the official and non-official. The official refers to reading, writing and speaking Standard English, while the non-official refers to languages such as AAVE and modes of literacy that incorporate hip-hop, spoken word poetry and popular culture. How can the official and non-official aspects of literacy converge so that these labels will no longer be needed? Considering these questions, it is also important to understand that literacy can open up spaces of freedom. Too often, African American students are experiencing oppression in the classroom, forced to repress non-official literacy practices for more official ones, in order to make the grade. However, when is making the grade equivalent to a loss of self?

In order for our students to thrive socially and academically, they must be critically conscious of every aspect of their education that impacts who they are and who they will become. For as Assata Shakur said in her autobiography, "the less you think about your

oppression, the more your tolerance for it grows. After a while, people just think oppression is the normal state of things. But to become free, you have to be acutely aware of being a slave" (p. 262). It is our job to encourage our students not only to be critical of themselves, but also critical of the educations they are receiving and how teaching and learning are impacted by larger sociohistorical, political and racial contexts. We can do this radically, through multiple and expanded notions of literacies.

It is essential to realize the way particular communities use literacy as a tool for social and economic survival. Heath's study of the literacy practices of Trackton residents reminded me of many of my students' families whom I got to know personally during my tenure as a high school English teacher. Many of them did not have books in their homes, which did surprise me. However, I would often see the students and parents reading newspapers, magazines, bills, letters sent home from school, etc. These are also acceptable forms of literacy and aids in the understanding of the self and the world. I do believe that education must value multiple ways of reading, writing, speaking and being; however, it is certainly a difficult social and cultural plane to navigate when it comes down to what schools should honor as literacy practices.

Drawing on New Literacy Studies, I argue that one must take into account social and cultural contexts that inform literacy practices on a daily basis. One text that explores social and cultural concepts of African American literacy, specifically rhetoric, is *Understanding African American Rhetoric*, edited by Ronald L. Jackson and Elaine B. Richardson (2003).

The essays in this anthology examine the history of African American rhetoric and its connection to concerns regarding spirituality, popular culture, and oral literacy. Several of the essays cite the African concept of Nommo, which "propels itself outward into and onto the world of being and doing. The spoken word (released through human agency) is not merely an

utterance skillfully manipulated, but rather an active force and companion to human activity, which gives life and efficacy to what it names or verbally affirms" (p. 85). In this sense, the essays offer multiple understandings of the significance of African American rhetoric in relation to identity and language. For example, there is a fundamental theme about the power of rhetoric to help develop and maintain Black communities. Scholar Maulana Karenga (2003) posits in his essay "Nommo, Kawaida, and Communicative Practice: Bringing Good into the World," that classical African American rhetoric focuses on "the dignity and rights of the human person, the well-being of family and community, the integrity and value of the environment, and the reciprocal solidarity and cooperation for mutual benefit of humanity" (p. 14). Therefore, when considering the concept of African American literacies, it is vital to consider the diversity of community that plays a role in its construction and progression.

One essay in the anthology titled "The Word at Work: Ideological and Epistemological Dynamics in African American Rhetoric" by Richard L. Wright (2003), emphasizes that words are activated within rhetorical events (p. 85). Writing is only as powerful as speaking and vice versa. One form of literacy is not privileged over the other, because it is understood that the spoken and written word are members of the same literary family and stimulate one another, similar to Dewey's transactional theory and eventually Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading.

If we look at language as an ideology, we can begin to understand that no two individuals' ideologies look exactly the same. There may be similarities; however, individuals have their own set of idiosyncrasies that form their identities over time. This rule of thumb also applies to literacy. The ways in which one may engage with reading, writing, speaking and being is like a fingerprint, one of a kind, despite its similarities to other fingerprints. No two literacies

are alike, yet each must be respected and valued in order for education to be an act of freedom. According to Wright, it is essential to acknowledge "culture-specific differences in conceptualizing and categorizing 'the world' " (p. 89). Wright's conclusions connect to the core beliefs of New Literacy Studies which claim that literacy cannot be examined without taking into account cultural and social factors.

What Does the Classroom Gotta Do With It?

"My commitment to engaged pedagogy is an expression of political activism." ~bell hooks

Because my life as a teacher is ongoing and greatly inspired the need to do this work, thinking of the English classroom and education is always living and breathing through my research. Several educators have modeled effective pedagogical strategies that represent an understanding of literacy that is broad and liberatory. Scholar Carol D. Lee discusses a noteworthy study she conducted with African American students, which she discusses in her article "A Culturally Based Cognitive Apprenticeship: Teaching African American High School Students Skills in Literary Interpretation" (1995). Lee highlights the necessity to incorporate cultural texts and experiences representative of Black students in literature classrooms. She describes a study that was conducted in an English classroom that allowed students to use the African American trope of signifying in order to create a culturally responsive learning environment.

Within this study, students that were labeled "novice readers" experienced significant gain in literacy skills after reading excerpts of *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, through a cognitive approach method. The goal of the cognitive approach method is "to make visible and explicit complex thinking strategies that experts use in particular domains. Such complex thinking strategies are mental, that is, they

occur inside the mind and therefore not easily observed by the novice" (p. 613). By the end of the study, it was clear that when students were allowed to draw on cultural representations of their respective histories and selves, they were able to read and think critically and intellectually, indicating that incorporating students' respective literacies can lead to academic success.

Allowing students to read cultural representations of their respective identities does not imply that those are the only books students should read. However, it is noted that these texts must stand alongside canonical texts, as a way to assert their relevance for the teaching of African American students. The goal of this particular model, "was to support the development of a set of both general and task-specific reading strategies that these students could then independently apply to other works of fiction that were not necessarily within the canon of African American literature" (p. 612).

Because students' ways of knowing and being were acknowledged through texts in the English classroom, students became more engaged in school and experienced academic success. Too often, African American students view their home languages and literacy practices as deficient, leading to low self-esteem and academic disengagement. Students who have been traditionally labeled as "underachieving" can and will learn, if their voices are privileged, as reflected in Lee's pedagogical approach: "The study organized a learning environment in which an academically underachieving set of African American adolescents would study samples of extended signifying dialogue as a kind of metalinguistic activity" (p. 612). Once students feel as if their cultures are valued academically, they can achieve at high levels, tackling rich, rigorous, and reinvigorating intellectual work. Lee's work reinforces many of Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy framework discussed in chapter 1.

Akin to Lee's notion of drawing on cultural texts to boost African American student success, scholar Michele Foster argues for the usage of AAVE when teaching African American students in her article "Ebonics and All That Jazz: Cutting Through the Politics of Linguistics, Education, and Race" (1997). Foster reviews the linguistic history of African Americans and provides pedagogical approaches for teaching Standard English, while acknowledging the significance of using AAVE simultaneously, in the classroom. She makes the argument that it is important to stop thinking of AAVE as deficient claiming that regardless of what some may think about African American English, "it is not substandard or deficient, nor does it in and of itself interfere with students' cognitive abilities, as some extremists have claimed" (p. 10). It is possible for English educators to embrace the rich history of African American language and culture.

Foster discusses her experiences in the classroom and the ways in which she employed both Standard English and AAVE fluidly, in order to help students read and interpret texts. She encourages oral and written traditions as a way to expand the range of literacy practices that draw on rhetorical and discourse features of the African American community. She posits, "When I began teaching in all-black urban classrooms, I instinctively drew upon the rich verbal traditions of the African American community" (p. 11). Educators can use Foster's model in order to help students unlearn stereotypes that promote AAVE as marginal and unnecessary in school contexts. This potentially will facilitate the construction of powerful and transformative literacy experiences.

Educators have continued to draw on pedagogical ideas like that of Foster and Lee, to promote student success in predominantly African American urban schools. Building on students' prior knowledge and cultural ways of knowing, being and becoming are at the root of it

all. Alongside the use of AAVE and multiple understandings of literacy, educators began to theorize about the effectiveness of popular culture in the English classroom. Literacy scholars Ernest Morrell and Jeff Duncan-Andrade discuss how using popular culture, specifically hip-hop in their English classroom, led to major student achievement, in their article "Promoting Academic Literacy with Urban Youth through Engaging Hip-Hop Culture" (2002).

The authors hypothesize that as classrooms become increasingly diverse around the nation, it is important for English educators to differentiate instruction to meet student needs. One option for engaging youth is through hip-hop music and culture. The authors describe a classroom unit that utilized hip-hop to teach critical and analytical skills, which students then applied to canonical texts. Students could also use the skills to develop rhetorical/debate strategies, become experts in academic and creative writing assignments, as well as the ability to critique poetry and music. The pedagogical method of the study revealed that "Hip-hop music-as a post industrial art form-was placed alongside other historical periods and poems (Elizabethan, Civil War, Harlem Renaissance, etc.), so that students would be able to use a time period and genre of poetry (hip-hop) they were familiar with, as a lens to examine other literary works..." (p. 90). Encouraging students to acknowledge the lenses and theories they bring into the classroom creates an emancipatory consciousness that allows them to further understand themselves as well as their respective communities and cultures.

Morrell and Duncan-Andrade employed Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy model by incorporating a lens that was philosophically significant to the students, hip-hop, while promoting scholarly thinking: "The unit was consistent with the original goals of being culturally and socially relevant, critically exposing students to the literary canon, and facilitating the development of college-level expository writing" (p. 91). It is evident that urban educators can

effectively use students' experiences and cultural lenses as a way to reimagine English classrooms as spaces where canonical texts and popular culture can coexist, in order to expand perceptions of literacy.

Thinking of literacy as multifaceted, in order to account for multiple identities and cultures, appears to be one key to successful teaching and learning, especially in urban classrooms. Reflecting on one's own literacy practices and its impact on the formation of identity and schooling experiences can be a powerful journey for educators. One scholar who does this effectively is Elaine Richardson in her groundbreaking book *African American Literacies* (2002).

Richardson highlights the diversity of African American language and culture that directly impact oral and written literacy. With regard to identity, Richardson incorporates aspects of her own literacy practices as a Black woman, as well as the literacy practices of African American students she has taught and worked with. She argues that teachers of African American students must use AAVE and Standard English in order to successfully engage students. Pedagogical and theoretical strategies are offered through a culturally relevant teaching and learning model. She asserts that "Literacies is oppositional to an autonomous literacy" (p. 75) evoking the concepts of New Literacy Studies. The term "literacies" suggests that we cannot think of literacy as a monolithic entity, but as a meshing of ways of being and knowing.

As a result, English educators must incorporate and understand multiple literacies in the classroom, in order to foster spaces for multiple and ever-changing identities of students from diverse cultural backgrounds, such as African Americans. According to Richardson "America continues to teach us to accept the status of lower achievement for Black students as the norm. Under the present system, we are set in motion to replicate the paradigm and the results" (p. 6). She successfully constructed a curriculum grounded in African American methodology that was

thorough and culturally relevant. Students were not only successful after taking her course, but they also began to believe in themselves, and in their writing more.

The implication is that we need to dismantle the current educational system that promotes deficit thinking and teaching when it comes to African Americans. We must revamp curriculum to meet the needs of Black students, proving that they can become academically victorious. A dramatic vision, such as this, starts with the power of the words we read, speak, teach and create in the name of educational equity.

As we expand upon the notion of literacies as a multilayered, ever-changing lens, we must also listen to youth voices. Too often, we underestimate youth, when having their input can help funnel radical educational reform. Allowing young people to tell their stories from their perspectives is not only vital for positive identity development, but also allows students to become autonomous in their educational journeys. Scholar Kris Gutierrez successfully uses student voice and writing to demonstrate the notion of literacies. Gutierrez makes the argument that there must be a transformation for determining what counts as learning and literacy in her article “Developing A Sociocritical Literacy in the Third Space” (2008). She introduces her interpretations of the terms “Third Space” (Bhabha, 1994) and “sociocritical literacy”. A Third Space represents a proximal space where "students can begin to reconceive who they are and what they may be able to accomplish academically and beyond" (p. 148). In conjunction, sociocritical literacy refers to a literacy that celebrates the sociohistorical and cultural lives that represent the students.

Gutierrez describes a study she conducted with students at the Migrant Student Leadership Institute (MSLI) at the University of California, Los Angeles. Students were allowed to draw on the past, the present and imagined futures, in order to make connections between

literacy and identity. Samples of student poetry and journal writings are presented, as examples of how creating collective Third Spaces and allowing students to bring in their respective cultures can create influential and intellectual literary communities. Students engaged in literacy practices by telling stories connected to their families and histories, which was essential, since, "school-based literacies generally emphasize ahistorical and vertical forms of learning and are oriented toward weak literacies" (p. 149).

Guiding students to reflect on their personal and cultural stories via literacy practices is grounded in reality and truth, two fundamental elements of the educational process. We cannot assume that students have reflected on their histories, especially since literacy curriculum in urban schools are often ahistorical as Gutierrez mentions. When we reflect on people like Assata Shakur and Frederick Douglass, who used history as a way to understand their sense of place and sense of being, we realize that our students have the power to walk in these gigantic shoes, too.

Continuing in the realm of student voice and the development of literacy, identity and sense of place, literacy scholar Valerie Kinloch describes an influential participatory action research (PAR) project with young people (specifically Black males) in Harlem, in her book *Harlem on our minds: Place, Race and the Literacies of Urban Youth* (2010). The two African American young men that Kinloch focused on in the project, regarding gentrification in Harlem, were active participants in the study: "The chapters, collectively, investigate how the lives and literacies of African American youth in Harlem are affected by public attempts to gentrify the community" (p. 6). The young men documented their lives in Harlem using multiple forms of literacy such as photographs, interviews and student-designed research projects. Kinloch and the students conducted the research process together, following the PAR model. Some parts of the book are actually written by the students, helping to provide a direct understanding of how

student identity was impacted by literacy practices tied to culturally responsive curriculum and the history of Harlem.

What educators can learn from Kinloch is the importance of allowing students to design and conduct research projects that are socially and culturally relevant to their lives. Since the project was grounded in the communities where the young men lived and went to school, it allowed them to critically examine their communities through social, cultural and political lenses. Research comes alive when inquiries are directly connected to the lives and histories of the investigators. As one of the young men named Phillip states in his chapter on gentrification, "I believe it is up to us to make wise decisions on how we live, where we live, and how we live with other people in mind. Do we accept gentrification if it causes displacement of groups and groups people, or do we stand up and seek other solutions" (p. 38).

One way educators can engage students in research projects of their choice is to have them generate questions that are pertinent to their sense of self, sense of place and sense of schooling experiences. Allowing students to come up with questions that are important to them can foster an understanding of self and community that is both freeing and fearless. One method Kinloch suggests is conducting "writing sessions where students learn to pose inquiry questions instead of always being given questions by us. They can be encouraged to revisit and revise their inquiry questions in order to turn them into researchable essay questions/prompts" (p. 55). The art of questioning is central to creating student-centered, liberatory classrooms, where literacy is a journey and not a dominant structure of inequality and white supremacy.

The Intersections Between Black Masculinities and Literacies

Although having a strong grasp of foundational conceptions of literacies and the history of African American literacies is central to my study, I am also looking at specific studies that

have already been conducted on how Black males navigate literacies in school and in their lives. There are a few texts that have been essential in my approach to this work on the connections among literacies, identities and Black masculinities.

Scholar David Kirkland examined the ideological structures that shape reading for young Black men in his article "Books Like Clothes: Engaging Young Black Men With Reading" (2011). Kirkland explores pedagogical literacy practices that help engage Black male youth with reading and self-expression. The study conducted focuses on one young man named Derrick, who thought he despised reading canonical texts, until he reads Homer's *The Iliad* by translating the language into his own dialect, as well as using comic books, to make comparative connections to the text. Because his teacher used pedagogical strategies that differentiated instruction to incorporate multiple literacies, the student excelled during *The Iliad* unit.

When observing the "Collaborative Student Text" Derrick created, it is apparent that he had a nuanced understanding of *The Iliad*, as a result of the culturally relevant approach utilized by his teacher. The text included images of Black men, as well as the use of AAVE to illustrate a few of the scenes in the epic poem. By making *The Iliad* his own, Derrick went from a disengaged student to one who was reading and identifying with canonical texts. As Derrick states in the article, "It wasn't like we were reading even though we were. It was kind of fun; like, I could relate. It took some time trying to figure out what [Homer] was talking about, but I got it when we talked about it and put it in our own language" (p. 205).

Kirkland makes the argument that various social constructions of identities impact how students (specifically Black males in this case) engage with texts. As a result, the underlying theme of the article pinpoints the disconnection between traditional school literacies and Black male identities. Kirkland notes that, "Black males often find school texts and contexts hostile.

Many of them participate in school under conditions of extreme duress, developing what some scholars regard as a healthy but eventually harmful skepticism of the way social institutions, such as schools present knowledge" (p. 204). As educators of the twenty-first century, it is imperative to acknowledge that our students are engaging in literacy acts all the time, whether they are using social media, text messaging their friends or watching music videos. I believe that we, as educators, must use these multimodalities as a means of expanding our perceptions of literacies not only for our students, but also for ourselves. Recognizing the commonality between student and teacher is indispensable in building safe classrooms that use literacy as a tool for critical reflection of the self and the world, as well as for critical actions that will lead to emancipatory pedagogies.

Similar to themes around Black men, literacy and schooling, scholar Vershawn Ashanti Young's seminal text *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy and Masculinity* (2007) is an autoethnography that details his life experiences growing up in Chicago and how he felt forced to perform race, gender and masculinity as a public school student through language and social behavior. He specifically focuses on how language itself serves as a site of tension for Black male identities, particularly because literacy habits such as reading novels and speaking Standard English is typically associated with whiteness.

Young asserts that "because language is often the touchstone for racial performance and consequently for being placed on the imposed identity spectrum, many well-meaning literacy educators who do not wish to impose the burden of racial performance when teaching literacy to Black students have offered code switching as a solution" (xxi). He argues that code switching is a form of racial bias because it forces Blacks to separate their home identities from school

adhering to the continual “burden of racial performance” as he states continuously throughout the text.

Young addresses how literacy serves as a model for racialized and gendered performances and that there is a pervasiveness to perform race, specifically for Blacks. He states that the need to “perform race is pervasive and is a complex problem that needs to be addressed, particularly where Black males and literacy are concerned” (xviii). Young’s study is similar to mine in that he works with perceptions of Black masculinities and racial performances and its connections to literacy. He also incorporates his own poetry specifically about his own educational and personal experiences. Similarly, his main argument is about connections among race, literacy and identities.

The gaps in his work include an essentialized explanation of how Black men navigate school systems. He claims, “Black males seem to fare worse because they resist most the performances of race and gender that schools appear to demand” (xiii). Although I can understand the rationale behind that point, I also believe it panders to stereotypical representations of Black men as students who automatically reject school environments. I agree that there are schooling structures in place that are racialized, which may push many Black men out. Yet still, there are deeper and more complex explanations for Black male experiences in schools and I think his work does not quite address those nuances.

A Critical Race Theory approach could have added more layers to Young’s work. Speaking of CRT, scholar Garrett Albert’s article “Beyond Love: A Critical Race Ethnography of the Schooling of Adolescent Black Males” (2010) examines the experiences of Black boys at a school referred to as City High School (CHS) and how their experiences are impacted by stereotypical perceptions of Black males. The central concept is that Black boys are "beyond

love" which is based on the CRT framework that one cannot fully love something one does not personally identify with. According to CRT scholar Richard Delgado, "we cannot identify with, or love anyone who is too different from us" (p. 55). The narrative research conducted by the author explored the narratives of Black males at CHS, particularly their perceptions of how they saw themselves in comparison to how others saw them, which ties nicely into Young's concept of the burden of racial performance. It was evident that many of the teachers, administrators and other students viewed the Black male students stereotypically, leading to the hindrance of positive teaching and learning experiences for the Black boys that would enhance their academic and social lives.

What I appreciated about this study was hearing the narratives of the Black males, since their voices often go unheard in schools: "As it relates to CHS, the rejection of the stories of Black males students creates a situation at the school where rather than viewing the marginalization and exclusion of these pupils as a reversible situation if addressed appropriately and vigorously, many view their situation as predictable..." (p. 134). The continuous marginalization of Black males in schools contributes to stereotypical portrayals of Black male achievement. How can one achieve in settings that undermine the subjectivities of that individual? The notion of an ontological blackness, which Victor Anderson (1995) describes as "Blackness that whiteness created," (p.13) reminds me of Du Bois' double-consciousness theory. The way Blacks perceive themselves in this nation is almost always connected to the way they are perceived by whites. I often wonder if it is possible, or if it ever will be possible for Blacks to see beyond "the veil?"

What I found to be limiting about this study was a limited amount of information about the boys' narratives. Every now and then there was a quote or two from the narratives of the

boys, however, I think this study could have employed more of a CRT framework by incorporating more of the boys' voices. I understand that as a researcher, one has to pick and choose which voices will be used and how much of the voice will be used in order to convey a particular message. However, the counterstory element of CRT (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) calls for research that looks and sounds different from the norm. Although I think the author created a solid argument for the ways in which black boys at CHS were "beyond love," I wish there was a part of the study in which the boys could have had an opportunity to discuss CRT itself and tell their stories in a way that did not seem overly structured.

One area that I am aware plays a role in my work but is not the primary focus of my dissertation study is class. Most of my experiences and work thus far have dealt with students from the working class. Obviously, it is almost impossible to have transparent discussions of race without careful consideration of class. Because many studies focus on working class experiences of Black males, it is also important to consider how Black men of different classes experience school. How are the experiences of Black middle class males similar or different to black poor and working class males? Scholar Quaylan Allen's article "Racial Microagressions: The Schooling Experiences of Black Middle-Class Males in Arizona's Secondary Schools" helped me further consider the role of class in the schooling experiences of Black males.

The central argument of the article is that middle class parents have more "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1986) which helps counter negative perceptions of their children in schools. In other words, research shows that Black males are often discouraged from high achieving tracks and encouraged to do vocational work. However, Black middle class male students documented in the article had parents that pushed for their academic success, eventually leading to better schooling experiences for their children. Thus, Black middle class males (in Arizona for

this study) were not exempt from experiencing stereotypical perceptions of their capabilities in school. However, the strength of their parental capital, helped impact the outcome of their schooling experiences: "The privilege of class and the access to certain social and cultural capital may have provided their parents the ability to dilute the impact of racism on these Black middle-class male students academic capabilities" (p. 126). I think the word "dilute" does not accurately describe the impact of parents with cultural capital upon their children. I would use the word "counter" as a way of expressing how the parents pushed against the institutional status quo, in order to protect their sons. Racism is so endemic to this nation that I do not believe it is impossible to "dilute" it in any way possible.

I found the focus on racial microaggressions through CRT fascinating: "At its axis, CRT analysis invariably uncovers how race mediates the manner in which people of color experience subordination through social and institutional racism" (p. 126). Pierce, Carew, Peirce-Gonzalez & Wills (1978) define microaggressions as "... subtle, stunning and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of blacks by offenders" (p. 66). The study describes how educators in Arizona secondary schools often employed racial microaggressions when interacting with Black boys. As a result, many of the students in the study experienced feelings of invisibility in school, due to stereotypical expectations of Black males projected onto them by educators. In my study, I also focus on how students remember how their teachers treated them and the rationale behind why. Considering that my research is with Black males whose teachers were mostly white, there is no denying the racial component that is bound to reveal itself in the data.

Although the study provided ample explanations of cultural and social capital and the ways in which Black middle class males experienced racism via microagressions, I thought the study did not do a clear enough job defining what was meant by class. The definition provided

by the author seemed vague, "middle-class was determined by their (parents) responses to initial demographics survey" (p. 128). Allen also expressed that both middle and working class parents took part in the survey, however, he did not compare and contrast the experiences of the Black working class males versus the Black middle class males, which would have been pivotal to his argument that all Black males experience the same racial microaggressions regardless of class. I agree that all Black males experience racial microaggressions regardless of class, which is why I chose not to particularly focus on this aspect throughout my study. However, I do acknowledge its relevance when necessary and realize that there is a specific role class plays in accordance with race and schooling.

Going back to understandings of literacies and Black males, current literacy pedagogies continue to reveal that popular culture narratives often motivate students. Quite often, students do not have enough opportunities for culturally relevant teaching and learning experiences. A study by scholar Jean M. Staples described in the article “Hustle & Flow: A Critical Student and Teacher-Generated Framework for Re-authoring a Representation of Black masculinity” (2008) examines how an after-school literacy program allowed Black male students to co-construct the framework for learning. This framework entailed the re-authoring of stereotypical representations of Black masculinity often portrayed through popular culture narratives. The author defines re-authoring as "a self-reflective process of naming and ascribing personhood" (p. 380). What I appreciate about this study is the way the author carved out what Michelle Fine (1997) describes as the "not yet" spaces for students to learn in a way that was comfortable as well as academically rigorous. The students evaluated a plethora of popular culture narratives, particularly the film "Hustle and Flow" in order to understand the multiple layers of Black masculinities. According to the author, popular culture narratives include "films, television

programs, Internet websites or popular periodicals" (p. 381-382). I also like the concept of re-authoring oneself as a sort of counternarrative to an essentialized self, which is the goal in my own study.

The students took on a number of roles in order to engage in the process of re-authoring. Some of these roles included "gazers, listeners, or recorders" (p. 383). The researcher incorporated multiple methods pertaining to New Literacy Studies that highlight "the range and variation of literacies, as well as the multiple contexts in which they occur, and the communities of learning that are built as a result of them" (p. 379). Expanding notions of literacy for these students who were labeled "disengaged" in their traditional school setting, helped create a sincere and transformative learning community. By the end of the study, it was clear that these so called disengaged students became more connected with literacy in an after-school setting, once they had a more culturally responsive pedagogical framework.

What I learned from this study that will aid in my own work, is that it is possible for a woman to engage in topics of masculinity with men, if a safe space is provided that allows participants to feel safe. Staples also employed elements of Critical Black Feminist Epistemologies in order to get an understanding of student perceptions of gender and sexuality. I believe that creating this safe space in my own study through CRT, poetry and portraiture is what helped gauge the layered identities that inform and shape Black masculinities.

Of course this conversation is not over, nor will it ever be “complete.” However, I believe that my explorations of the intersections among Black masculinities, literacies, identities and pedagogies in the English classroom, might be reflectively thought provoking as my work is grounded in the lives of Black men. These hopes are not formulaic concoctions of my

imagination, but rather my musings and understandings of the texts that aid my vision before, during and after the research process.

Chapter 3
Theoretical/Conceptual Framework & Methodology

In this chapter, I describe how I used the qualitative method of portraiture to examine, compose and offer partial portrayals of the educational lives, literacies and masculinities of adult Black men. I describe my decision to use portraiture as a research method along with my interdisciplinary theoretical/conceptual frameworks, which include Critical Race Theory and the concepts of masculinities, literacies and identities in order to research the possible connections among the educational, personal, political and gendered narratives of my participants.

Before I delve into the origins of Critical Race Theory (CRT) it is important to start at the root, which is critical theory that emerged from a group of German theorists collectively known as the Frankfurt School. Overall, the goals of critical theory aim to both critique and change society simultaneously. One of the primary beliefs of critical theory is that all human affairs are socially constructed, "humanly determined and interpreted, and hence subject to change through human means"(Gibson, 1986, p. 4). Critical theory aims to promote enlightenment that takes into account "sociocultural, political, and economic forces that shape our consciousness and identity" (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 128). The combination of social constructions paired with structural forces that impact individual identities and experiences are the tenets central to critical theory. Similarly, the intricate workings of power, hegemony and culture were significant philosophical topics to early critical theorists and certainly remain relevant to critical theorists today. (Gibson, 1986; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000).

Critical theory also focuses on the distinctions between a dominant and subservient class and asserts that "society is orchestrated in such a way to make the dominant class maintain their

hegemony and the subservient class maintain their oppression" (Palmer & Maramba, 2011, p. 441). As such, the workings of class and the reproduction of the status quo through economic inequality are an integral aspect of critical theory. Overall, critical theory focuses on several aspects of power, class, social structures, social constructions and how these elements impact individual identities and life experiences. More importantly, "critical theory emphasizes transformation to promote new truth for individuals and society" (Gibson, 1986; Kincheloe, 2001). My research specifically draws on the concept that the subject of critical theory is "a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups" (Horkheimer, 1937, 1975, p. 211). In other words, understanding how an individual makes sense of the various communities, institutions and realities one must navigate, paints a critical and complex portrait of one's life.

CRT developed as a result of critical theory and legal scholarship in the 1970s with the early work of Derrick Bell (African American) and Alan Freeman (white) who were very disturbed by the slow progress of racial reform in the United States (Delgado, 1995, p. xiii). CRT initially provided analyses of race and racism from a legal point of view. Since its inception it has extended to other disciplines, such as education. CRT is an "important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction and construction: deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 9). As such, CRT speaks to social injustices throughout society as witnessed via so-called "colorblind" policies and educational disparities. Within the CRT framework, there are strands of postmodernism which emphasize "the idea that categories we consider natural or merely representational are actually socially constructed in a linguistic economy of difference" (Crenshaw, 1993, p. 244). However, it is clear that CRT and

postmodernism are very different at the same time and have different goals. For instance, although postmodernism emphasizes a "politics of difference and otherness" it does not concretely tackle the politics of race. Although I do agree that categories of race and gender can be fluid, there is still a fixedness that impacts every individual, regardless of the theories that argue otherwise. I believe "our notions of race (and its use) are so complex that even when it fails to 'make sense' we continue to employ and deploy it. I want to argue then that our conceptions of race, even in a postmodern and/or postcolonial world, are more embedded and fixed than in a previous age" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 8).

Closely related to postmodernism is poststructuralism although, "poststructuralism is a theory of knowledge and language, whereas postmodernism is a theory of society, culture and history" (Agger, 1991, 112). Poststructuralism pushes against fixed and final meanings and one of the leading poststructural writers, Derrida (1987) believed that "every definition 'deconstructs itself'---that is, it tends to unravel when one probes deeper into its foundational assumptions and literary gestures" (Agger, 1991, p. 112). As such one cannot assume any finality in poststructuralism or "knowing" anything fully. That ties in neatly with postmodernist conceptions of social constructions and the political and cultural process of identity formations and subjectivities. For this reason, I am more drawn to CRT because I agree that, "while the descriptive project of postmodernism of questioning the ways in which meaning is socially constructed is generally sound, this critique sometimes misreads the meaning of social construction and distorts its political relevance" (Crenshaw, 1993, p. 244). Yes, categories such as race and gender are socially constructed, however, those categories have political significance in our society and reflecting on how these categories are navigated is vital to my work. However, postmodern theories have been very helpful in "thinking about the way power has clustered

around certain categories and is exercised against others" (Crenshaw, 1993, p. 244). Therefore, the heart of my proposed research is not ignoring the tensions that arise from having categories (race, class, gender) in the first place, but the specific values attached to them, thus leading to social hierarchies. My goal in this work was not to make the case for my choice of CRT as a theoretical/conceptual framework as opposed to more traditional theories, but in acknowledging (briefly) the tensions that may implicitly arise in the data presented.

"Just what is CRT and what is it doing in a nice field like education?" asked Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) in an article that addressed the ways CRT can be used to address educational problems often faced by students of color. Critical Race Theory (CRT) explores the connections among conceptions of race, identity and power, asserting that in order to critically talk and write about race, one must accept that racism is a permanent component of American life. According to Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995), racial inequalities "are a logical and predictable result of a racialized society…" (p. 48). Although I do agree with the permanence of race in this nation, I also understand that race "has fluid, decentered social meanings that are continually shaped by political pressures" (Calmore, 1992). With respect to my research, it is important to reflect upon how Black men are racialized in educational discourses and spaces. Considering the fact that almost "63% of teachers in public schools are white women" (Toldson, 2011), reflecting on how Black men are racialized and perceived is relevant to examining widening "achievement gaps" and inequities within U.S. education.

I am thinking of scholar Garret Albert Duncan's interpretation of the concept "Beyond Love" (2012) inspired by CRT scholar Richard Delgado, which asserts that anyone regarded as Other will always be seen as outside of a Dominant mainstream culture and is therefore unable to be treated justly and holistically throughout societal institutions. (Delgado, 1995; p. 55)

Considering that Black males are often "constructed as a strange population, that is, as a group with values and attitudes that are seen as different, their marginalization and oppression are understood as natural and primarily of their own doing" (Duncan, 2002, p. 140), it is important to think about how some Black men navigate individual and institutional spaces. CRT is a lens to make sense of oppressive ideologies that I anticipate will surface in the research, as it "exposes the historical, ideological, psychological, and social contexts in which racism has been declared virtually eradicated while racially subordinated peoples have been chastised for relying too much on racial 'victimology.' (McWhorter, 2000)" (Parker & Lynn, 2002, p. 150).

Critics of CRT (Subotnik, 1998) argue that this embodiment of a so-called victimized mindset while offering no practical solutions for "ending racism" proves that the theory does more harm than good. Drawing on the historical context of how the United States came to be, with regard to enslaved Africans over the course of a few centuries, how can one not see that racism is central to American life? Of course my positionality as a Black woman living in this Black body certainly paints the pictures I see and experience on a daily basis. CRT asserts that the experiential knowledge of people of color is vital to understanding racial inequality. Ladson-Billings (2000) claimed that, "CRT asks the critical qualitative researcher to operate in a self-revelatory mode, to acknowledge the double (or multiple) consciousness in which she is operating… All of my 'selves' are invested in this work-the self that is researcher, the self that is a parent, the self that is a community member, the self that is a Black woman" (p. 272). Therefore part of using CRT as a framework is combined with my racialized and gendered life experiences while acknowledging postmodernist ideas that "reject traditional legal realist and conceptualist epistemologies and rely instead on the importance of perspective and context in assessing truth claims" (Parker & Lynn, 2009, p. 152).

Hayman (1995) noted the similarities between postmodernists and Critical Race Theorists in that "both reject the assertion that established doctrine and texts have objective truth and universal meanings" (Parker & Lynn, 2009, p. 152). With respect to that point, although I am a Black woman who conducted and constructed research about Black men, I also understand that race is constantly deconstructed and reconstructed, due to postmodernist theories. However, CRT deviates from postmodern beliefs in "the insistence that justice cannot be merely theoretical. Furthermore, it must be informed by and realized in lived experiences, and while the struggle for racial justice may offer no prospects for immediate or ultimate success, the struggle has to be continuous" (Hayman, 1995, p. 70).

One of the hallmark themes of CRT is the distinction between idealists and realists within the framework. Idealists believe that "racism and discrimination are matters of thinking, mental categorization, attitude, and discourse" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 21). In this respect, idealists identify with race as a social construction that can be changed by impacting systems through scholarly work and within education through teaching and learning. Realists on the other hand believe that "racism is a means by which society allocates privilege and status. Racial hierarchies determine who gets tangible benefits, including the best jobs, the best schools… Members of this school of thought point out that antiblack prejudice sprang up with slavery and capitalists' need for labor" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 21). There is a clear focus on privilege and economic opportunity from a realist standpoint. My research approach falls in between these two schools of thought. One the one hand, I understand that race is a social construction and not a biological reality. As such, scholars, activists and educators alike have the ability to transform racist mindsets and ideologies. Yet still, I also understand the deeper systemic and economic realities of racism, which continue to disenfranchise and render invisible

people of color through education, housing and jobs to name a few. I embrace a "middle ground that sees both forces, material and cultural, operating together so that race reformers working in either area contribute to a broad program of racial reform" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 25).

Because I focused on masculinities, I constantly thought about how my choice to identify as a Black/woman/poet/writer/researcher impacted the work. I enacted deliberate self-reflexivity through continuous journal writing, as a means of recognizing that I was always present in the work. Because being reflexive and being reflective is often conflated, I want to note that I draw on Elisabeth Chiseri-Strater's (1996) distinction between the two which posits: "to be reflective does not demand an 'other' while to be reflexive demands both an other and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny" (p. 130). Even within my writing throughout the research process, sometimes I recognized that "writing is always partial, local, and situational, and that our Self is always present, no matter how much we try to suppress it-but only partially present, for in our writing we repress parts of ourselves, too" (Richardson, 1994, p. 930). However, I also believe that writing revealed the unconscious parts of myself, which lead to powerful ways of conducting self-reflexive-research. I was able to see my biases and assumptions more clearly because of my reflexive approach. In that sense, "self-reflexivity brings to consciousness some of the complex political/ideological agendas hidden in our writing" (Richardson, 1994, p. 936).

Thinking more about the idea that "masculinity studies is dedicated to analyzing what has often seemed to be an implicit fact, that the vast majority of societies are patriarchal and that men have historically enjoyed more than their share of power, resources, and cultural authority" (Adams & Savran, 2002, p. 2), making sense of my role as a Black/woman/poet/writer/researcher throughout this journey encouraged me to gauge the male-

centeredness of my research, while working with and writing about how Black men (re)membered their experiences in urban schools. I understand that my research participants possibly perceived me as "feminine", based on some of the things they said, which is important to consider. However I do believe that "feminine or masculine natures are not something people are born with. They are produced through the discourses of femininity and masculinity of a given way of thinking, and the effects of these discourses" (Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002; pg. 90). With this in mind, I challenged my assumptions throughout the research process as a woman working with a small group of men, while keeping in mind that this work was more about my participants than it was about me.

As a way to work through various aspects of identities and masculinities in addition to race and gender, I used intersectionality as a way to avoid essentializing my participants. One can say that "Intersectionality, or interaction of multiple identities and varied experiences of exclusion and subordination, provides a suitable framework to examine the experiences of Black males because it not only centers race at the core of its analysis, but also recognizes and examines other forms of oppression and identity markers, namely, class and gender, which have important implications for Black males" (Howard, 2013, p. 39, Patterson, 1995). I believe that exploring and analyzing the intersecting patterns of race and gender that shape the multiple dimensions of Black men's experiences contributed to more holistic qualitative research practices.

Intersectionality also fostered a space to write about race that did not "reinsribe its fixed and essentialist positionality" (Weseen & Wong, 2003, p. 40). I agree that race does matter because it "structures interactions, opportunities, consciousness, ideology and the forms of resistance that characterize American life… It matters in shaping the social location of different

groups in contemporary society" (West, 1993; Andersen, 1996, p. ix). However, considering that race (although a social construct) does exist and was significant in the participants' lives, it was important for me to unpack both race and racism, in a way that highlighted seemingly contradictory and fluid narratives.

I also used the concept of rememory (Morrison, 1987), which is central to the novel *Beloved* and implies that the past and the present are always intertwined and although we may attempt to forget certain elements of our past, it is always with us. Moreover, there is a recreation of the self that happens when one honestly reflects on past experiences. Sethe, the protagonist who is haunted by her memories as a slave describes rememory in the following passage:

> I used to think to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place--the picture of it--stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened (p. 88).

Sethe's depiction of rememory emphasizes the idea that memories never completely die, even if the individual forgets. In fact, memories continue to impact an individual's way of seeing the world. Using this concept fostered reflections and memories to serve as additional tools to investigate the layered experiences of the men.

Meeting Portraiture for the First Time

When I first stumbled upon Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot's *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (2007), the Picasso-like image on the cover along with the word science confounded me. I automatically questioned how this text could possibly help me conduct qualitative research.

Again, this was only based on the cover and the title. As I began to read the text, I realized that portraiture as a methodology, spoke to my identities as a poet who desired the need to create images through words and rich descriptions. More importantly, in order to create holistic and captivating stories, the combination of the scientific with the creative is one that I believe was vital for examining the lives of my research participants. As Lawrence-Lightfoot expresses early on in the text, "the telling of stories can be a profound form of scholarship moving serious study close to the frontiers of art in the capacity to express complex truth and moral context in intelligible ways" (p. 11).

One of the most attractive facets of portraiture was the ability to find myself inside of the work, which was helpful during the research process. I was able to practice self-reflexivity by writing journal entries that documented how I was thinking and feeling before and after my conversations with participants, as a way to show my judgment, fears, biases and meanderings. I was also open and honest about my research process during my conversations with the men. I understand that "most researchers use reflexivity without defining how they are using it, as if it is something we all commonly understand and accept as standard methodological practice for critical qualitative research" (Pillow 2003, p. 175). As a highly reflexive researcher, my process entailed thinking of my own subjectivity and how "who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel affected data collection and analysis" (Pillow, 2003, p. 176). However, my vision of self-reflexivity did not end there, for it can certainly be "considered at best self-indulgent, narcissistic, and tiresome at worst, undermining the conditions necessary for emancipatory research" (Kemmis, 1995; Patai, 1994; Pillow, 2003, p. 176). During the research process I practiced what I consider f*ull* self-reflexivity as a process that pushed me to challenge my

assumptions, while constructing research narratives that problematized social constructions of race and gender and how that played out in educational contexts.

Because each of the participants was aware of my poet identity, I shared poetry I wrote about them during the research process, which I conceived of as crossing personal and political boundaries as a researcher. Davis asserts in chapter two of *The Art and Science of Portraiture* that Lawrence-Lightfoot's portraiture crossed the lines that traditionally separate science and art and forged a new territory in which artistic elements were intrinsic to both the process and the product of research methodology" (p. 21). I am thinking about what it means as a researcher to see oneself as interior to the work, but certainly as an external authority that has the "power" to tell the stories in his/her own way?

In her award-winning book *The Good High School* (1983), Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot provides complex portraits of six high schools. The underlying message, which is connoted in the title, is that we can always find the good in any situation. When thinking of educational research, there is a surplus of victory narratives or tragic narratives that only focus on what is wrong with education, especially when it comes to public schools. What I found powerful about this particular study is that each school had strengths and complicated weaknesses tied to the personal and political. It is impossible to read this text and have one perspective of any of the schools, which is what makes portraiture such a revelatory and multi-faceted research method. In fact, the combination of the scientific and the creative have the ability to bring new insights to the forefront, as "portraits tell you about parts of yourself which you are unaware, or to which you haven't attended" (p. 5). I was able to see things in my participants that I believe they may not have seen in themselves, as a way of creating research that is not merely a report of evidence

but a mirror of intellectual and theoretical messiness, which is often hidden, in educational research.

Although being a portraitist allowed a "measure of freedom from the traditions and constraints of disciplined research methods" (p.13), the focus needed to create compelling narratives required "empathetic regard, full and critical attention, and a discerning gaze" (p. 6). As a poet-researcher, I found this method most appealing to my artistic eye, while pushing me to think outside of what I believe I already knew.

A key idea in the text that really pushed my thinking of portraiture as a research method, was exploring a research participant's particular lived experiences from the inside out. It is easy to see something one-dimensionally, but how does the researcher effectively get to the core of the research questions? Similar to a painting that has many contours of colors and textures, working with human participants requires one to see what is not only revealed in the painting itself, but what lies beyond the frame. I was able to see my participants from the inside out because they felt comfortable sharing many pieces of their lives with me. This is further explained in the following chapter.

Why Portraiture

I have always leaned more towards ethnographic approaches to research because these are closely tied to my personal and ethical beliefs. Portraiture is rooted in the tradition of ethnography, while providing more fluid constructions of identities and storytelling. While grounding itself in ethnographic inquiry, portraiture allows a central voice for the researcher. Because the nature of my work forced me to question my role in the research and the rationale behind that, the centrality of the researcher was essential to my dissertation. I am aware that this is one of the main criticisms of portraiture which claim that portraits are only artifacts "of a

constructed reality in the mind of the *artist-researcher* who embeds the story within a context and centers around selected and specific speakers who sing the designated songs" (English, 2000, p. 25). One can argue that every researcher constructs specific narratives, regardless of methodology and criticism with regard to the "politics of vision" (Callen, 1995, p. 112) can be equally applied to any research method. My goal was to be a transparent qualitative researcher who was aware that the work is my interpretations of my participants' narratives.

Because many of us are conditioned to believe that science and art cannot coexist in a space that is critical and transformative, many hold on to traditional approaches to research, in fear that rigor and so-called objective inquiry will dissipate. However, the researcher can never be truly objective. Because this is a qualitative study, my goal was not to strive for objectivity but multiple truths as expressed through the lived experiences of a select few.

I did not choose portraiture because I believed the method was without any flaws. In fact, I worried that Lawrence-Lightfoot's focus on "goodness" through portraiture due to many of the pathological approaches to research by social scientists may have the power to blur what are clear societal problems. Yet still, I think it is a unique method since it not only challenges notions of what can be considered academic research, it also allows one to weave stories (interpreted and represented by the researcher) together in fluid and nuanced ways, providing multiple perspectives and realities.

Because Critical Race Theory was my primary theoretical lens, I found portraiture to be complimentary to its interdisciplinary nature. Within portraiture, there is a merging of the researcher and participants that happens in a way that attempts to decenter one dominant voice with a blending of perspectives. At the same time, within portraiture, it is important for the portraitist "to sketch herself into the context. The researcher is the stranger, the newcomer, the

interloper—entering the place, engaging the people, and disturbing the natural rhythms of the environment—so her presence must be made explicit, nor masked or silenced" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 50). Similar to portraiture, "in CRT, the researcher is central, which likewise involves recognition of the unique qualities that researchers of color bring to their research and recognition of a researcher's 'self' as inseparable from the research" (Chapman, 2007, p. 158). Because I continuously interrogated my position as a Black/woman/poet/writer/researcher before, during and after the research process, portraiture served as the best choice in conjunction with my theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

Research Design

The following research matrix captures how I conceptually saw the work. I chose to represent the research visually by the use of a circular matrix because the work is ongoing and in process. At the center of the chart are my qualitative method and my primary theoretical framework (CRT). Surrounding this method/framework are the ingredients that contributed to a CRT/portraiture recipe that included: Black masculinities, poetry as research, literacies and identities. The concepts that are not incorporated into this flow chart are intersectionality and rememory and there is a rationale. Intersectionality is constantly evoked through the work due to the layers of connections I explored throughout the data, thus it is implicitly always there and I would argue this is the case for any portraiture study that emphasizes the many nuances and contexts that shape and reshape an individual's life. Similarly, because the participants recalled their experiences in NYC public schools and other personal occurrences throughout their lives connected to Black masculinities, there was a constant process of rememory and reconstruction of self happening throughout the research process, thus rendering rememory an implicit research factor, as well.

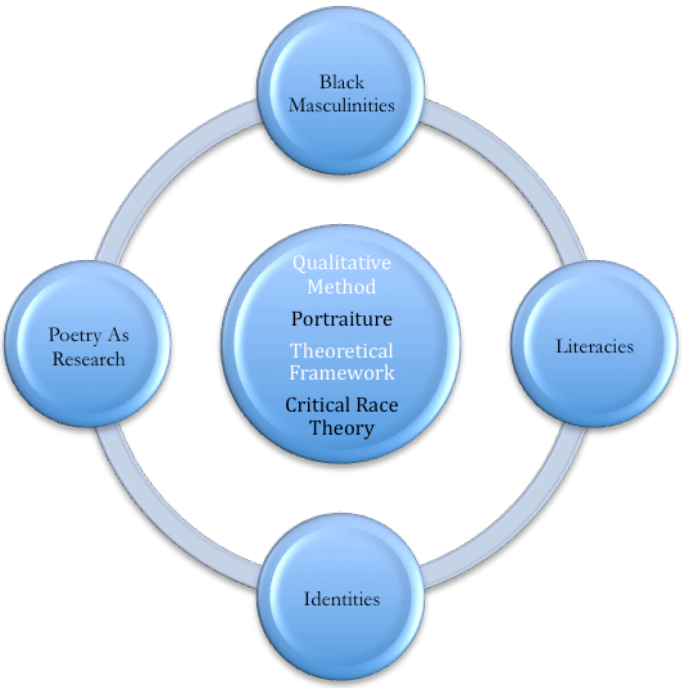

Figure 3.1- Research Matrix

I explored the former public high school experiences of Black men in urban New York City schools through the methodological/theoretical intersections of portraiture, poetry and Critical Race Theory. (Solarzano &Yosso, 2002). My love of Black men is where I began as a portraitist, poet and Critical Race Theorist. As Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) states in *I've Known Rivers: Lives of Loss and Liberation*, "For a portraitist to see her subject clearly, she must fall in love. This love has many dimensions: respect, advocacy, intimacy, and admiration, and the curiosity and skepticism required to penetrate layers of image toward essence. This love allows for both connection and challenge, identification and scrutiny" (p. xv). My love continued with the incorporation of poetry. As a poet-researcher it was important for me to paint a picture of each man's former schooling life with a critical eye, while using poetry to make sense of what I saw, heard and felt during the process. I truly believe that "observations about poetry as a means to enlarge understanding, resist clear undemanding interpretations, and move closer to

what it means to be human elucidates the reason some researchers use poetry as a means of representing research" (Faulkner, 2009, p. 16). Portraiture and poetry complimented each other because each sought to uncover the silences of everyday life through the merging of science and art. Similarly, a Critical Race Methodology "offers space to conduct and present research grounded in the experiences and knowledges of people of color" (Solarzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 23). The "intersection of poetry and social science research is a challenge to dominant discourses inside and outside of the academy and poetry reminds us that everything is constructed in language; our experiences are all epistemologically and ontologically connected composed and understood in words, our words and others' words" (Leggo, 2008, p. 166).

Based on my experiences as a high school English teacher, I always thought about how I could make my curriculum more relevant to my students' lives, while encouraging many of my Black male students to examine notions of their own masculinities in the classroom. Some of my Black male students began to explore their identities by choosing texts that allowed them to feel safe, welcomed, and more critical of their educational and personal lives. During this teacher journey, I realized that the national discourse about Black male students, although seemingly factual, was wrong. All the Black males I taught *wanted* to learn once given an opportunity to safely do so, without anyone questioning their intellectual capabilities due to mainstream stereotypes. My dissertation study seeks to push against "conceptual and theoretical frames that are centered on a discourse of Black males being endangered, extinct, or at risk" (Howard, 2013, p. 19) that fail to address structural and institutional forms of oppression.

I recruited four Black men aged 20-30 through social networks (Facebook/Twitter), and the Teachers College "My TC page" as a means of channeling multiple networks of people, in order to offer a more nuanced understanding of how these particular men (re)membered their

secondary schooling experiences and how they believed it has affected (if at all) their lives (personally, educationally and politically) today. I sought after men of various experiences and identities who attended urban public high schools in NYC as I was interested in partially understanding where they are now in their lives. Men were selected by their interest in the project and responses to the reason(s) why they wanted to be a part of the study. I particularly searched for individuals who enjoyed talking about their respective life histories and I encouraged (re)memory with my participants in order to gain an understanding of how they perceived their various positionalities as former Black men in NYC urban public schools. Each participant was asked to sign a consent form before the research began, as a way to remain transparent and ethical about the process. Men were given the document ahead of time so they could consider whether or not they agreed to the parameters of the research. We also met in-person to discuss the consent form.

Portraiture's ethnographic foundation served as a means to encourage the examination of the situated lives of the men, as they recalled their experiences in secondary public school settings. Each portrait integrates poetry, dialogue and theory as a way to interrupt, challenge and push against my constructions, interpretations and representations. The data collection process allowed me to become immersed in "the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural contexts, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.3).

The participants were comprised of Black men who have been "formally" educated (college and graduate school) as well as Black men were not as "successful" in the public educational pipeline (only one of the men fit this profile). My foundation for this approach was to get a sense of how Black men who managed to "make it" in the public school system did so

and how Black men who did not succeed in the system felt about the reasons as to why this may have occurred. In retrospect, I am aware that it was dangerous to think of my participants as those who "made it" in the educational system v. those who did not, and I problematized this binary through the portraits I created about the men.

When I reflected on the kind of study I wanted to do, I knew that an intimate qualitative study would be best, as a way to provide a fresh perspective on the lived experiences of a select group of Black men. By creating snapshots of each man, I gained a more complex and partial understanding of who they are and how they see the world through a CRT approach that encouraged them to tell their own truths connected to educational, historical and personal contexts, especially considering that, "a critical race theory challenges the traditional claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity" (Solarzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26).

Instead of focusing on pathology and disease, "portraiture resists the tradition of laden effort to document failure" (Lightfoot, p. 9). As such, I used aspects of portraiture to focus on how understanding social and cultural contexts aid in our comprehension of the human participants we work with. Acknowledging that there is a larger sociopolitical and sociohistorical structure in place that impacts all of us widens the lens of how we see our research participants and ourselves. Therefore, portraiture helped explore the context(s) that were remembered and explored.

Within my poetic lens as a portraitist aligned with a CRT framework, I acknowledged racism in all aspects of the research process (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24). I understand that there are several definitions of the word racism, however, I am specifically using Manning Marable's definition which defines racism as a "system of ignorance, exploitation, and power

used to oppress African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific-Americans, American-Indians and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, color" (1992, p. 5). This definition serves to highlight systems of power and exploitation, which is also directly connected to the tenets of CRT.

I conducted bi-monthly semi-structured conversations with the men over a four-month period in public settings such as coffee shops and bookstores. The questions (see appendix B) were constructed based on my research questions regarding themes of Black masculinities, education and literacies. Each conversation included questions that were personal, political and educational. I had a total of eight conversations with each participant and each conversation lasted about one to two hours. The public locations were meant to inspire more "genuine" and open conversations (although I understand this was my own belief as a researcher), which presented its own unique challenges such as unexpected noise and sometimes a lack of privacy. Journaling, memos, poems (written by me about the process and the participants), and over 200 pages of recorded transcripts of the conversations were collected to ensure a more nuanced and versatile approach to data collection methods. Multiple forms of data were also meant to encourage rich, engaging portraits.

In the spirit of portraiture, I created an anticipatory template that incorporated major research themes that I believed would come up in the conversations with the men. I share this anticipatory template to show that I entered the research with a "well-defined research plan with a clear intellectual framework" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 186). My goal for this anticipatory template was to help generate theory once comparing it to what actually emerged from the research as opposed to "proving" prior theoretical propositions. I acknowledge that this template was a starting point and eventually adapted to the realities of my participants.

Anticipatory Template

Theme 1	Similar Racialized Collective Memories of the Black Male Experience in Public Schools
Theme 2	Performing Black masculinities
Theme 3	Literacy as a way of being
Theme 4	Connecting School to Life Chances & Outcomes

Table 3.2

Poetic Pause II
Critical Assumptions

A poet-researcher she is.
Dabbling and dwelling in the lives
Of men she imagines are safe.
From borders and patrols,
That invade their bodies like Trayvon.
She listens, sometimes critically,
Sometimes with a third eye that
Reminds her of her biological brothers on Brooklyn streets.
No notes are taken during the dialogues
That infiltrate Starbucks dynasties surrounded
By gentrified transplants
Who can afford to buy slave (~~free~~) trade coffee
Every single day.
The aroma of the dark roast
Tints the conversations with reminders of
Past lives none of them have ever lived.
But they smile.
And the recorder captures and steals
The memories of the men forever.
First on tape, then on her computer
In a so-called transcript
That she will code and create and code and construct
To her liking.
But the qualitative sugar
Allows her to sweetly flavor her objects
As subjects,
She hopes to paint.

Although she is no artist. In fact,
What she is,
She still does not really know.
But the conversations remind her that
Questions can supersede answers,
In Dominant discourses…

Poetry as research

"*The poet is a human scientist*." (Leggo, 2008, p. 165)

As mentioned earlier, because I am a poet, it was very important for me to incorporate poetry throughout the research process, empirically and conceptually, as a means of bringing elements of myself to the work while complicating the layers of my participants. Finley (2008) describes arts-based inquiry "as a methodology for radical, ethical, and revolutionary research that is futuristic, socially responsible, and useful for addressing social inequities" (p. 71). The element of poetry throughout my research created another way of (re)presenting my participants that resulted from my own constructions of who they are while offering a more non-traditional and creative approach to the work.

At the beginning of the data collection process, I created poems about each of the men based on my initial perceptions of them after our first conversation. After the data analysis process, I then created new poems about each of the men using specific quotes from our conversations based on the transcripts as a way of (re)presenting and (re)imagining the participants. This process is also referred to as poetic transcription, where "poet-researchers highlight participants' exact words and language from an interview transcript, in an effort to reveal the essence of a participant's lived experience" (Faulkner, 2009, p. 31). I specifically created these pre and post poems as a way of challenging my own assumptions about my

participants at first glance and how my perceptions changed over time based on our conversations. Poems were also revised several times to incorporate theoretical/empirical foci.

The goal of using poetry in my research is also aligned to Denzin's (1997, 1999) belief that poetry can be used as cultural critique, emotional verisimilitude, useful to readers' lives and a tool for political change. (See chapter 5 for pre/post poems/analysis). Additionally, it is also connected to the CRT concept of counterstories which is:

> A method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform. Yet, counter-stories need not be created only as a direct response to majoritarian stories. As Ikemoto (1997) reminds us, "By responding only to the standard story, we let it dominate the discourse" (p. 136). Indeed, within the histories and lives of people of color, there are numerous unheard counter-stories. Storytelling and counter-storytelling these experiences can help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32)

I specifically used the strand of telling someone else's story as a way to "reveal experiences with and responses to racism. This type of counter-narrative usually offers biographical analysis of the experiences of a person of color, in relation to U.S. institutions and in a sociohistorical context" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 33).

Poetic Pause III
Research Borders

The borders we cross are not invisible.
And the words we paint on pages to tell stories
Of why the how came to be
Is not only about theory,

Or the margins that escaped from mouths
That smile because they have to.
In offices that approve IRBs
And institutions that remind you of the Wrath.

My epistemology is blurred by the epic Discourse wars
That can always dictate
How I will write my name,
How I will say my name in the presence of Power
How I will craft my speech in word documents
To convey their lives.

There are no surveys,
Only conversations constructed around blatant ideologies
That call themselves Truth.
And I will call it a portrait in the end
Because it will be.
And I will create the title
Because I can.
And someone will read it
With their own lens and not understand all that happened
Or all that is happening right now.
But it's okay…

Because what is trapped between the pages and the theories
Can be regurgitated at conferences
Where other theoretical people with theoretical degrees
Will critique you and read your narratives like landlords
In charge of property rights and academic rental hikes.

(Still) I do this.
Because I am hoping that one day
My audience will go beyond
Socratic seminars
And Ivy thoughts.
I am hoping that one day
my audience

Won't only be represented in my narratives,
That still hide more than they break free.

Chapter 4
Data Analysis: Black Men Matter

"The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being." ~Toni Morrison

The purpose of this qualitative research project was to examine the intersections among the literacies, identities and masculinities among Black male participants and how they remembered their secondary schooling experiences through the merging of CRT, portraiture and poetry. The research project specifically focused on reflective conversational questions (see Appendix B) as a way to encourage a collective reflection process. I use the word collective in the sense that many of these men's memories of being Black males in the NYC public school system were similar. Tales of being misunderstood or pre-judged based on their race while inhabiting Black bodies were common among the men, which the data will reflect.

It was important for me to have the men reflect on their high school experiences as a way for them to use memory as a way to reconstruct their understandings of their schooling experiences, while reconstructing pieces of themselves in the process. Toni Morrison's concept of rememory as exemplified in the novel *Beloved* (1987) encourages one to both remember and reconstruct the past thus creating new memories that are both healing and transformative. The power of Morrison's concept as portrayed in *Beloved* was a part of my rationale for working with men who were removed from the high school experience, some as many as 13 years and one as little as two years. What you will uncover throughout this chapter are pieces, parts and poetic representations of their reconstructions of their NYC public school experiences as connected to their literacies, identities and masculinities.

What follows is a critical race analysis through the lenses of poetry and portraiture that describe the specific experiences of Black men in NYC public schools, in their communities and their current lives as a means of highlighting the nuances of their literacies and the collective struggles they faced in similar yet different urban spaces. It incorporates the masculinities, positionalities and identities of my participants during the data analysis process. Findings based on the voices of the men are also included in this chapter. I am aware that as the researcher, I had the "power" in how these stories have been constructed. However, I do believe that the variety of the data, which includes poetry, participant responses to a poem, recorded conversations and observation notes, offer multiple sites of entry into the research.

Data Analysis Approach

My data analysis method included both a template and immersion approach (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). In a template approach "key codes are determined either on a *a priori* basis (ie: derived from theory or research questions or from an initial read of the data)" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 112). My main theory (CRT) and research questions along with my conceptual diagram (see chapter 3) certainly guided the codes I created. These codes then went on to serve as templates, while remaining flexible as the data analysis process proceeded, which leads to the immersion approach. An immersion approach is "the least structured and most interpretive, emphasizing researcher insight, intuition and creativity" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 117). The immersion method was attractive to me as a poet and allowed room for fluidity while allowing the participant voices to speak for themselves through the data. The combination of the template and immersion approach directly aligned to the CRT method of counterstorytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) and the creation of nuanced portraits through portraiture. In many ways, the stories of the men in this chapter are counterstories in that they push against traditional

notions of literacies and Black masculinities. These stories open up alternative spaces for Black men outside of restrictive, deficit educational narratives that often dominate educational research.

I worked closely with four participants who were chosen out of six people who responded to my recruitment flyer over the course of four months. The men were between 20-30 years old, with three participants in their 30s and one who was 20. This provided an insight into possible generational differences as experienced by Black males in NYC pubic schools. Each participant attended high school in the NYC public school system and was asked to reflect on their experiences in those settings from their perspectives as Black males.

Our conversations took place in public settings such as coffee shops and bookstores as a means of creating a more "natural" atmosphere, although sometimes the setting proved to be noisy. Each conversation was recorded with a digital audio recorder, which the participants were aware of. 280 pages of recorded transcripts were collected during the four-month period. I transcribed each transcript individually using a transcribing foot pedal that allowed me to slow down the recording, fast forward or rewind as needed. I chose to transcribe my own conversations as a means of becoming deeply connected to and entrenched within the data. This process also allowed me to relive many of the conversations, while reflecting on possible research questions I could have employed differently. I manually coded the transcripts by looking for themes that were directly connected to masculinities, literacies, identities and race. Whenever I discovered a quote from the conversation that was directly aligned to one of these themes, I highlighted the text and made note of the particular theme in the margins.

I created major codes found throughout the data based on the recorded conversations and transcripts, observation notes, poetry, written responses from the men based on the poem "When

Schools Ain't Enough for Black Boys" (see chapter 1) as well as my understanding of Critical Race Theory. These major codes are included in the second half of this chapter (See figure 2).

I examined the data separately (poems, research notes, participant responses, recorded conversations) as a means of interpreting each on its own. First, I transcribed the audiotapes and analyzed the conversations for themes and trends based on my interpretations, assumptions and social, cultural and historical contexts. Next, I examined the poems, journals and memos simultaneously as a way to question my personal thoughts, biases and poetic constructions. Lastly I looked at periodic emails about the research (initiated by me) as a way to complicate the layers of these men's lives, which I believe lead to engaging, stimulating portraits that read like novels as opposed to a research report.

Black Lives Matter

As I currently write these words, there are nationwide protests going on in response to the recent decisions not to indict the murderers (who also happen to be police officers) of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. I briefly discussed Michael Brown's murder in chapter 1 and now I return to the image of his dead, Black body lying wretchedly in the street as police officers paced back and forth nonchalantly. This was the image proudly displayed all over nationwide news networks. His large Black body was considered worthless and the image of his young, 18-year old self with the warm eyes that would no longer open or stare, on that suburban street in Ferguson, Missouri continues to haunt me. Eric Garner was another unarmed Black man from Staten Island, New York who was murdered in cold blood by use of an illegal chokehold that was caught entirely on video. Yet still, that video did not lead to an indictment just one week after the decision not to indict Michael Brown's murderer. These racist acts of injustice, which

are not limited to these two brothas, continue to happen without a single consequence and point to the timeliness and momentous implications of this study.

So what does this have to do with my participants? They are all Black men navigating this blatantly and racially unjust society. As such, the portraits of these men will serve as more than my constructions of who I perceive them to be, it will also serve as a site of possibility for examining all of the complexities, calamities and criticisms that come with being a Black man. I want to take this moment to provide a visual sketch of who they are and what they look like. I had the privilege of developing relationships with these men over the four months we spent together and I want to portray them in humanizing and complex ways. Portraits are "constructed, shaped, and drawn through the development of relationships. *All* the processes of portraiture require that we build productive and benign relationships" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.135). Welcome to my initial visual sketches of these Black men who shaped and shifted this work. I call these sketches visual not because they are artistic drawings but because I painted their images as I saw them, through words. These visual sketches were created in my research journal during the research process.

Data Sketches[1]

Kwame Jones

30 years old. He is of medium height and wears a complexion rooted in caramel. A blazer and jeans matched with a quirky t-shirt with a political slogan seems to be his typical fashion choice. A short curly Afro that shines in the sun sits atop his head. Glasses, kind of thick, cover his small eyes. He walks sternly and proudly, yet you feel the gracious spirit in him. His Trinidadian

[1] Participant names are represented by pseudonyms to protect their respective identities.

accent is reminiscent of his first 15 years of life, spent between Trinidad and Venezuela, until he found his way in New York City at an urban high school with over 3000 students. This new setting apparently paled in comparison to his school in Venezuela, where he knew his multiplication tables by the time he was 6 years old and was writing essays by the time he was 9. His immediate views of his New York City public high school were that it was a place for continuous miseducation and misinformation for Black students. Yet still, he succeeded. Full scholarship to college and has spent several years as a financial advisor for numerous major economic institutions. But in my eyes, he is more of a politician, one who wants to lead masses of people but has not figured out how to do it just yet. He seems fidgety and pensive. Confused about what steps he should take next, but clearly believes he is the next Bill Gates. His intellect and level-headedness leads me to believe he could in fact be the next Bill Gates or… the one and only Kwame Jones.

Malcolm Lewis

30 years old and about 6 feet tall. He is a large man with very dark skin, reminiscent of chocolate, and piercing eyes. I see the fearful looks many give him walking down the street. He is big, he is Black and he is bold. His dark blue suit is expertly pressed to perfection and it is obvious that he takes his time when getting dressed in the morning. He walks slowly and deliberately as if he knows his self-worth and believes in enjoying every moment of his life. His family came to NYC from Jamaica a few years before he was born. His father was eventually deported and his mother was a hard-working single mom who made sure he had everything he needed to thrive as opposed to just survive. And he is grateful for his mother who he invokes any chance he gets. He is grateful for her tough love and stern looks that got him through high school, college and law school. A practicing lawyer in the heart of NYC he seems satisfied with

his success. But he reveals to me that he aspires to be a councilman. However, he worries that fathering two children with different women he once loved will count against him. "I don't want to be a statistic," he repeats during many of our conversations.

Justice Hooks

20 years old. Young and free spirited but still radical enough to lead a revolution if he wanted to. Medium height and brown skin tinged with anger at the state for incarcerating his father in front of him. "This country don't care about us, yo," he says while eating his McDonald's French fries. He has just been laid off from his job at Victoria's Secret, his first job after high school. He has been looking for a job for the past two months. Justice is convinced it will be harder for him to get hired because he is young and Black. But despite this conviction, he keeps looking. He is charismatic, constantly telling jokes. Justice is also confident in nature and believes in himself despite the fact the he feels he "didn't learn anything in high school." He sports a short tapered Afro, a puffy black jacket, blue jeans and Timberland boots. He often has his hands in his pocket, observing the world around him eagerly. Justice is in his first relationship with a girl who he says is brainwashed by European ideals. But he is "teaching her" and hoping she realizes her strong "African roots" one day.

Lamar James

31 years old and short in height. He smiles often and widely as if the whole world has been kind to him, and according to him, the world has been terribly nice to him. His skin, a light brown complexion and his almond shape eyes are welcoming. Lamar is a self proclaimed people pleaser." I just like to make people happy, because when people are happy it makes me happy," he states calmly. He is an MTA train operator and comes from a legacy of MTA workers. His mother and father drive MTA buses and have done so for over 25 years. He was also high school

valedictorian and went to a prestigious college for a couple of years before deciding it wasn't the right place for him. That was a hard life transition for him, especially since he was always considered the "smart one" amongst his friends and family. But that doesn't seem to phase him anymore, because he seems genuinely content with his place in life. Soon he will become a father and is in relationship with a woman he loves. A little girl is on the way, his firstborn. He is so excited he cannot contain himself. "I cannot wait to be a father," he boasts happily. I want to be the best father and the best partner and I want to buy a house." Lamar's aspirations for his life and for his family are similar to many Americans who believe in the American dream…

These visual sketches represent how I saw the men after speaking with them and learning more about them. My goal was to capture their physical essence as portrayed in the way each of them walked, smiled, spoke and discussed the research questions. There is a mixture of both the personal and the political within these brief sketches. I always worked on the sketches right after having an in-person conversation with each of them as a way to preserve what I observed and felt during the research process that day. As such, there is a mixture of the empirical and the personal mixed with my own perceptions of their lives they chose to share with me.

The sketches are also reflections of the relationships I was building with each of the men throughout the research process. I understood that as a portraitist, I had to form strong relationships with my participants and I can honestly say that I was able to form solid relationships that pushed me to reconsider some of my own assumptions coming into the work while forming new ideas about the intersections among Black masculinities, literacies and education. I respected each participant's personal space while developing a deeper relationship that led to powerful conversations. Overall, this experience of building relationships with my participants highlighted that, "portraitists share the revisionist view of relationship, recognizing

its dynamic and complex qualities, seeking to construct relationships of symmetry and reciprocity with actors in the setting, and working to negotiate (and renegotiate) fluid boundaries that mark distance and intimacy" (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 138). Similarly, from a CRT perspective, these sketches are meant to highlight the participants' lives by building on everyday experiences and the power of stories to highlight deeper understandings of how we see race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 44).

Participant Responses to Poem

The very first step of the research process after the men were chosen to take part in the study was having them respond to a poem that I had written via email. For the purpose of them not feeling pressured to respond a certain way, I did not share that I was the author of the poem at that time. The poem, "When Schools Ain't Enough for Black Boys" (see preface to chapter 1) was shared as an email attachment and the men were asked to follow these steps: "Please tell me your initial reaction to the poem below via email within the next week. You may write as much as you please." To be transparent, I wrote this poem during my second year as a PhD student while reflecting on the kind of work I wanted to do. It kept coming back to Black males, which as explained in my introduction was both personal and political. I kept reflecting on the students I taught and the ones who seemed to have a hard time negotiating school spaces for what clearly appeared to be racialized and culturally biased reasons. As I was trying to articulate for myself what this meant for my work, I wrote the poem, which in many ways tells the stories of my brothers and my former Black male students through my eyes and stanzas.

Below you will find analysis and initial findings of each participant's response to the poem. After receiving the participants' responses, I printed each out and manually coded for important themes connected to the research questions. These initial responses via email set the

tone for our first face-to-face conversations thereafter and also allowed me to construct the pre poems I created about each participant (see chapter 5). What are shared below are partial examples of their responses along with a critical race analysis.

8/12/14- Poem Response # 1- Kwame Jones

his words don't fit with the curriculum sometimes 'cause
he be writin' rhymes for reparations and slingin' street metaphors
to open lyrically locked public school doors.

> This really reminds me of school. I knew a lot of people who were as intelligent (actually more intelligent) than me, who could recite whole hip-hop albums from memory, who could throw down serious freestyles…but were not doing well at school at all. That was always a huge puzzle to me. Even when some people knew the answer to questions they wouldn't speak up in class. In some cases I think they were ashamed to display their knowledge…but sometimes I think they just refused to participate fully in the system because they didn't have faith in it?

Finding #1: Multiple Black male literacies were not honored in school

Kwame had the longest and the most elaborate response. He even highlighted sections of the poem, responding to each section as a form of annotation, which was my first entry point into Kwame's literacy. Based on the way he broke down and analyzed the poem, I immediately saw him as a scholar, one who was fascinated by words and "knowledge." One of his immediate reactions was, "I knew a lot of people who were as intelligent (actually more intelligent) than me, who could recite whole hip hop albums from memory, who could throw down serious freestyles…but were not doing well at school at all." He clearly identifies himself as intelligent

and this poem conjures up a memory of school that valued a particular kind of literacy. The literacy that he discusses here reminds me of "literacy pedagogy that has traditionally meant teaching and learning to read and write in page-bound, official, standard forms of the national language. Literacy pedagogy, in other words, has been a carefully restricted project - restricted to formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language" (New London Group, 1996, p.61). From a CRT perspective, valuing one form of literacy in schools is similar to valuing the notion of one form of knowledge. CRT honors counterstories, stories that push against "majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32), while honoring the situated knowledges of people of color through personal and autobiographical accounts of racism and sexism, for example. As such, it appears that many of Kwame's friends were attempting to bring their counterstories into the classroom through hip-hop but it was not accepted as knowledge.

8/20/14- Poem Response #2 - Justice Hooks

> My reaction is I have to step up my vocabulary, lol. My reaction was, wow I can relate. This poem captured real issues that a lot of us wouldn't think of addressing but I really loved it. I can relate to certain things in the beginning of the poem. It goes into basically how you can be lyrically talented but it's not accepted as real poetry in school because of the way the brothers may present it with street metaphors or just the way we talk in general school will make you feel like that gift isn't really intelligence and it wouldn't get you a good grade if you had to write a poem. We can't express ourselves the way we want because it's not proper in this society and we won't get far talking this way in White America so we have to adapt to what's proper and speak proper and basically leave a part of ourselves to succeed for those who refuse to have it hard in White America.

Justice's response is aligned with Kwame's and ties in to the first finding of schools not honoring multiple literacies, which is why these two responses follow one another. Similar to Kwame, Justice's response echoes that, "being lyrically talented was not accepted as real poetry in school because of the way the brothers may present it with street metaphors." There is an implicit emphasis on a particular kind of Standard English literacy that was valued in schools. In both of their responses, we find an indication that they are remembering the English classroom specifically, where activities like writing rhymes or the use of hip-hop would seem connected to an English language arts curriculum, especially in a place like New York City, where hip-hop was birthed. I am also aware that presenting them with a poem to react to can be interpreted as an activity associated with the English classroom. Each participant was also aware of my former experiences as a high school English teacher and I must acknowledge that this could have easily played a role in the construction of their responses.

Justice also refers to "White America" in his response, implying that school is more of a microcosm of the larger society. He states, "We can't express ourselves the way we want because it's not proper in this society and we won't get far talking this way in White America." This declaration and the his use of terms like "lol" and "u" in his writing (I changed the "u's" to you for the "academic" purposes of this dissertation) highlight what I will call Justice's oppositional literacies. He is intentionally defying and speaking back to what the educators in his life deemed as the "right" way of speaking, talking and being in order to attain a certain status. Within the CRT framework, "racism is a means why which society allocates privilege and status" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 21). Justice emphasizes a clear connection between literacy and privilege. The literacy Justice represents in his response to the poem is an inherent distrust of schooling systems and English educators.

8/13/14- Poem Response #3- Lamar James

My initial reaction to the poem is a feeling of frustration. I am frustrated because of the truth that is given by the poem. It is true that the life of Black boys is constantly plagued by struggle. It is true that there are many factors in the world we live in that promote that struggle. It is true that no matter how much education you have and obtain you will always struggle. Right? I believe that pursuing education is only a piece of the puzzle. Education will give you the means to obtain the freedom that you deserve, but what education do we need to obtain? The type of freedom I'm talking about is being able to manipulate the world around you to make it more fit for you to live in. Changing your environment to make sure that you can succeed and be free. Learning how to beat the ones that want to hold you down by playing the game with a winning hand. It all starts with the right attitude and building the resilience of your character. The weak minded and low self-esteemers are the ones that are more likely to give up or be led. We want to breed leaders; leaders that inspire; leaders that motivate. However, where does the leader get his/her motivation? That motivation has to be cultivated from the day that you are born. It has to be nurtured in that little Black girl/boy and encouraged. Anything other than encouragement should be put aside because we are fueling success and freedom from the "jump". That is why it is so important for parents to be able to communicate effectively to their children. Parents are the first role models that kids imitate. So if the parent's behavior isn't promoting success for the future, then your child's chances for success will wither away. It goes much further than "because I said so", there is a responsibility there. You have to be able to explain to your child why they are going to struggle and how to overcome those obstacles in the near future. Plan ahead always. I'm

not saying that you can plan for any and every situation but you can provide your child with the mind-set of being a problem solver. And that is "magic" in itself. Approaching problems with a positive attitude and a solution oriented mind-set works worlds if you ask me. There's nothing more enjoyable by hearing a person say, "there's a problem, but I know I can solve it."

Finding #2: Parents and individuals are primarily responsible for the educational success of Black males

Lamar immediately indicated that he was frustrated by the poem because of the "truth" it conveys. His claim that the "life of Black boys is constantly plagued by struggle" alludes to a system that is complicit in this reality. However, he then puts the onus on the individual and parents stating that one must be willing to change his/her community in order for true change to take place and that parenting is critical in a child's life outcomes. There seemed to be tensions in his beliefs between systemic failures (re: public education), which directly impact Black males versus the responsibility of parents and the individual.

This initial view into Lamar's literacy evoked freedom as he stated, "education will give you the means to obtain the freedom that you deserve." I cannot help but wonder as a result, was he implying that Black males have to earn their freedom in 2014? He was more critical of individual behaviors that lead to unfortunate life outcomes as opposed to the institutional workings of racism that remain entrenched in our daily lives. According to CRT, "if racism is embedded in our thought processes and social structures, then the 'ordinary business' of society-the routines, practices, and institutions that we rely on to do the world's work-will keep minorities in subordinate positions" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 27). Lamar's beliefs

challenge those posed in my CRT framework. He argued that good parenting and positivity can alleviate many of the problems Black males are facing in schools.

8/22/14- Poem Response #4- Malcolm Lewis

This poem depicts some of the darkest proportions of my life, some of which I continuously battle until this day. The plight of the Black man can be treacherous and repentant. Not to diminish the struggles of our sisters, but its almost as if the those who do all they can to surpass stereotypical molds pre-defined, determined, and often placated on young Black men. I recall being made to believe although I was extremely intelligent as a student that I would more than likely end up two places, dead or in jail. Teachers would put this in our minds, young Black men, its sad, and I wish I could say that it were racist teachers but many were of our own race. The saddest part of being told these statistics as a child was that in fact this was the reality in the environment, which I came from. But for an institution to make it a mantra to young Black children was just sad. I've recently turned 30 years old, and although, I have the means, I choose not to travel, I travel often for work, to make it to this milestone age such as 30, I just merely wanted to "BE" and "EXIST" in the city that I struggled to survive in. Some people turn 30, and look at their lives as aging, progressing into the truest stages of adulthood, and they're depressed, I was just happy to "BE" and to "Exist" to have lived to 30, not because of poor health, because I didn't succumb to street violence, I was never incarcerated, nor was I gunned down by an NYPD officer. As a father, son, friend, and man, its my sole obligation to remain the pillar of strength for my family, to never show or display the weaknesses that can break a man in this world, but Black males continue to face so many obstacles.

Finding #3: Black masculinities are a constant threat in schools as well as in the communities inhabited by Black men

Malcolm's response was the most intimate as he revealed how the poem reminded him so much of his life as a Black man navigating public schools and various communities. His discussion of how stereotypical representations of Black males impacted his life seem to haunt him all the time as expressed when he stated, "The plight of the Black man can be treacherous and repentant." He feels this way in spite of the fact that he knew he was extremely intelligent and indicates that teachers reinforced the message that he would end up "dead or in jail". As he acknowledges that this was the reality in his own community, he seems proud that he was never murdered by a police officer or incarcerated. These are the words coming from an extremely educated lawyer, which provides insight as to how Black masculinities are constantly presented as threatening and dangerous. The force of Malcolm's words is even more powerful considering the current climate of police brutality against Black men nationwide.

My understanding of Malcolm's literacy at this point, based on his response, is one that is tinged with frustrations of schooling, racism and Black male subjectivity. Yet still, he has learned to navigate his life accordingly in order to push against the stereotypes that continue to plague his daily experiences.

Finding #4: High school experiences serve as reminders of emotional trauma for Black men

Based on the responses to the poem, there appeared to be another layer of trauma experienced by each of my participants in New York City public schools. This trauma is one that is more emotional and internal which is based on my own interpretation of their words. Each man had multiple experiences in school that made them sometimes question their own ability. Because these experiences were incredibly similar, I would argue that they experienced public

educational trauma due to the intersections of their masculinities, literacies and identities. After re-analyzing the data, I recognized this trauma through their words based on their initial responses to the poem. Overlapping themes of internal resistance to school structures resonate through their discussions of freedom and Black male stereotypes. Yet it is also clear that they have each learned how to cope with these traumas as opposed to confront it directly, for the fear that it would ruin their futures. The unspoken fears that became evident through their stories were haunting yet illuminating of their experiences.

These emotional and internalized traumas as a result of (re)memories of schooling reminded me of a quote from the novel *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones. The novel is centered on the life stories and memories of main character Ursa. Through her memories that are often painful yet revelatory, she remembers the words of her great grandmother throughout the text: “I'm leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence.... They burned all the documents.... We got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that's left to bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood” (Jones, 1975). The participants were the witnesses of their own stories, carefully remembering, (re)imagining and (re)constructing their identities and memories in the process. They will probably pass these stories on to their own children, nieces/nephews, etc. As a result, many of these traumas as reflected through their personal narratives will continue to live on; they cannot be destroyed or burned so to speak, because the witnesses have spoken. Their portraitures also serve as testimonies of healing.

Constructed Conversations

Each face-to-face conversation began the same way, at a local Starbucks or Barnes and Noble, the smell of coffee, magazines and books permeating the air followed by welcoming small talk such as "how are you?" and "how is your day going?" etc. I never jumped right into my schedule of questions although I eagerly wanted to hear their responses to the questions I had crafted beforehand. There was always some hesitation at the beginning of the conversation for each of the participants, which I think can be attributed to the public setting and the background noise. For the most part, after about 20 minutes, both of us warmed up and began talking. Of course I will never be able to know exactly how the participant was feeling, as I can only go by their body language and responses to the questions.

Although I had set questions for each conversation that were created in advance, I always asked other questions that would arise based on the nature of the conversation. For example, sometimes the conversation would veer from questions of literacy to current events, which I gladly welcomed as a means of further understanding each of the men. Sometimes if the conversation went too far off track, I would gently return to the research questions as a way to remain focused on the overall goal of the project.

After coding the transcripts of each conversation based on my theoretical framework and searching for others themes that emerged during the coding process, I created a data summary table which allowed me to calculate how many times the men directly and indirectly addressed the main themes of the dissertation. These themes I specifically focused on for my data summary table included: Black masculinities, literacies, the secondary English classroom and CRT. (See chart below). Creating the data summary chart was helpful to reduce the large amount of data, while narrowing it down to the research questions and the statement of the problem. Considering

the results of the data summary chart it is apparent that some themes stood out more than others, particularly Black masculinities followed by CRT. I would argue that these results reflect a variety of factors that impacted the research. Black male subjectivity and the centering of the experiences of Black men in NYC public schools were at the heart of this dissertation research and as a result, the majority of the men's responses were directly connected to Black masculinities. As such, it seemed fitting that CRT came second to Black masculinities. However, I would also argue that there was a synergy among the themes as reflected in the research questions. It is also without a doubt that as a researcher I was sure to constantly come back to these themes in a variety of ways as of way of ensuring that I achieved the goal of answering the research questions.

Data Summary Chart

Participant	**Literacies**	**Black Masculinities**	**Secondary English Classroom**	**CRT**
Malcolm	5	40	7	18
Lamar	16	15	10	7
Justice	10	17	8	18
Kwame	8	18	13	12
N=X	**39**	**90**	**38**	**55**

Table 4.1

After creating the data summary chart, I identified the quotes by the participants across several conversations that answered the research questions. Below you will find the responses of the men based on the themes reflected in the data summary table followed by analysis and the findings it represents. It is important to note that each of the participants went to a New York City public school between the time period of 1996-2013 with populations that were 90% Black and Latino/a. I should also note that two of the participants went to the same high school.

Kwame referred me to Malcolm upon meeting him and asking if he knew anyone else who would be interested in the project. The participant high school chart below represents the schools they attended, the years of attendance, the location of the school and the demographics as presented on the New York City Department of Education website. The names of the schools have been altered to further protect the identity of the research participants.

Participant High School Information Chart

Participant/Age	**School**	**Location**	**Attendance**	**Demographics**
Kwame Jones/ 30	Harriet Tubman High School	New York, NY	1998-2002	Asian: 0% Black: 40% Hispanic: 57% White: 3%
Justice Hooks/ 20	Arts and Justice High School	Brooklyn, NY	2009-2013	Asian: 1% Black: 75% Hispanic: 20% White: 2%
Malcolm Lewis/30	Harriet Tubman High School	New York, NY	1997-2001	Asian: 0% Black: 40% Hispanic: 57% White: 3%
Lamar James/31	Science Times High School	Brooklyn, NY	1996-2000	Asian: 7% Black: 72% Hispanic: 17% White: 2%

Table 4.2

The following data includes snippets of the participants' words throughout multiple conversations over the duration of the research project. The initials indicate their names and occasionally the first initial of my name is incorporated as a way to indicate when I am speaking. For the most part, I only include the words of the men as way to structure these portraiture

narratives around them. I only incorporate myself when I feel it is integral to understanding the conversation.

Participants Memories of the Secondary English Classroom/Education

Kwame

> K: Mr. Gus [English Teacher] was really good. He was an actor, he was a singer, ummm and I think that performance background really helped with his teaching.
>
> K: But ultimately, one of the things that I think is obsolete about education now ummm is the whole role of teachers and students. Now I'm not saying that teachers shouldn't have authority, right, over their classroom because as the adult in the room like clearly… right? But I think that there should be more encouragement of independence ummmm like the way your colleague put it that he's giving people knowledge? He shouldn't be giving people knowledge, he should be enabling knowledge. Because it started off with like our generation, but I think it's even more true with kids today, they're not passive, right and the education method, pedagogy or whatever, is basically geared towards the students just being passive, right?
>
> K: I was just breezing through getting As easily [In English classes], not challenging at all. I would leave class for a third of the class, go to my guidance counselor's office and just chill and then 10 minutes before class was supposed to end I would go back to class and I wouldn't miss anything.

The varied selection of quotes was taken from Kwame's transcripts and reflects many layers of how he remembers the English classroom. His fondest memory of English class is from a teacher who had a performance background. He talked more about this particular English teacher when we walked to the train station together after the conversation was over. As we walked briskly

towards the Union Station train stop on 14th street and 4th avenue, he recalled Mr. Gus smiling often and having daily "words of the day." Mr. Gus also sang opera and invited his students to his shows at Carnegie Hall. The desire to know that teachers existed outside of the classroom seemed important to Kwame as related to the power of teacher and learning.

On the other hand, Kwame also recalls that school often felt like a restricted space that treated students like "passive" people who were "given knowledge." Kwame clearly evokes scholar Paulo Freire's "banking model" theory, which asserts "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (Freire, 1970, 1993, p. 72). While evoking this theory, he also seems respectful of teachers, claiming that he understands that they should have authority because they are the adults after all. But what does that really mean in the context of education when most of the student-teacher relationships in public schools continue to operate under the "banking model?"

Most of Kwame's memories are constructed around him being a stellar student who did everything needed to earn a full academic scholarship to college and being liked by most teachers because of his demonstration of knowledge. However, it is also apparent that he was in an environment where "education became an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (Freire, 1970, 1993, p. 72). He paints his English classes as non-constructive, non-critical spaces where following all of the teacher's orders meant you got a good grade. I believe these memories about the secondary English classroom imply that multiple literacies and multiple forms of knowledge were not honored in the English classrooms Kwame was a part of. And in many ways, I don't get the sense that he believes this is necessarily a negative memory, yet he has obviously internalized what a "good student is," which is one similar to him who got all A's because he followed orders well. Throughout our

conversations, Kwame often equated his grasp of what would be considered standard knowledge with his academic success. I would argue that this kind of schooling was especially reinforced during his high school years as a result of intensive state testing that called for rote memorization of facts as opposed to critical thinking. Kwame's understanding of his knowledge is directly tied to his schooling experiences.

Malcolm

M: I had all white English teachers. I didn't… I've never had Black English teachers in Tubman.

M: Freshman year I remember, we had revolving English teachers. One lady, Mr. Flynn had to fire her because she wasn't tough enough to deal with those kids

C: What was happening?

M: She was a really nice lady. The books that she was giving us were really great but she was dealing with ignorant children. You know like the NYC teachers, you gotta be a great educator but a stern manager and a behavioral manager, you gotta be tough. She just didn't have that background. So she got ran out. Then they brought in a really nice guy and he was okay. He was just like you know what? I will make this shit as easy as possible and for y'all and imma give everybody 95s and 100s.

M: Ms. Risch was a white lady. She ended up moving down to Louisiana. I used to like Ms. Risch. The books that I would read I would fly through it because I'm a reader, I love to read. And she would say oh my God and I would be like you guys are giving us simple ass books like you expect me not to sit down and not read it on my commute. Like she would give me more aggressive literature, she was like you need to move on to European literature and stuff like that.

Malcolm had the most racialized memories of his experiences in the high school English classroom and seemed genuinely troubled while reflecting on these specific memories. When he tells me that he did not have "any Black English teachers" in high school, he said it nonchalantly, as if the thought of having a Black English teacher was a thing of the past. At least that is how I interpreted his words and his body language. However, I kept sensing there was more he wanted to say but chose not to say anything further on this matter specifically. Many scholars have addressed the whitening of the teaching profession, particularly in public schools, over the years (Epstein, 2005; Meiners, 2010). I suspect that Malcolm wanted to talk more about the fact that his high school English teachers were white and perhaps I could have asked more questions to encourage him to open up more. However, the fact that all of his English teachers were white in a school that is 97% Black/Latino speaks to the overwhelming whitening of the teaching profession in New York City public schools. In the year that Malcolm started high school, according to the statistics on the New York City Department of Education website, the new hires for that year and thereafter were predominantly white. The new hires for the years 1997-98 are 56.7% white, 20.1% Black, 3.8% Asian, 0.4% Indian and 3.7% unknown. (Black Educator via NYCODE, 2006).

What was most interesting about this conversation with Malcolm was that he goes from seemingly wanting to critique never having Black teachers to placing blame on so-called "ignorant children" who needed to be handled a certain way. He seems to buy into the white supremacist ideology that Black/Brown youth are difficult, unmanageable and deserve to be treated in a strict disciplinary manner. He proudly boasts that one English teacher was fired because "she wasn't tough enough to deal with those kids." Freire's notion of the thin line between the oppressed and the oppressor (1970, 1993), p. 44) is on display here. Bringing up his

all white English teachers appeared to be oppressive although he did not go into the reasons why. Yet still, he blames the so-called ill-mannered kids for the reasons why teachers did not stay, which is more of an oppressor mindset. Malcolm clearly experienced oppressive conditions in his English classrooms as he claims that because he was a strong reader, he was allowed to read "European literature" which in his eyes was more advanced. He smiled upon sharing this memory with me that reveals a sense of pride he still cares about. The belief that reading and understanding European literature is a sign of great intelligence is one that is fostered in English classrooms nationwide, thus leaving little room for voices that do not speak to these master narratives.

Lamar

> L: Ummm, there is a difference between being educated in school institutions and then education outside of school institutions. In order to get truth in its entirety books will tell you one thing, because the book has a level of truth to it, however there is certain things in the book that are gonna be omitted.
>
> L: My school was small, it was small. I went to Science Times Center High School and it was an alternative school. It opened up in 1994 and it only had about like 800 students. So it was small. The principal knew exactly who you were.
>
> C: So do you think teachers that you had in high school fostered that, like that kind of critical thinking and if so what did they do?
>
> L: Definitely. I would say my English teacher, well all of my English teachers. Whenever we would read it was always you would always have to write. There was always writing involved. To the point when your hand would cramp up and hurt. It was great though because you know it was formulating ideas and it turned it into how we talk into how we

put words on paper with grammatical skills. It forced us to be more articulate. Because it's like I want you to speak how you write. I don't want you to talk how you talk to your friends in this classroom, I want you to be articulate, young students that are able to express themselves in any form that you're given. It was a stressful time because I'm always like nah mean, on the block and outside the classroom. The English teacher was like no not in my house. I will teach you some commas, some semicolons and all that other good stuff.

L: Ayy he was one of the good ones [An English teacher]. We read the Odyssey in his class, too. Umm, some other Greek tragedies but I can't remember them at the top of my head. He used to crack me up a lot because he would ask questions and let's say the class is moving in the direction that he wants us to move in, he would say "you almost got it, you almost got it, but what does that really mean? I need you guys to get to the real core, the meat of what we're talking about in this class today." And we're like, okay don't mess it up, the flow is going and then like if we mess up he would be like "ahhhhh so close. So so so close. You guys had all the breadcrumbs but we didn't get to the loaf."

Although Lamar acknowledges the distinctions between education and schooling, he does not go deeper into what that means and has meant for him in his life. This was the case throughout many of our conversations. Lamar always seemed hesitant to critique any aspect of the educational process and often placed the onus on parents and students. His memories of English class are overwhelmingly positive as he tells stories of teachers [all white] who enforced grammar, which coerced him to be "more articulate." He laughs during the interview when he reflects on this memory. According to Lamar, it was unacceptable to use the language of his community in the classroom because it was viewed as a distraction. From what I gathered,

Lamar understood why this was necessary in his own life. Similar to Kwame, he often talked about being a great student and living up to the expectations of his parents to get good grades. Achieving the "good student" status did not seem to align with questioning teacher pedagogies. Then again, how often are students expected to question teachers in environments that do not value critical literacies and student voices?

Lamar's fondest memories of English class in high school, involves a teacher he refers to as one of the "good ones" because the class was student-centered as the teacher facilitated the pace and flow by asking questions. Apparently, the majority of the texts they covered included solely Greek tragedies. When I pushed Lamar to think about why certain texts were chosen for this English class, he seemed to be thinking of his high school curricular choices for the first time. He merely stated that he had "never really thought about that" but appreciated the teacher's enthusiasm and love of teaching. I could not help but wonder if this is what most students, who were considered "good Black boys" thought, too? That blindly learning a curriculum that did not incorporate any literature of your experiences was acceptable as long as the teacher engaged students. To be clear, I am not admonishing the teaching of Greek tragedies in English classrooms, however, I am acknowledging that an English curriculum, in a school that is 90% Black/Latino, should be inclusive of diverse voices and experiences that are representative of the students.

Justice

> J: If you express poetry in a way that we would in our Black community [in school] it's not gonna get recognized. It's just gon' be belittled, like it's not up to par with the poetry we learn in school. You won't be heard and you won't even get a good grade with your punctuation and how you wanna put things.

J: The metaphor and similes that we come up with lyrically is genius. But the way they make it seem in school is like it's not done, it's not art.

C: Did you feel like that in school?

J: Yeah… If I wanted to explain something the way I would and it took a lot to think of something the way I would say it and is special to me, it would just get shut down because the way they wanted to present it I guess.

J: Honestly, school if you want me to be completely honest, it didn't teach me anything really.

J: I rather Black teachers teaching but not Black teachers that's misguided.

J: I went to middle school at Dr. Betty Shabazz actually and I didn't learn shit about her. And it's sad. You know who Dr. Betty Shabazz is and I didn't know nothing about her? I got into her school and I knew nothing about her that makes no sense. All I know is about George Washington and Christopher Columbus and all that other bullshit. It's just crazy. Why don't I know a whole bunch about Malcolm X? Like that don't make—it just baffles me.

C: So do you feel that you had space in your English classrooms to say how you really felt? Like do you think that was encouraged for you to speak your mind?

J: Certain classes not all like in Mr. P's class I couldn't express myself in there but I could express myself in Mr. G's class.

C: Wow, tell me what was his English class like and why did you feel you couldn't express yourself?

J: It was all about Shakespeare and it was strictly on them and not what we really think. It was really strictly about passing the regents. Even though it helped me pass the regents, I

guess it wasn't really about yourself or what your thinking. It happened in certain classes, but it wasn't really enough to me.

Similar to Malcolm, Justice had very racialized memories of the high school English classroom, one that stifled his desire to write rhymes and explore more of his culture. Justice claimed that English educators would belittle the way he wanted to incorporate various aspects of literacy in the classroom. There is anger in his voice whenever he talks about schooling. These experiences continue to shape the way he sees education and the world around him. Unlike Lamar, the heavily Shakespeare inspired curriculum was troublesome for Justice. But he has internalized that only this type of literature was valuable to help him pass state exams. I found it interesting that as radical and as racially conscious as he was, he still believed that only reading texts like Shakespeare could help him pass the New York State English regents exam. To his credit, the texts that are incorporated on the exam and the texts they encourage students to utilize in their essays are often classical, canonical texts.

Justin makes the assertion that he wishes he had more Black teachers, but those who were not "misguided" (his words) which made me wonder about some of the Black teachers he had in his life that made him use this language. He did not go in-depth with this particular response but it was clear based on his memory that he had some challenging experiences with Black teachers, as well. His use of the word "misguided" implies that these particular teachers needed a more critical approach in order to be more effective educators.

Participants' Reflections on Literacies

Kwame

> K: Dude, yo literacy is everything.
>
> K: To me literacy is more than just like knowing that these letters together form a certain word or phrase and being able to read it out loud. I think literacy, is actually understanding what the fuck you're reading and being able to question, not question to analyze what you're reading. And I think that there are superficial attempts, and it's an evolving thing because I mean education on a whole is evolving but I feel like they don't necessarily go deep enough into that, at least at Harriet Tubman with the exception of a few teachers but the general population at Tubman didn't have classes with those teachers. You know? So, I think that there is a very superficial concern with being able to read and write and it's not enough, especially in the 21st century.

I expected such a response from Kwame, that "literacy is everything" because out of all the participants, he exemplified multiple literacies continuously as he navigated his Trinidadian dialect, Standard English and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) throughout our conversations. He also seemed comfortable navigating these multiple literacies in my presence; it appeared to be second nature to him. However, based on our conversations, it was clear that he did not have the space to navigate these multiple literacies in school. Now that he has achieved what would be considered success in his life such as a degree from a prestigious school and starting his own investment company, he appears to have the freedom to embrace the many parts of himself that he had to "turn off" in his New York City public school classrooms.

Kwame discusses the "superficial" attempts at literacy practiced at his high school and makes the claim that literacy is the ability to question, which seemed aligned with the literacies

he displayed during our conversations. He often questioned the questions and seemed very critical of the questions I asked pertaining to education, which led to highly engaging conversations. For example, he would respond to questions about education with another question. Or he would often reiterate that "education is what you make of it," etc. At the same time, he would often display different kinds of literacies depending on the question asked. For example, questions that were about education were often answered in Standard English. However, questions that were about Black masculinities were often answered in AAVE or his Trinidadian dialect. It was almost as if he had internalized that anything connected to schooling still demands one conception of literacy.

Malcolm

> M: Literacy is the ability to retain what you learn. Ummm and functionally place it auditorially, like yeah I'm writing, or regurgitating it from someone else, so that your comprehension can be understood. I learned firsthand when I got to school (college) that all of my literacy and that my retention ability and my ability to relay information functionally to writing wasn't very good. And what was being assessed even in AP classes, in Ms. Langfeld's class and stuff like that in high school was subpar on a school level. So I'm coming out of school thinking that my writing is the best, I write amazing essays and I had a teacher that was from England, she was from the island of Wales more specifically, and she told me she doesn't understand how I was allowed to be writing like this but since someone helped me… (inaudible). So umm, I think literacy in schools, especially now that we are going more into a tablet phase, more of a digital age, children aren't, students aren't focusing more on writing.

Unlike Kwame, Malcolm did not see literacy as "everything." In fact his definition of literacy alludes to the "superficial" conceptions of literacy mentioned in Kwame's response that is more about reading and writing Standard English that will allow one to succeed in school. He openly reflects on realizing that his literacy skills were "subpar" upon arriving to college since his writing did not reflect someone who had what would be considered strong reading and writing skills. He also blames technology on students' ability to write well. I could not help but wonder how Malcolm's narrow definition of literacy continues to impact his life as a lawyer. Granted, I do understand that knowing how to read and write Standard English is in fact a necessity in this country, especially when you're Black and male. I also know that internalizing reading and writing Standard English as the essential literacy ingredient continues to perpetuate hegemonic and white supremacist literacy ideals.

Malcolm blamed what he saw as the shortcomings of his high school English teachers as the reason for his inferior writing upon arriving to college. Perhaps there is some validity to this claim that connects with some of his memories about his high school English teachers. I think it would be unfair to put all of the blame upon his English teachers. Instead, it is important to critically examine the educational system that encourages the miseducation of Black students, which is prevalent in New York City and other major cities. It is no secret that "consistently, schools that serve Black males fail to nurture, support, or protect them" (Noguera, 2005, p. 56). However, I do agree that English educators have a critical and powerful responsibility in shaping the lifelong literacies of their students.

Lamar

> L: Literacy to me is the ability to read #1 and the ability to convey your ideas in a manner in which others can understand. That's what I think literacy is.

C: Okay. And how would you describe your literacy? Like if you had to say Lamar's literacy, what is Lamar's literacy, what does it look like?

L: Aww man, that's a good question. Ummm, I would say my literacy is kind of like hmmm my literacy is kind of like Google. You type something in and you push the search bar and a definition comes at you.

C: Would you say your high school valued literacy?

L: I would say definitely. That was definitely a staple. Like when any teacher approached you in the hallway and they might like ask you a question like what are your goals in life, they expected a literacy answer. It wasn't like I want to buy a car. No, no, no, no. Like we want to own two houses down the line, something along those lines. They wanted us to be very successful future-oriented people. It was like don't live day to day, and conquer each day as it comes. Let's put forth a plan.

Lamar immediately ties literacy to the ability to read, which is how most people conceive of literacy, since that is the way it is traditionally taught in schools. It is what I like to think of as a very basic answer as well as a very central understanding of the ways that literacy functions or is supposed to function. I found it interesting that he found his own literacy like that of Google, one where "you type something in and press the search bar and a definition comes at you." Similar to Malcolm, Lamar's conception of literacy is tied to reading and definitions. Yet, Lamar's effortless back and forth from AAVE to Standard English, along with his love of dance always creeping up in our conversations and his body language, speak to other forms of literacies that he may not be aware of. Or perhaps he is aware of these other ways of being but does not consider it literacy.

What I found more intriguing was when I asked Lamar whether or not his school valued literacy he provided an affirmative answer because of the way his school upheld middle class values. Teachers encouraged them to own property and value successes that are directly aspects of the "American Dream." I did not understand why asking Lamar about whether or not his school valued literacy led to this response but what I gathered from this response is that his notion of literacy is tied to capitalism and power.

Justice

> J: I define literacy as a way to truly express ya self or thoughts in writing. Literacy in high school for the most part focused on punctuation, grammar and format on how schools say we are supposed to write. Sometimes in high school you could express yourself and sometimes you couldn't if you wanted a good grade. The way it plays a part in my life is complicated. I learned how to write the way they want me to I still won't use these skills unless I have to like if I'm in college but when I write poems or raps or even thoughts I write it in my own format and way.

Justice seemed to understand the notion of multiple litearcies operating in his life and the ways that school constantly stifled the literacies that he valued and wanted to express. He makes a clear distinction between how he defines literacy as opposed to how his high school defined literacy, which was more about grammar and punctuation. He makes it clear that literacy skills he adopted in high school will not be useful to him unless he goes to college. Yet still, he insists that when he writes his lyrics or poetry he will continue to write the way he desires. When Justice described this to me he had a smirk on his face. The smirk was one of both pain and compromise. He has come to an agreement with himself that there is a particular brand of literacy that will help him succeed in college (if he ever decides to take that path). However, it is

evident that this brand of literacy makes the literacies he values as his own appear minor, invisible, unworthy of all that is considered academic.

Participants' Perceptions of Black Masculinities

Kwame

K: I think there is a very specific way to be a Black man. And I don't think that I necessarily subscribe to that or control that.

K: and I think that athleticism is definitely a key part of Black masculinity, like you're expected to be like good at sports, especially by like people outside of the community.

K: You have like the Steve Harvey Black man, like church going, like down home kinda like folksy, you know ahhhh (pause) country-ish, kinda like dude. Ummm, pictures himself as being the shit, portrays himself as the shit and the end all be all like, probably dabbling on the side, definitely like very traditional like, very conservative in many respects, that's one version. Umm then you have like the thug, right? Who is like mad like (pause) you know umm, I don't even know if there are thugs anymore but like swag, basically like you have like a swag, like you have something flamboyant about you umm that you use to attract females and to attract attention to yourself in general. Right? Umm I don't like attention so I never really fit in with that. Ummm some people use like thuggish behavior, other people use (inaudible), some people do a combination of the two. There's a spectrum, right?

K: There's a lot of old school thinking that still dictates masculinity not just in the Black community but even in the white community, right?

K: Black men in America have been in a crisis for almost three decades. I think that a number of areas where numerically and quantitatively Black men are underperforming

has a lot to with qualitative factors and the initiative (MBK) is probably trying to deal with some of these qualitative factors such as a lack of mentorship. Umm lack of role models.

K: If I had come to the states a few years earlier like I don't think I would have done as well in school as I did. Ummm I was lucky to have come here at 15 and the fact that my family is educated also helped. But, it's really not cool to be a smart Black guy. It wasn't cool to be a smart Black guy. It wasn't cool to be a Black guy who was like into his studies.

Throughout all of our conversations, Kwame had some interesting reflections about Black masculinities, many of which adhered to stereotypical constructions of the Black male experience. At the same time, Kwame was sure to assert that he did not fit in to or "subscribe to the specific ways of being a Black man." I assumed that with this strong assertion he would stray from stereotypical narratives about the Black male experience, particularly because his own story defies that. On the other hand, when he described the spectrum of who he believes Black men are, he immediately resorted to stereotypical representations of "thugs" or men who portray themselves, as "the end all be all." When Kwame spoke of these kinds of Black men, it was slightly mocking, as if to say, this is who they are, not who I am, especially since he often labeled himself as "the smart Black guy." Some stereotypical representations of the Black male experience had obviously impacted how he saw himself and how he constructed himself as a Black man in America.

He offers the popular Black male exceptionalism argument when he claims "Black men have been in crisis for almost three decades." According to scholar Paul Butler, "Black male exceptionalism is the premise that African American men fare more poorly than any other group

in the United States. The discourse of Black male exceptionalism presents African American men as an 'endangered species' " (Butler, 2013, p. 485). Although I do understand the sense of urgency around Black male achievement due to ongoing dismal graduation rates and high incarceration rates, I also believe it is dangerous to paint a singular narrative of an endangered Black man. However, with the proliferation of new government sponsored programs like My Brother's Keeper (see chapter 1), initiated by the Obama administration, it is hard not to buy into this narrative.

Malcolm

> M: It's hard to find a decent Black man who is educated, who isn't abusive or psycho, things of that nature. If you know you bring something positive to the table and you're willing to be a good provider and willing to be faithful. A lot of times many Black men are unappreciative and get comfortable.
>
> M: I was in the army and it was a lot different than the perception of a Black man in the white man's military. I would say all of my instructors and superiors were Black. Fort Salem was the largest Black military base I had ever seen although Oklahoma might be the most racist state that you encounter. But I never encountered any racism in Oklahoma. It was probably because I was wearing a military uniform.
>
> M: I don't really check Black male or African American male on job applications. It got to the point where I'm like you know what? I'm checking off white man. And you would be surprised I get more callbacks.
>
> M: Let's talk about the working class educated Black males who are suffering financially in this economy. Why is Black male unemployment at 30%. I've been on unemployment and that wasn't paying my rent I was selling drugs.

M: We live in a misogynistic world where masculinity dominates everything like the identifications for what one's sexuality is not in a sexual sense but in a lust and for an excuse… speaking of what I mean, the definition of gender, the definition of what a man is, what a woman is, what her place is, what her place is.

M: My political definition of masculinity is it's a word that we shouldn't even broach upon. Why are we diffusing a word into our vernacular, into our life that can be hurtful to anyone? Why are we gauging one's being or essence? And when you define masculinity that's what you're saying. Like there is some who measure up to be masculine and some who measure up to be feminine.

M: To me like I'm not gonna define my masculinity with a nationality or race. [Pause] Because like I don't know I've always heard 'for a Black guy.' You're kinda smart for a Black guy, you made it kinda far for a Black guy, you're fairly successful for a Black guy, so you're tacking my abilities or my achievements or whatever it is I go through in life with my race. Now I do understand, to do well within your race is prime and stuff like that but I see it as a detriment as much as it is an adherence. Like I can't buy into the concept of Black masculinity like we spoke on but masculinity is like.. I feel like I just can't do it, ummm. It's too many problems in our race to define what we are. I think we need to be aware of our history, I think that that's more stringent and we should be defining like, trying to write the future not by defining what Black masculinity is when we don't understand what our culture is.

M: Black masculinity is that most Black males aren't going to graduate high school before they receive a criminal record. That is… that is Black masculinity.

M: There are perceptions of two things when it comes to Black men, are you gonna be a statistic or are you gonna be a successful Black male and that's the choice that a lot of Black males are dealing with. Like even growing, my thing was I will never get arrested, I will never get arrested. My mother always said it would break her heart if I ended up like my father and be a criminal.

Malcolm's reflections on Black masculinities were complex. On one hand, he believed that thinking of Black men and masculinity concurrently as absurd. He chalked it up to "too many problems in our race" to think about something like masculinity. What is fascinating about that particular remark is that out of all the participants, Malcolm's responses were most directly related to hegemonic masculinity and being a Black man in America. He exhibited a poised rage about how many of his experiences in his life were impacted by him being Black and male which was a thread in most of our conversations. Yet still, he makes the claim that "it is hard to find a decent Black man that is educated" when he is one of those Black men. It was as if he was implying that Black men like him are not the norm and although I can understand why he may have this perspective, it blatantly plays into stereotypical representations of Black men in terms of education and success.

Malcolm also laments over the unemployment rate among Black males and reflects on a time he resorted to selling drugs (despite all of his education) to survive. He openly critiques socioeconomic structures in place that limit the opportunities of Black males whether these men have formal educations or not. Admittedly though, he resents how race plays into how he is perceived day in and day out, and the burden of being a dark-skinned, large Black man who makes "white women clutch their purses," continues to haunt him no matter how far up the corporate ladder he manages to climb. Malcolm understood that being Black and male will

continue to influence the trajectory of his life, and there was something in this particular response that felt hopeless when he claimed that, "Black masculinity is that Black males aren't going to graduate high school before they receive a criminal record." In the face of his status as lawyer and educated brotha, these are still his feelings about being Black and male in America which speaks volumes about the influence of the representation of Black masculinities socially, culturally and politically upon those who it directly affects.

Lamar

> L: Ever since the beginning of time, it's been like men are the masters of the household and what a man says goes and that's it and there should be no type of excuse about whatever a man says or stuff like that. But in the reality of the situation men are human and he can be wrong so if you're telling me that one person's way of thinking or one man's way of thinking should be the law of the land, that doesn't make any sense. Everything should be up for discussion in my book.
>
> L: Masculinity to me it means tact. Ummm it's the ability for like a man to express himself. Like umm not so much as like you know uhhh stereotypical uhhh idea of masculinity. If you ask like the ordinary slow joe on the channel like that or like the macho man of masculinity meaning it's just like the ability for a man to control something.
>
> L: Like you know people say that you know if you're a Black man in America or a Black man in the ghetto, you're born with like a weight on your shoulders and like some strikes. You're constantly overcoming obstacles and you're constantly trying to fit the bill of what society wants you to be, you know, in the eyes of society you never kind of get that because of the stereotypical image that society has of you, that society has constructed for

you. So it's like you're born into a mold and you're constantly chipping away to break away at that mold for something else or something better.

C: Wow that's really powerful. Have you ever felt the burden of that weight and if so like what is an example?

L: Ummm, I would say I've never really felt the burden of like being a Black man and being like kind of how do you say "against all odds" so to speak. Because I guess growing up I was always told just do well in school. You do the best you can, just do well in school. So I guess in that aspect, I was in a mold that I had to break out of but as a child I was just like everyone has to do good in school. It wasn't something like you know that I kind of realized at that time that I was doing like excelling in school and doing the best that I could. Like at that point in time while I was in school I was just doing what my parents told me not knowing that there might have been an underlying message there. So instead of me actually realizing what I'm doing or like kind of like breaking the mold of what society has for me, I didn't know I was doing that but I guess in all actuality, I probably was, you know?

Lamar's response strays drastically from the others as he claims that although he understands there is a burden of being a Black man in America, he in fact has avoided that burden because of "doing well in school." Throughout our conversations, Lamar often used education as the answer to all of his problems, and in this case, one that lifted the burden of being Black and male. Of course my bias as a researcher interested in the experiences of Black men in America found this incredibly hard to fathom and I wonder if his response was more about respectability politics, which I would argue was a theme throughout our discussions. However, I also think that his answer is one that speaks to the nuances of the Black male experience that is not often depicted

in educational research. I am not at all doubting Lamar's response, especially considering that he graduated at the top of his class in high school and went on to a tier one institution on an academic scholarship. Lamar probably never reflected on the role of race in his life because he grew up in a predominantly Black neighborhood and went to predominantly Black schools from k-12. Yet still, he consciously discusses race in ways that reveal another side that he perhaps has not fully explored himself or does not necessarily believe is relevant to his own life. I would argue that it is not possible for education to erase the struggle that is connected to being Black and male in America, but again that is my bias.

Lamar thinks of masculinity as the way men are able to express themselves as opposed to definitions tied to machismo and dominance. The way Lamar carries himself and talks about his partnership with his girlfriend, it is apparent that he pushes against traditional constructions of masculinity. In some of our off-topic conversations, he discusses the equal distribution of chores in his household and his desire to not feel like "the man" all of the time. He specifically connected "being the man" to financial responsibility. He admits that he felt less pressure as a man by sharing the bills with his partner. Overall, although Lamar provided a definition of masculinity tied to self-expression, societal constructions of masculinity undoubtedly affect his consciousness about the term.

Justice

> J: My dad is a strong man, he is a man. I think no matter what he did, like even though he was a drug dealer and stuff like that he is the definition of a man. I see him as a strong man. I know I keep saying the same word but seriously. Manly. He's the one who instilled the idea of Black power in me from a young age.

C: And so when you think of a strong man in your opinion, what does a strong man look like or what does a strong man do?

J: Ummm (pause) a strong man provides for his family (pause), he (pause), yeah a strong man provides for his family (pause) you know or whatever, he works hard (pause), that's all I can really think about.

J: I don't think masculinity is just men. I don't think the word should be masculinity.

C: Tell me more about that, I like that. Break that down for me.

J: Because women are strong as well. So why it gotta be the man?

J: As long as we keep talking about this man/woman thing and about how we are not equal, it's not gon' work, we need to unite, too. Just like all Black kings need to unite, we gotta treat the women differently.

J: You know how my dad is, he is strong, you know Black that and Black power, he still has his flaws and that's women. He doesn't respect women. He thinks they're stupid. He had me thinking like that too. And I remember I used to say things in class like men are stronger and blah blah blah

J: I mean I feel like our problems [Black males] are deeper than that. It's deeper than just getting a job and (pause) and staying in school because you know it's the school institution that's kind of fucking us up and jobs are bullshit because we are just working for water and all of this stuff that should be free.

Most of Justice's conceptions of masculinity were tied to his father, who he idolizes in many ways, although at the time of our conversations his father was incarcerated for drug distribution. He often referred to his dad as "a man's man" because he provided for his family and worked incredibly hard, although the work he was involved in was illegal. Justice particularly credited

his father for instilling Black power ideologies in him, which according to Justice is "the love of my people and doing for ourselves." What I found fascinating about my conversations with Justice around masculinity is that there was a generational connection between him and his father that was incredibly important to the way he understood manhood and himself. He was one of the only participants who reflected in depth about how his experiences with his own father shaped how he understood masculinity in his life.

Unlike Lamar, Justice did not believe that education has the power to erase the burden of being Black and male. In fact, Justice asserted that schools help perpetuate the downfall of Black men in this nation. He does not go into the specifics of what exactly he meant by this, however, based on our previous conversations, Justice made it clear that he did not trust the government or institutions. Thus, it came as no surprise when he blamed schools for many of the systemic problems that Black men face.

Justice's definition of masculinity surprised me when he said " I don't think masculinity is just men" which he justified by stating that the concept of masculinity encourages unnecessary separation between men and women. He implicitly acknowledges tensions between Black men and Black women that continue to hinder unity and success among us. Overall, Justice's response was complex in that he acknowledges that he sees his father as the ultimate definition of a man because he had financial freedom, albeit from an underground economy, and held the family together. At the same time, Justice pushes back on the ways that hypermasculinity can limit the potential of Black men and Black women uniting. Although he did not explain what he meant by this unity, I imagine he was referring to strengthening our family structures and our communities based on many of our conversations throughout the research.

Participants' Memories Aligned with CRT

Kwame

> K: Within the Black community whatever is going on in society is magnified exponentially. Right? That's why American society is materialistic, because on the surface there's been (I don't want to sound Republican or anything) but there's been a breakdown… where you see that most exacerbated. To me, the African American community is like the canary in the coal mine of the United States, right? Whatever is going on in the country socially, economically, umm psychologically, you see it's a much more prevalent in our communities. Even incarceration, right? As a general… looking at general data objectively… America, and you know this, America has a much higher incarceration rate than most other countries. The way I look at the Black community in the states is like it's a hyperbolized version of broader societal norms. Right? So whatever is going on in the Black community at any given time is like an exaggerated version of what's going on in society as a whole.
>
> K: Because at the end of the day even from a cultural point of view, I don't necessarily think that umm, and I'm very far removed from high school right now, but the impression I get overall is that whole like the whole like thug, glorification of what Black students think isn't really there anymore and I think there is slightly less negative peer pressure when it comes to education, right? Ummm or cuz now it's all about getting ahead. But some people are so fixated on "hustling."

Kwame often invoked the perils of racism in all of our conversations. One point he made that was especially powerful, was that whatever is happening in society is automatically embellished in the Black community. He specifically pointed out incarceration rates and socioeconomic

status as his points of reference. I wondered if Kwame believed that the intricate workings of racism played into these numbers or if he believed that individuals themselves were responsible for these staggering statistics? I could not gauge what Kwame meant, but based on some of his beliefs he shared during our conversations, I believe he thinks it is a combination of individual responsibility and the workings or racism simultaneously.

Kwame seemed stuck on the notion that Black boys played the role of "thugs" in school, which contributed to their academic failures. He often made it clear that he was more of the "ideal" Black male student as opposed to the "thugs" he often alluded to who came to school without backpacks or a desire to learn. I do not deny that there are many Black males who may perform exaggerated roles of Black masculinities in school in order to fit in. However, I found it fascinating that Kwame tried to remove himself from these kinds of Black men every chance he could when it was clear that he succeeded in school at a very young age based on his memories that he shared with me. His responses often critiqued what he considered problematic behavior of Black males along with general observations of the Black male struggle in this nation based on "general data."

Malcolm

> M: I would see lots of corruption, like white cops coming in marked cars, picking up payments from their drug spots and stuff, all over my neighborhood.
>
> M: It's so many barriers for us, people don't even understand like I can't come off as being aggressive because then I will be considered as the angry Black guy or my tone and the pitch in my voice when I'm not even screaming, I don't scream.
>
> M: Obstacles aren't going to change. We as Black people need to change. Instead of looking for jobs we need to create them.

M: I get more callbacks from companies when I check off white on an application. It's awesome.

Malcolm addressed the corruption of white police officers in his community. This response was timely considering the large numbers of Black men who are being murdered at the hands of the police. His words echo a reality that is so haunting and reminiscent of stories stemming from the Civil Rights Movement, except it is 2015 (2014 at the time of this conversation). When discussing this high level of corruption amongst those who were supposed to "protect and serve" his community, Malcolm had a sly smile on his face, as if he expected nothing more from white police officers in his community. I wondered if this early understanding of corruption in his neighborhood helped him begin to understand that it was and always will be dangerous for him to be aggressive as a Black man, which he states nonchalantly.

Malcolm offers a perspective that reeks of both pessimism and optimism when he states, "Obstacles aren't going to change. We as Black people need to change. Instead of looking for jobs we need to create them." He acknowledges the tenet of CRT that acknowledges the permanence of race in this nation while encouraging Blacks to create their own jobs. I agree to an extent that creating more of our own opportunities can help alleviate many of the struggles we face, however, creating these jobs still demands that we work within the confines of an exploitative capitalistic system. If Malcolm truly believes this, why is it that he continues to check off white instead of Black on his applications? Yes, I know the answer to this rhetorical question, but I also think that Malcolm's words are easier said than done.

Lamar

L: So a lot of people that I grew up with [predominantly Black], they're still my friends, whenever they see me it's all love but they still haven't gotten out of that mentality of

this is my block, this I where I live, this is where I come from, this is what I represent. It's all great and gravy but you can represent your block in other aspects, in the corporate world. You can still go home to that place all the time. So I don't understand why it would be frowned upon from anyone that comes from the block if you go to work. It's not a bad thing. You understand? But then again, things portrayed in these songs that you hear on the radio, they glorify it, it's just like that's real to them and that's what they stick behind. Anything outside of that like picking up a book reading or quoting Dostoyevsky or stuff like that, that's a bad thing. Now you're "white" and we don't do that around here. It's shunned. Alright that's cool, I'm gonna talk "white" for a while. Because I noticed my income goes up a little bit more after I start talking white.

L: But one time in class Michael said that Mr. K said the N word in class.

C: Oh, really?

L: Yeah. Mr. K as calm and collected, this man is smiling, joking, laughing always. Yo he did not turn beet red, did not miss a step. He calmly took off his glasses, he used to teach at like a makeshift podium in front of the class or whatever, put down his book, closed the door, he always had the door open. He went back up to the podium. What?! Would I use that type of language in this format of a classroom? I'm an instructor, I am a teacher, I am a role model for you guys. I would never, never use that type of language in my classroom.

C: So he was accused of saying that, by a student?

L: Yeah.

C: Was this student credible?

L: Credible? Yes… But wrong, wrong…

C: So that was a lie?

L: Yeah… very wrong.

C: So why do you think the student did that?

L: The whole thing with the whole hearing, he thought he heard something which he clearly didn't and he just ran with it.

Lamar incessantly criticizes his fellow friends he grew up with (mostly Black males) for not wanting to work because that would not be considered "keeping it real." He blames it on a "mentality" they have that keeps them trapped in their neighborhoods. Although he is quick to criticize his friends, he is never quick to criticize the systems in friends that may be contributing to his friends' feelings of hopelessness. Sometimes I wondered if Lamar believed that there were systems in place that benefitted from keeping certain people at the bottom, specifically people of color. After all, that is the way capitalism has always operated. Malcolm X claimed that "you can't have capitalism without racism" (Breitman, 1971) and I fully agree with this claim since it is no secret that capitalism mostly benefits white men.

Lamar blames his friends' "mentality" on the music they listen to and the books they choose not to read because supposedly they view reading as "acting white." It was obvious that Lamar believed this was a problematic mindset that was in fact limiting his friends' opportunities. He asserted with pride that he would continue to "act white" because his income continues to benefit from these actions. I wonder how much of this "acting white" is a direct result from the overwhelming impact of white supremacy in his life?

I found it troubling that upon reflecting on a time when a student claimed that a teacher (one of Lamar's favorites) said the "N" word in class, Lamar automatically took the teacher's side although he acknowledged the student was very credible and honest. Lamar chalked it up to

the student thinking, “he heard something which he clearly didn’t.” Now although I was not there that day, it did concern me that Lamar did not even take a moment to consider why a student would make such an accusation if it were untrue. He automatically gave the teacher the benefit of the doubt as opposed to the student, which revealed the intense racial power dynamics at play in the classroom (the teacher was white and the student was a Black male). Once again, Lamar finds a way to downplay race and the workings of racism throughout his life.

Justice

J: Metal detectors were the worst. I hate the metal detectors. They treat you like inmates, they were like patting you down. I remember this was this one officer because he ain’t like a certain student he would make him get pat down every single time even when it didn’t buzz because he didn’t like him. One day he put his hands on him and he said listen don’t touch me. What is he touching him for? He is going to school to get an education. Yeah they (security guards) be too aggressive sometimes.

J: The thing about is I would always tell him (his dad) how are you talking about this Black power stuff and you’re selling drugs to the community?

C: And what would he say?

J: He would say they gon’ get it anyway. And I was just like… and he would say listen, who else gon’ put money in your pocket and grandma pocket. Then he start getting defensive. Everybody want me to stop but nobody stopped asking me or money.

J: America was never fun. Never. They just make us feel like this. (Inaudible). Racism is still alive it’s just not out in the open no more, that’s all. So we don’t have an uprising.

J: I have a lot of bad memories of high school; I used to be called racist and everything [by white teachers].

J: You know how the system/institution is. You can't teach every race the same way, we're all different. You can't teach us all the same and tell us we're stupid. Everybody got different traits and different ways of learning and comprehending and it's just not healthy, especially for us. We're a people that's more spiritual, more how can I say, more, we're just different.

Justice unabashedly addressed the workings of racism in his life throughout most of our conversations. His educational reflections on how schools resembled prisons made him frustrated. Imagine going to school in the morning and having to go through a metal detector before you sit down to learn and explore ideas? I had the same experiences with metal detectors when I attended high school from 1996-2000, so I think it's safe to say that New York City public high schools don't plan to remove these jail-like devices any time soon. Considering the massive incarceration of Black males coupled with schools that scan you upon entry, it is hard to think of schools as safe spaces for Black bodies and clearly exemplifies the school to prison pipeline.

Once again, Justice struggles with his father's teaching of Black power along with the reality that he sold drugs to people in his own community to make a living. The reality lived by Justice's father aligns with Malcolm's disappointment at high levels of Black male unemployment and him being forced to sell drugs, although he never wanted to go that route. I cannot say Justice's father and Malcolm had the same experience but underground economies certainly played a role in their lives. Justin's words often echo the intersections among race, class and power.

Justice has no faith in this nation and was not afraid to express this viewpoint. He aggressively stated, "racism is still alive, it's just not out in the open no more." His

consciousness of racism and the ways that it shaped his life seem wise beyond his years. Justice has vivid memories of being called a racist by white teachers who he says did not give him the space to express how he felt about racism. I continue to think about how these experiences have hardened him and sharpened him like a knife in his 20 years of life. He referred to white people and white teachers as a knowing "they," automatically assuming that I understood this standpoint. I could sense that Justice felt very comfortable in my presence and I believe it was because he saw me as someone who could identify with his struggles and aspirations. He often said, "I like having these conversations with you because I don't have many people to talk about this stuff with." I certainly learned so much from our exchanges.

Data Analysis Overview

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a thematic analysis using portraiture and a CRT lens, based on the data sketches, participant responses to a poem and conversational transcripts with the participants. There were continuous intersections among race, class, gender and public schools throughout the conversations that sometimes challenged, complicated or affirmed my assumptions. Some major findings that emerged based on the data sketches and participant responses to the poem include:

1) Black male literacies are not honored in the New York City public high schools the participants attended
2) Parents and individuals are primarily responsible for the educational success of Black males
3) Black masculinities are a constant threat in schools as well as in the communities inhabited by Black men
4) High school experiences serve as reminders of emotional trauma for Black men

These findings both supported as well as challenged some of my assumptions. For example, I assumed that Black male literacies were not honored in New York City public high schools based on my experiences as both a student and teacher in this system, so that was no surprise. I am also aware of the negative perceptions of Black men nationwide that are apparent just about everywhere you turn. However, I was surprised at the primary focus of the role of parents and individuals in Black men's lives as opposed to systems and structures that implicitly limit the opportunities of Black men in school and beyond. Only one of my participants actively critiqued the systems in place that make it harder for Black male achievement.

Although many aspects of the conversational transcripts are aligned with these findings, some additional findings that came up based on the conversational transcripts include:

5) Black men have similar collective memories about the racialized experiences of attending New York City public schools
6) English educators often avoid discussions of racism in their students' lives
7) Receiving an education can help alleviate some of the racial burdens that come with being Black and male

Overall, these seven findings correlate as well as push against my anticipatory template (chapter 3) that I devised before the data collection process as a way to make sense of how I initially saw the work versus what was actually discovered in the data. The participants' words pushed and prodded me to rethink some of my research questions and some of my assumptions about how Black males navigate New York City public schools. At the same time I realize that their experiences are not only germane to New York City and also apply to other large, urban areas. Although it was difficult to choose which of the participants' words to highlight, my data summary table along with the coding I did beforehand helped me reduce the data most

effectively. These findings directly respond to the research questions about Black male literacies, identities, experiences in the English classroom and their overall perceptions of the role of education in their lives. Their memories represent nuances, fluidity and complexity of the Black male experience. Although there is a collective racialized consciousness dancing within and around their memories, each portrait stands alone as its own story.

In Their Words Only

According to portraiture, "the portraitist as artist is constructing and communicating her understanding for the reconstruction and reinterpretation of the reader. This communicative expression of understanding relies on the creation of a unified whole" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 261). Throughout this chapter, you have had an opportunity to hear from the participants alongside my analysis of some of their deepest thoughts as related to the research questions. I want to end this chapter with their words only, as a way of honoring their voices and their boldness to take part in this research. Towards the end of the research process, I asked each of the men three reflective questions.

1) What are your thoughts about the research process?

2) How does it feel to reflect on your educational experiences?

3) Would you say you have learned anything more about yourself?

Each participant responded to the questions via email. Below you will find their responses to these questions that further add to the portraits presented in this chapter. Their responses are meant to stand alone for the purpose of highlighting their perspectives and experiences with the research overall.

Kwame

1) It felt very conversational and at times I wondered whether I was providing any valuable input LOL. But if you are happy with what I was able to give you, then I am fine.

2) It was very interesting because analyzing my educational experience is something that always happens somewhat beneath the surface, or under a lid, and it was the first time that I was allowed to lift that lid, with someone who I felt would understand where I am coming from, and with whom I did not have to give detailed qualifications and caveats.

3) I think it helped bring to the surface things that I already knew about myself, and made them much more tangible and immediate. I think it was the first time I verbally and consciously addressed my relative privilege (on multiple levels) and how it affected (mostly helped) my educational outcomes.

Malcolm

1) The research process has been very therapeutic. It has forced me to reflect back upon some dark periods of my childhood, which I otherwise blacked out or had stricken from my memory. To clarify, or further emphasize upon my remarks, life for black individuals is hard in general, but I believe there are many arduous challenges to the lives of black males, and reflecting upon my educational experiences as a black male in a NYC public school educational system enabled me to look at those challenges from a different prism. I now look amongst my peers, those who have found what "society" deems as success, and those who were not as fortunate, and with a heavy heart, I see the anguish within all of us. Some wear their anguish on their sleeves, while some mask it in material things that perpetuate our stereotypes. These thoughts are not just subjective or objective to my peers, but also an internal analysis of what can

become of one's character and moral compass while in pursuit of the dream which many blacks have been denied.

2) Reflecting upon my educational experience has not only been therapeutic, but it also has re-ignited a passion to do more for my community, particularly children from poverty stricken, or low income homes. A few years back, I began drafting a charter, for a charter school, I just believed that our educational practices and philosophies are dated, and we must begin preparing our children for the new world industries, our schools do not represent what the world is or demands in a competitive job market as is. I expect to sit down and finish the charter, and have all of my highly educated, and well-qualified educators such as yourself, and my "Baby-Mommas" they're educators as well, hey they need to pitch in on the dream as well, lol. But in all honesty, I didn't know how disenfranchised my educational experience was until I participated in this research study, and I believe I now possess the maturity to redirect my anger into a positive and productive manner, which is otherwise why it was suppressed for so long.

3) I've learned a great deal about myself. To share what I've learned is hard, because I'm still reflecting on it, but I've learned that although I can continue to be ambitious, I can find comfort and solace in my accomplishments thus far. Not to say that I'll take my foot off of the gas, because I still believe that to excel as a Black male you have to be twice as good and have God on your side lol, but that I no longer have anything to prove to myself or others. I haven't closed the chapter on my goals, I still have lofty ambitions, but I can look back on my life and take pride in the fact that I've managed to avoid the many perilous statistics which disenfranchises the Black man. What can I do to change that and how can we change our people? Those are my next questions.

Lamar

1) The research process has given me an opportunity to dig into my past and see how I have grown as an individual. The thought provoking questions asked during the interviews, are a great way for me to reconnect with old experiences and see how they have shaped my life. It's awesome!

2) It feels good reflecting on my educational experiences. Through those experiences I was able to challenge myself mentally and see just how much I could really do. All in all, those experiences made me realize that my mind is wonderful and I can overcome any obstacle.

3) I believe that I re-affirmed to myself that once I get inspired and mentally motivated....my creative juices have no boundaries.

Justice

1) I believe this process is has gone well. I enjoy being apart of something that will help the Black community, especially the education system because they have a big affect on how we think.

2) Reflecting on my educational experience helped me realize and confirm more problems in the educational system. It also installs in my head to teach my kids all that I know. I wont allow the educational system to brain wash my children or be the main source of knowledge for my children.

3) I learned that I am way more intelligent then the educational system judged my friends and I, as well.

Chapter 5
Poetry as Data

"You might as well answer the door, my child,
The truth is furiously knocking." ~Lucille Clifton

The poetic constructions in this chapter are specifically meant to add more nuances to the portraits of the men initially presented in chapter 4. Because the goal of this dissertation is to investigate the connections among Black masculinities, identities and literacies, the poems explore each of those themes intrinsically. These poetic portraits also serve as a way for me to examine my lens as a poet-researcher. I needed space to present and speak back to the poetry in a way that allows the research to speak for itself through stanzas. For this reason, these poems stand apart from the data analysis section as a way to have the men poetically speak, although I am fully aware that I have constructed these narratives for the men, which is an aspect of portraiture.

The pre poetic portraits represent my initial reactions of the men upon meeting with them while mentally, poetically and creatively constructing stanzas that carefully depict who they are. Each of these poems was written at the very beginning of the research process, after our initial encounter. The pieces are written in mostly third person as a way to capture my observational lens, with the occasional "I" in the first person, which represents me. The post poetic portraits were written after the data collection and analysis process and what I like to think of as the final poetic portraits. These poems are meant to explore how the men spoke back to my research questions. These pieces are written in the first person "I", which represents what I imagine to be the men speaking to the work. Similarly, these poems create an additional layer of the portraits that expands the breadth of the data. At the beginning of each post poetic portrait, I have incorporated a quote from each of the participants that I believe represents an integral aspect of

their character based on the data. This poetic process was adopted from a poetry as research method adopted from Furman and his colleagues (2006) as "they wrote poems about participants, took the original poems and used open coding to analyze them for themes and then constructed new poems" (Faulkner 2009, p. 28). The pre-poems have not been revised much as a way to be transparent about my honest thoughts about the participants upon meeting with them. However, the final poetic portraits went through numerous revisions in order to best account for the data presented.

Pre Poetic Portraits

Kwame [Pre]

His education is almost as
Large as his thoughts
Towering over and under
The intellectual crevices he proudly
Displays
But never wears.
Glasses cover the windows to
His blossoming consciousness
That he openly shares
With a crafty smile
And a non-threatening hoodie.
Knowledge of power he understands
Knowledge of inflation he figured
Out, while living in Venezuela
As a young Black man.
One day he could buy
Bread, sugar, flour and water
For one price.
The very next day, he could
Only buy bread and sugar
With the same amount.
Inflation was his first math lesson.
Not common core state standards.
Not textbook layouts.
It was *real*.
Life prescriptions that
Needed to be filled in like freedom formulas.

Currently he is smart and
He knows this *truth*.
Smart according to state
Exam ideals
And meritocracy dreams that have pushed him into
The *other* Black man
Labels.

But he smiles behind
The spectacles
And the bearded truths he holds
Dear to himself

I want to know
As much as I can…
And I wonder if he will want to share with me.
The recorder-researcher-semi reporter.

Time will tell.

Malcolm [Pre]

Big and bold like man,
He is.
Smiling and frowning at the
Same time.
Not because he is disappointed
Or content
But because he feels,
Just like everyone…else.
You might mistake him for
An athlete.
Which he is…or used to be.
He brands his education
Not like a badge of honor
But more like a tattoo,
An experience that
Remains permanently etched
Within the contours of his
Black face

Others seem to stare at him
Often
Because elements
Of Negrophobia
Remain stained on his skin.

He seems aware.
He seems unbothered. And bothered.
The voice, not too loud, but
Lots of bass and passion
When we talk schooling and
Education.

He holds back and his body language
Speaks to volumes of misunderstandings
That he has learned to accept.
And now he smiles…
Candidly and fully
As if he has remembered
That the storm
Is over.

Lamar [Pre]

Small in size
Bold with excitement and possibility.
He is warm,
So warm, others smile in his presence,
Even strangers.
The width of his smile never leaves
When he speaks.
In fact I wonder if his smile
Has been painted by the likes of
Power? If it is stationed there
Like Juneteenth.

He seems compliant and good.
Genuinely.
High school valedictorian
College scholarship winner-
Prestigious school.
Now he operates NYC iron horses.
A good job with good benefits
And stability.

His mother and father
Both drive MTA buses.
Yes,
He is their child.

Justice [Pre]

Young with fearless tendencies
Freshly removed from the
School to prison pipeline that
Caged in his father
The man who taught him
That the government cannot be
Trusted.
And he believes this
Because it has been proven to
Him over and over again.

Medium height. Eyes that
Observe closely and thoughtfully.
Brown skin that he wears proudly,
Chewing on McDonalds burger
With delight.

I enjoy his insight that
Reads beyond his years.
No desires for college
But a desire to change the
World.

I can't help but wonder
How this will happen
In his shoes
In his skin
In his zip code…

I wonder.

Portraitist Response

When I first looked at the pre poems I created about my research participants, it had been three months since I had written them and some of the words I used to describe my participants seemed essentialist, limited and at times, beautiful. When I use the word beautiful, it is not to imply that what I write is beautiful but that the words reminded me of the beauty in each of these men. A beauty that was often hidden and silent or bold and loud depending on who I was

speaking with. Although there were similarities between each of them, they were all very different and wanted to ensure that they were helpful for my project. I often got statements during the beginning of the research project that echoed "I hope this is helpful." I would always respond with "I appreciate and value your time, please do not feel pressured about what you are saying." I wondered how much of this was chivalry since I was a woman doing research with men, or if this was more about the power dynamic between the researcher and the researched? I cannot answer this question nor do I think the reasons for the answer lie solely between these two ideas. However, I often thought about how the research participants viewed me and constantly made attempts at breaking down the walls between the researcher and the researched, a main goal in any portraiture study.

My pre poetic portraits have several common themes such as focusing more on empirical evidence as it pertains to individual appearance and character traits. Some of the physical attributes I focused on in the poems remind me of the intense focus on the Black male body, although that was not my intention per se. It was important for me to create physical images of the men through the poems by talking about their complexions, mannerisms and overall presentation of what I presumed to be their literacies. This overall pre poetic portrait is a reflection of my initial observations of my research participants.

After coding these poems, Black masculinities and racism were most prevalent throughout the weaving of my words. I believe this is partially because of my own lens and experiences with Black men as well as the opening stories each of these men shared with me in their responses to the poem and initial conversations. Each participant knew, based on my IRB consent form, that I was interested in how Black men navigated public schools in their lives, as well as their understandings of multiple issues connected to their respected to their identities. As

such, these initial themes also help paint the picture that I was searching for and that they may have felt obligated to reflect upon based on agreeing to participate in the study. At the same time, education was a strong undercurrent to Black masculinities and racism in the poems, as if these three themes are always intertwined. The intersections among racism, Black masculinities and education haunted me throughout the entire research process and I would argue that is because it haunts me in my daily life as I look around my own community and family.

There was also a mirroring effect in these pre poetic portraits as I was reminded of my own poem "When Schools Ain't Enough for Black Boys" through the lines. There was something about each of the participants that reminded me of my own brothers; of the Black men I taught when I was an English teacher. Because that poem was my first entry into this research project, I cannot deny that it's stanzas echo through these poetic productions. What does it mean when the stanzas you create for your research participants mirror the stanzas you would create for your own brothers? What does it mean when you hear some of the pain in each of the men's counterstories and it comes as no surprise that racism continues to dictate their lives whether they realize it or not? These are the questions I asked myself as I read the pre poems that were constructed in a little journal I carried around during the data collection process. I cannot answer all of these questions finitely but I can say that these intersections among the experiences of my brothers, my Black male students and my research participants reflect the similar collective memories and experiences of Black men in New York City public schools and of course other major cities nationwide.

Post Poetic Portraits

Kwame [Post]

"I don't really fit into people's boxes of who they think I might be because of the way I look. Whether it's like my ethnicity or how I dress or how I carry myself. I think I'm very different than what people see on the surface."

I am the quintessential brotha, flaunting my degrees in the face of power.
I do this for myself as well as those who look like me that can't yet speak
For reasons best known
To themselves.

They called me Trader Man in school because I knew how to
Stretch money. But I also knew how to use
Fancy words to talk about capital. A teenage entrepreneur… in my mind.
This made my teachers respect me and
Suddenly
My future was brighter than my skin in the summer.

I have successes but I am not yet successful
Because my bank account does not allow me to live in
Gentrified New York 'hoods. But I am smart. This I know.
And I use this reality to my advantage in board meetings and
In business plans that are specifically designed
To benefit more quintessential brothas like me.

High school was my underground railroad,
As I knew the codes needed to get to the Other side.
I read canonical texts with ease and wrote like a champ.
Standardized tests were as calculating as
My English teachers' daily lesson plans
That instilled discipline more than critical thinking.
But discipline helped me after all, right?
I mean, I got through college and
My networks span the globe.

What Black man wouldn't want
My connections?
What Black man wouldn't want
To swim where I've swam
What Black man wouldn't want
To trade places with a rich white man,
Just for a day?

Malcolm [Post]

"It's too many problems in our race to define what we are. I think we need to be aware of our history, I think that that's more stringent and we should be defining like, trying to write the future not by defining what Black masculinity is when we don't understand what our culture is."

Sportsman. I love sports because I'm in charge when I play
And now my suits have taken the place of my uniforms
That I used to wear to protect the image of athletic Black man.
I ran up and down fields like Frederick (footnote) in order to pay for the tuition
That now allows me to live in Williamsburg
With the hipsters.

Fathered two children with two women
And now some call me a statistic, but I am not.
I was in love, more than once.
Doesn't that count when you're a brotha?
I guess not.

Economics only matter when you don't have money.
I never want that to happen, not having any money.
I've worked too hard to have some money. Not a lot.
But enough to take my children
To Disney World. And enough to have
People trust me as soon as I saw the L word:
Lawyer.

The white women who clutch their purses probably think I rape women
Because I am so big and Black and unapologetically bold.
Oh well. They won't change anyway.
I guess Bigger Thomas did more harm
Than good because on paper I'm dope as hell
But in person so many fear me.

My Jamaican lineage reminds me every day
That most Black folks don't have a real place
To call home.
And when we do have a home,
We must leave for Capital that is continuously
Stolen from our native lands
Like native sons
Without mothers.

So I do what I can to honor American dreams
That don't honor me. Perhaps that is why I never
Had a daughter. How will their lives be similar to

Or different from my own?
Only time will tell.

Until then, I will continue to trust in my degrees
And the green although I am fully aware
That even that
Cannot stop a police officer
From murdering me
At point blank range,
In broad daylight…

Lamar [Post]

"I found out that I was the valedictorian… They posted like everybody's average… well not everyone's but all of the honors students in the schools and stuff like that and I had the highest score."

Being nice and educated has made my life relatively easy.
Most people don't see me as a threat,
Especially the Ones that matter.
Plus I have a good city job,
A woman that adores me and a brand new baby.
Living the dream, man.

I operate trains in NYC. The best part about my day
Is I am alone most of the time, with my thoughts and my goodness.
"You are so nice!" I have heard this phrase all my life
And to be honest, I agree.
Being nice and remaining quiet at the right times
Continue to keep me alive. Safe. Sane. Free.
I guess since I was the valedictorian
Everyone thought I would become a doctor, my first love.
So did I…
But I don't think about that anymore
Because I'm still better off than most of the brothas
I grew up with,
That I went to school with.
But I know I'm not better than them
Just in a better position is all.

My hands are rough like real men
And my blue-collar job further confirms that.
But my thinking is more white-collar than anything else
But nobody remembers that when you become a
Train conductor.

Life is not as bad as my friends make it seem
Sure they are killing some of us
But some of us need to stay out of the streets
And go to school.
I guarantee if most of these cats did that,
They would end up feeling a little more
Liberated.

As for me, I will keep doing what I've been doing
In order to stay off the radar
And on the payroll.

Justice [Post]

"America was never fun. Never. They just make us feel like this. Racism is still alive it's just not out in the open no more, that's all. So we don't have an uprising."

Everyone around me is either stupid or sleepwalking.
My father's lessons about Black power have ignited and infuriated me
Because I look around my Brownsville 'hood and wonder,
Why doesn't anyone care about these people?
Why do I care and what can I do as a 19-year-old Black man?

Imma go back to school one of these days,
But high school was really nothing to remember.
Those white teachers told me I was racist just because
I said Christopher Columbus was a murderer.
Isn't that true?

My mother doesn't understand me.
She says I'm too angry and need to focus on going to college.
What will college teach me that I don't already know?
I know America is racist
I know I am stopped and frisked at least once a month
I know I don't really have civil rights
I know I'm seen as a young, lazy kid
I know nobody values my voice
What will college teach me that I don't already know?

I was reading about Nat Turner (footnote) the other day and I wondered
Where are all the Nat Turners today?
Will there ever be another uprising or a revolution?
I have so many questions that nobody can answer.
This is the reason why teachers didn't like me,

I asked too many questions.

Some days I feel hopeless but I do realize I'm a leader.
I teach my friends all the time about our history.
At least my father was around to teach me about my culture
We don't be knowing about our culture.

Maybe I will go study computers or rap or box,
Man I dunno. There are too many rules to make it
In this country. It's all too much.
I want to rhyme
But then I will be another Black man who raps… right?

I'm young but I got big plans… big plans for my people.
We need our own institutions
And our own rules to live by.
Because They just don't care…

Portraitist Response

These post poems, which I think of as final poetic portraits went through numerous revisions because I wanted to ensure that the voices in the poems represent (as much as possible) the voices of the men as presented in the data. Sometimes I would change a word or a phrase that I believed was more of my construction of the participant's voice than the participant himself. I utilized a combination of portraiture's "voice as interpretation" and "voice as preoccupation" method. Essentially voice as interpretation allows one to understand "the researcher's attempts to make sense of the data. She is asking 'what is the meaning of this action, gesture, or communication to the actors in the setting?' and 'What is the meaning of this to me?'" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 91). Considering that portraiture is rooted in the tradition of ethnography, it is important to remember that much of the work is interpretive and a search for meaning, which Geertz (1973) points out when he says that researchers must dig through interpretations, "through piled-up structures of inference and implication" (p. 7). Similarly, voice as preoccupation "refers to the ways in which the researcher's observations and her text are

shaped by the assumptions she brings to the inquiry, reflecting her disciplinary background, her theoretical perspectives, her intellectual interests, and her understanding of the relevant literature" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 93). The threads of these two portraiture methods are infused throughout the stanzas of these post poems.

Writing these final poetic portraits was more complicated than I imagined because the role of ethics kept coming back to my mind. I wanted to ensure that each of my participants could read these poems and feel comfortable. Yet still, I wanted to be as truthful about my observations and interpretations as possible. It was hard to choose one quote, however, I chose what I believed was most aligned to the overall data.

The poems are the voices of the men as I see them and as I have created them and theorized about them throughout the research process. Unlike the pre-poems, these final poetic portraits dig deeper into the minds of the men after analyzing so many of our conversations over the course of several months. The poems are not only based on observational thoughts and research-based interpretations, but more like fluid conceptions of how these men navigate, understand and reflect on their experiences in New York City public schools, English classrooms and life in general.

Within the lines of each of these final poetic portraits, I have pushed myself to step away from essentialization and really paint the picture of who the men told me they were, because I think it is important for their voices to stand apart from my own. Of course, the nature of portraiture requires that these lines are blurred a bit and I can see that is reflected in my poetic narratives in this chapter here. I also see my own biases and critique of my participants in these poems, through my poetic-researcher lens. Although I understand that bias is inescapable in any qualitative study or any research study for that matter, I realize that although I wanted to remain

as open as possible about the men's experiences, as a researcher, critiquing and judging those experiences in order to make sense of my research questions were inevitable.

The use of the word "final" does not in any way mean that these poems say all there is to know about the participants post data analysis. However, I use final to indicate that these poems represent another side of the initial poems represented. These poems speak to how my understandings of CRT, Black masculinities, identities and English education were challenged and interrupted often while speaking to each of these men. The very nature of my qualitative inquiry required me to be silent even when something that was said offended me or struck me as particularly frustrating. I know this is because I realized during the process that this research study is so much larger than me and the men I worked with, it is about so many Black men whose stories we will never hear or read about in fancy academic journals.

At the same time, there is a clear sense of respect for the participants reflected in the poems that was incredibly important to me, not in a politics of respectability kind of way, but in an appreciation for their time and personal reflection kind of way. I can say without hesitation that I had full cooperation from my participants at all times and there were some difficult conversations that stirred up emotions that may have never been reflected upon. Yet still, each participant went as far as they comfortably could because I honestly believe they cared about the research project due to the nature of the themes in direct correlation with their own lives and experiences.

There is a final poem that I wrote, which is written from many of my lenses as poet-researcher, qualitative field worker, Critical Race Theorist, Black woman and English teacher as a result of this dissertation study. The stanzas are sitting below like the stains of this project that will forever remain through and under these words…

Academic Footprints

These words and experiences were tethered by theories and rules.
But that is the nature of the game, to play and to be played
Like collegial pawns.

As I listened to the sounds of their stories,
I heard much of my own in the tears that never rolled down their faces.
As I listened to the echoes of their stories,
I realized there was privilege in my pen.
More privilege than Power for me.
But I listened as closely as I could
And I methodically cried inside
When their words were so painful it had become immune to their existence.
I understood the why.
But I am still grappling with the how of changing some of those realities. Their realities.

Not a savior. I didn't come to save, I came to present, construct and (re)construct
The silences in so-called safe classroom spaces
That folks remember for life.
A former English teacher who writes poetry to reflect on the past and the present
And
Some things I will never know or comprehend.

But these stories are beyond the realm of these pages and these stages.
While the rage of my words are justified by CRT, it existed before the term
So sometimes I wonder if theory can ever fully do justice to the practices we practice
Just to be treated as more than three fifths of an IRB.

The portraitist in me painted with words and sculpted with data,
But when that wasn't enough,
I went back to the questions that got me here in the first place,
The questions that are filled with my biases and doubt
The questions that are filled with my questions and conscience
The questions that had to be tailor-made
In order to get here.

Tell me how long the train has been gone
While the fires that linger from last time
Become the next time
When dead Black bodies are emblems of the embattled
And the forgotten
And the weary
And the tired-of-fighting-to-be-acknowledged
And the white-privilege-rules-again sob stories.

But I digress. Or do I?
What good is it to scream #BlackLivesMatter from a mountaintop
When teachers cannot even hear it in the classroom?
Yeah.
That's how it be sometimes.

The brothas spoke to me like I was their blood sister.
Told me about their mamas and their lovers and their hopes and their fears.
They told me openly and cautiously.
Because after all, I had the pen and the abstract.
This sharing of skin was more than some superficial construction
Coined in theories that don't live what they write.
This sharing of skin was like a badge of remembrance and rememory
Rewriting ourselves into each other's lives
Like discounted counterstories.

So now what? I will write conclusions
That do not conclude the problems that preceded and will continue after this project.
I will stand and deliver and defend the findings presented here.
I will speak from the trenches and the truths I understand
And then…

The stories will still speak for themselves, hopefully.
The stories will still speak to the souls of ancestors and future generations to come.
Yes, it will.
Because the depth of Black masculinities and Black literacies
Are bound by the theories that push, prod, ponder, and pulse with tomorrow.
I hope.

I hope this was more than a construction and a (re)construction
And more of an inquiry into the sights and sounds, layers and love.
I hope.
I hope that
You know these men are more than
Research figments of the imagination.
They are the hopes and the dreams of untold and dismissed
Narratives.

All I did was unbury some of these words
Slowly. Carefully. Deliberately.
In the name of

Literacy. Loyalty. Liability.

I hope you know…

Chapter 6
Significance and Implications

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the intersections among Black masculinities, literacies and identities through participant reflections about education by their respective memories of the secondary English classroom and personal life experiences. The theoretical lens of CRT along with sociocultural perspectives of literacy and the qualitative method of portraiture served as the guiding principles to further make sense of the data gathered and analyzed. By shifting the focus on adult Black males who were remembering their experiences in high school and their lives thereafter, my dissertation creates a new body of literature that moves beyond working with current youth to working with men whose voices we do not often hear about in English education research. I argue that the voices of adult Black males and their (re)memories of education and the English classroom are just as powerful as those often explored with Black youth in public schools today.

The existing research has focused on understanding why Black men are failing academically and the systems in place that help perpetuate these academic shortcomings. Much of the current research also explains educational inequalities through a majoritarian storytelling model, ignoring much of the nuances and complexities of Black male educational experiences. While the existing research has been a great factor in my understanding of the layers of this work, it does not address what happens to many Black men once they leave high school. There is an implicit belief that focusing on Black youth of today is the only way to make sense of what is currently happening to Black boys in urban public schools. However, the very nature of this study and the findings speak to the power of having Black men who are removed from the high school experience, (re)construct and (re)imagine who they were then, who they are now and who they imagine themselves to be in the future. Additionally through the use of poetry,

counterstorytelling and the inclusion of Black masculinities and literacies, these stories stand up and stand out in a sea of deficit tales about Black males and education.

Summary of Findings

To contribute to the existing research while filling the empirical gap that exists about the post high school experiences of adult Black men, I first came up with a theoretical and conceptual framework that was specifically designed to explore how Black men remember their high school experiences, including but not limited to the English classroom and if it all their lives have been affected thereafter. I came up with targeted conversational questions that were separated into eight parts, as a way to build trust over a sustained period of time. Additionally, I also incorporated a poetic lens as result of my own positionality as a poet, which offers a qualitative study that includes multiple tiers of data that clearly connects the researcher to the participants. Although previous research has incorporated the use of poetry to explore the experiences of Black male literacies (Kirkland, 2013), where my study differs is the creation of pre and post poetic portraits that speak directly to the data analysis and research process as well as poetry that the participants spoke back to directly.

In this study, I attempted to answer four research questions. Below I respond to the four questions, specifically using an intersectional approach that takes into account the data reflected in chapters four and five through race, masculinities, literacies and education. The goal of this approach is to speak to the futility of privileging a single dimension of an experience as if it can constitute someone's life. Instead, I utilize the belief that "major systems of oppression are interlocking" (Brah & Phoenix, 2009, p. 250).

1) How does a select group of men who identify as Black, (re)member the secondary English classroom?

The four participants in the study had extensive memories of the English classroom that were indelibly tied to race, masculinities and literacies, although they did not define it as such, their counterstories spoke to this reality. Although each participant was unique in his own right, there were collective memories of the English classroom that suggested narrow curriculum that primarily focused on European literature as well as a playing up or down of their respective Black masculinities in order to adhere to the school status quo. One of the participants admitted that he often played up being a nice guy in order to get along with teachers and administration, which he found helpful for his academic success as a Black male. Another participant who was blatantly comfortable in asserting his Blackness and desire to discuss Black power ideologies in school reveals that he was often referred to as racist and thrown out of class. As a result, his inability to downplay his respective Black masculinity led to his frustration in school, particularly in the English classroom where he often desired to express himself through writing rhymes. The other two participants, who had similar backgrounds being raised as first generation immigrants, understood that school was a place designed for social mobility as opposed to questioning teacher pedagogies. Accordingly, they played the role of "good student" in order to ensure they would go on to college, which they both did. At the same time, upon personal reflection and memory, they began to think about how these behaviors impacted their lives then and now.

2) What do these (re)memberings indicate about their interpretations of their respective literacies, teaching/learning and their lives?

The participants' rememberings indicated that collectively many of them repressed their cultural ways of knowing and literacies in order to thrive in school. They all understood that there was a specific school literacy, which was explicitly speaking, writing and discussing all school related issues in Standard English. One of the participants clearly stated that he felt this was the purpose of school and that one of his favorite English teachers made it clear that school was a place to leave their colloquial ways of speaking behind. Another participant made it clear that when he tried to write his rhymes and poetry in English class, it was seen as non-academic. Because he needed to graduate from high school, he adhered to these rules but still feels great frustration in his life based on those experiences; he admitted that he refuses to go to college based on these experiences in high school. One participant shared that being a Black male athlete meant that he had to utilize the literacies that would guarantee good grades that kept him playing track and football. He viewed teaching and learning primarily as a one-way process where the teacher provided the rules and the students followed. There was hardly any room for critical engagement or reflection. Another participant shared that he knew the power of navigating multiple literacies at an early age due to his early educational background in the Caribbean. As such, it did not bother him that he was expected to utilize the preferred school literacy throughout his high school experience. He also argued that teaching and learning failures could not be primarily blamed on teachers but also on students who he insisted "did not want to learn." Overall, there was a collective belief that teaching and learning practices in English classrooms and most classrooms for that matter were more about teacher beliefs and school policies.

Unfortunately, student engagement was not a priority based on their memories and two of them believed that this was because they were Black men.

3) What are the participants' perceptions of what counts as literacy?

The participants' perceptions of what counts as literacy varied and a couple of them struggled to answer this question. It was clear that all of them had never really thought about the question fully, as literacy is often thought of as a one-size-fits-all concept. Upon digging deeper with questions about their lives, one participant acknowledged his community cultural practices as his preferred literacy. He made the claim that the preferred school literacy would not allow him to survive in his own community so he often felt marginalized in school. Another participant viewed literacy as a way of life and that having a grasp on navigating multiple literacies is what allows one to succeed in this country. Because he felt confident that he had mastered this art form, he talked about literacy in a way that was affirming and powerful for his own life. Another participant blamed his high school for not valuing what he thought of as "sophisticated literacies" as it pertains to reading and writing only. He believes that he struggled during his first year of college because of the failings of his high school's English education pedagogical practices. He was unable to connect school literacies to his own ways of knowing and being. Another participant understood the separation of powers in his school and home literacy practices and believed it was necessary in order to climb the social ladder, therefore, he felt no harm in these distinctions between seemingly important v. unimportant literacies.

4) How do they critique (if at all) their public educational experiences and how does this impact their understandings of their own masculinities?

Each participant openly critiqued his public educational experiences apart from one. For those that critiqued their public educational experiences, there was a collective frustration about

stereotypical perceptions of who they were as Black male students in urban public schools that often impacted how they saw themselves inside and outside of the classroom. These stereotypical perceptions have followed each of them into their lives thereafter and require a certain performance of their Black male identities that make others (particularly whites) feel safe. Considering the current political and social climate for Black male bodies dying at the hands of police, these frustrations make sense. Participants agreed that learning how to navigate public schools helped them navigate many of the obstacles they faced and continue to face thereafter in other institutions and communities as Black men.

The one participant who hardly critiqued his public educational experiences appeared to be concerned about respectability politics. It was evident through his words and body language that he was uncomfortable being critical of his experiences in high school. Every story he told was tied to goodness and great teaching and learning experiences. However, he consciously talked about the burden of being a Black man in America and the pressure he felt as a result, at times. He discounted these feelings by pointing out that he was the high school valedictorian and now lives a pretty comfortable life as blue-collar worker. It was clear that his masculinity was tied to academic success and financial stability, which was a theme each participant broached uniquely.

Conclusions

The conclusions from this small qualitative study follow the research questions and the findings and therefore address six areas: a) Black male literacies are not honored in the New York City public high schools the participants attended; b) parents and individuals are primarily responsible for the educational success of Black males; c) Black masculinities are a constant threat in schools as well as in the communities inhabited by Black men; d) Black men have

collective racialized memories about their experiences while attending New York City public schools; e) English educators often avoid discussions of race in their students' lives; f) earning an education can help alleviate some of the burdens that come with being Black and male. Following is a discussion of the major findings and conclusions drawn from this research. This discussion is followed by limitations of the study, implications and recommendations and a final reflection on the research. It is important to note that the use of the word "conclusions" only pertains to the data collected about the four men and is not meant to be generalizable since this is a modest qualitative study.

Black Male Literacies Are Not Honored in New York City Public High Schools

The first major finding of this research is that Black male literacies are not honored in New York City public high schools as reflected through the participants' responses to the poem and conversational transcripts. This finding was implied in my assumptions. A conclusion to be drawn based on this finding is that many New York City public high schools are sites of oppression that promote the erasure of student's respective cultures and literacies in order to adhere to a biased and unjust educational status quo. With regard to Black males, their respective ways of knowing, being and seeing the world continue to be marginalized in order to enforce school discipline codes and policies. Research continues to show that Black males are suspended at disproportionately higher rates. In this regard, it can also be concluded that Black male literacies may be viewed as anti-school policies, leading to the continuation of these extreme discipline trends.

Parents and Individuals are Primarily Responsible for the Education of Black Males

The second major finding was that three out of the four participants believed that individuals and parents played a key role in the educational successes of Black males. Although

only one participant said this explicitly, it was also implied through the words of the other participants. A conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that parents and individuals are often blamed for the educational outcomes of Black men when clearly there are systems in place that limit parental access to schools as well as individual autonomy in oppressive school structures. Although most of the participants heavily critiqued many aspects of school, only one really critiqued the bureaucratic and racist systems of public schooling that represent larger social and cultural inequities. It can also be concluded that Black parents and Black males in urban communities are not encouraged to be critical of the very systems that have the power to limit their educational opportunities and social mobility.

Black Masculinities Are A Constant Threat in Schools and Urban Communities

The study's third major finding was that Black masculinities are a constant threat in schools and the urban communities Black men inhabit, another finding tied to my assumptions. All participants expressed that their Blackness and maleness made them hyper aware of their behavior inside and outside of school as a way to remain safe. The men had an explicit understanding that there were certain ways they were expected to act in order to perform a kind of Black masculinity that was non-threatening. Although they all believed this was unjust, all but one of the participants followed suit to a certain extent, especially in school. A conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is schools and urban communities help perpetuate stereotypical representations of Black men and the Black male body which may be an extension of the media and popular culture. This reality enforces Black male marginalization in the schools they attend and communities they live in.

Black Men Have Collective Racialized Memories About Experiences in NYC Public Schools

The study's fourth major finding revealed that Black men have collective racialized memories, which is the third and final finding tied to my assumptions. Each participant had specific experiences that happened to them and their Black male friends throughout the course of their high school career that indicated highly racialized teaching and learning environments, where the majority of their teachers were white. Although these experiences were not always named as race, it was clear that racial dynamics were at play and that there were emotional and internalized traumas as a result. A conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that students in urban schools are so accustomed to having predominantly white teachers in their urban schools that dealing with racism is perceived as part of the package in which students have no power. According to the participants, even when racialized incidents that included name-calling and stereotypical language occurred, there were no repercussions for teachers. Based on these stories from the participants, it can also be concluded that colorblind ideologies are upheld in urban New York City public schools as many of the teachers believed their actions were not racist.

English Educators Often Avoid Discussions of Race in Their Students' Lives

The study's fifth major finding is that English educators often avoid discussions of the role of race in their students' lives. It is important to note that all of the participants had only white English teachers throughout their high school tenure. Each of them claimed that issues around race, racism and identity were not addressed within the curriculum. However, all participants studied Shakespeare and other American authors that were not people of color. A conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that students who attend New York City urban

schools that are predominantly Black and Latino with a largely white teaching force are completely erased from the curriculum.

Earning an Education Can Alleviate Some of the Burdens that Come with Being Black and Male

The study's sixth and final major finding showed that all of the participants believed in some way that earning an education had the power to alleviate some of the burdens that come with being Black and male. Although only one participant said this explicitly, the three other participants implied this belief in various memories they shared about their educational experiences and current lives. A conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that despite numerous odds faced by Black males who attend urban public schools, there is still hope among some of them that education can be a true civil right and equalizer for everyone.

Limitations of Study

There were many limitations to this study. Doing research with people I believe I connected with due to race and lived experiences was incredibly complicated. My goal was to remain as ethical as possible throughout the process. Because of this fact, I constantly checked myself as much as possible to ensure that I was not creating stories from my own experiences but sometimes the lines were blurred. I tried to overcome this obstacle by referring to all data that were specifically about research, before writing. Denzin (2003) stated that methodologies such as portraiture and theories like CRT represent qualitative research that continues to move away from postpositivist notions of research and those that adhere to formal relationships in the field and espouse researcher objectivity and detachment. My goal was to create respectful and engaging relationships with my participants and I believe I managed to do that, but sometimes I wondered if participants felt pressured to respond a certain way. At the same time, constructing

their narratives in a way that was humane, complex and as fair as possible was important to me as a researcher, poet, activist and educator.

Working with such a small group of Black males is of course mostly reflective of their individual lives and experiences. In the spirit of qualitative research and portraiture the findings are in no way meant to be representative of all Black males who attend urban schools in New York City, but I do believe that their counterstories reflect many Black male experiences in New York City public schools and other large urban areas.

Because the dates of attendance that the participants attended high school includes a sixteen-year gap, things may have changed in their former schools and some of these rememories may no longer be reflective of the current conditions at the schools. However, because this study was focused on the memories of the participants as a way for them to (re)imagine and (re)member their lives, the current happenings at their schools are not necessarily the focus. Although I would argue that many of the participants' reflections continue to be "true."

Another limitation is that most of my data is primarily from the conversations I had with the men over the four month period at designated public locations. Although I created poems about the participants and did receive individual responses to the poem I wrote from each of them, I wonder if meeting them in more locations other than public coffee shops could have given me more of a holistic understanding of their respective literacies, masculinities and identities. Perhaps meeting them in their various communities that they lived in across New York City could have offered another critical layer to the work.

Lastly, a final limitation was my positionality as a Black woman working with Black men. Sometimes I felt that the men were being rather chivalrous because of the nature of gender dynamics and patriarchy. I often found myself reflecting upon different aspects of masculinity

studies during our conversations, as an entry point for myself into some of the thoughts they shared. At the same time, sometimes I felt they were sharing a lot because I was a Black woman and it was safe to speak to me. After all, I was not in direct competition with them so to speak, but I guess that is also patriarchy speaking and not necessarily the power of human relationships across gender lines. Similarly, being a Black woman who felt this work was also very much connected to my own life, at many times our conversations went beyond the research questions leading to highly personal and politically charged emotions. Although on one hand, this allowed me to understand more about the men and their respective literacies and masculinities, on the other hand, sometimes it was clear that the men felt overwhelmed by some of the emotions they were reflecting upon. I also wondered about how my status as a doctoral candidate impacted how they responded to the project and if this may have played into some of the politics of respectability that came up in some of our conversations. After reflecting on the data intensely, I believe that my status as a doctoral candidate had an impact on how the men responded to my questions and beliefs.

Given these limitations, my findings are relative to the participants in my study and are not meant to speak for all Black men who attended New York City public schools. At the same time, the words and experiences of my participants are certainly a significant contribution to the field of English education and the findings here could have impact for research and practice.

Implications

Previous qualitative studies in English education with Black males have primarily focused on high school youth (Kirkland, 2013) and within education, qualitative studies have focused on Black males who have dropped out of high school or experienced incarceration (Gause, 2005). In filling this empirical gap, similar to the current work of Kirkland's (2013) *A*

Search Past Silence: The Literacy of Young Black Men, findings from my dissertation, *Not Your Average Brotha: Examining the Educational Lives, Literacies and Masculiniities of Black Males*, can have powerful implications for English educators, researchers and policy makers.

Recommendations

English educators in New York City schools and other urban areas may consider how their curriculum and pedagogical practices directly impact the learning and lives of Black male students and make conscious efforts to acknowledge their own biases in the classroom. English educators should specifically consider how mainstream representations of Black males and the Black male body impact how Black males as well as students of other races and backgrounds perceive Black masculinities. This recommendation is not implying that English educators should only focus on the experiences of Black male students, but that they should take into account what it means to have large numbers of Black male students in their classrooms and whether or not they are contributing to stereotypical perceptions of who they are and who they can be.

Researchers can push against deficit understandings of the experiences of Black males in New York City public schools by conducting larger qualitative research studies over longer periods of time. These potential studies can also include family interviews and individual community practices as a way to further understand the literacies, identities and masculinities of Black males. Similarly, the research can involve Black male youth and adult Black men who have an opportunity to speak to one another about their current and past experiences, as a way to determine past and present similarities and differences and its connection to teaching and learning.

Another recommendation for researchers might be to compare the high school graduation rates of Black boys and Black girls, as a way to challenge the Black male exceptionalism argument that insists that Black males are "endangered." Oftentimes, Black girls and women are excluded from these studies and it would be interesting to have a qualitative research comparison that speaks back to this popular narrative.

In light of the current My Brother's Keeper initiative (MBK) that focuses on creating more occupational opportunities for Black males, policy makers should also consider ways to measure teacher effectiveness in schools that are measured by student voices as opposed to standardized testing. Instead of obsessing over Black and Latino male graduation rates (although I do understand the sense of urgency), policy makers should consider ways of ensuring that teachers are prepared to teach large populations of Black males by hearing from the students themselves, possibly through citywide short response surveys.

Additionally, policy makers may use these findings to reframe narrow conversations about Black male experiences in New York City public schools while encouraging pedagogical and postsecondary support structures in order to increase Black male graduation rates. What I have learned from my own experiences as a teacher and from speaking with each of my participants, is that most current educational policies in urban public schools focus on standardized testing and common core state standards. Considering the current "post-racial" buzz throughout this country, I have seen very little standardized curriculum that addresses the role of race, racism, literacies and masculinities. Policy makers have the power to help push for curriculum that speaks to some of the most pressing issues in this nation including, but not limited to, the miseducation of Black males.

Last but certainly not least, policy makers can push for ongoing racial and cultural teacher trainings and professional developments throughout the school year that address gender and racial biases in the classroom and beyond. This can speak to the some of the current trends among the negative teaching and learning experiences of Black male students.

Final Reflections

"There is nothing more negligent than attempting to address a problem one finds on a branch than by censoring the leaves." ~Saul Williams

As this study comes to a close, I want to take a moment to reflect on this journey that has occurred throughout and beyond these pages. It is my hope that the stories of these Black men are more than temporary constructions of qualitative methods. Instead, I hope that their stories have countered and pushed against the stereotypes and the media hype of the so-called Black male experience. I hope it is clear through this work and the work of those before me that there isn't a single Black male experience. There are many Black male experiences which can be represented by the way one chooses to navigate one's literacies through languages and cultures or the way one chooses to explore his masculinities through education or daily life lessons. These experiences are not all the same even though there may be overlapping similarities among the experiences of Black men nationwide.

As Saul Williams beautifully articulated, censoring the leaves due to a problem on the branch does not solve the problem; in fact it only magnifies it. I like to think of my participants as the leaves on racialized American trees. The branches on these trees include CRT and New York City public education systems. As leaves, they have been censored so much in their lives that it has become normalized for them. Now as adult Black men, they still practice self-censorship in the forms of downplaying home literacies or stereotypical aspects of Black maleness, in order to fit in to the boxes that have been constructed for them by Others. But this is

how I see them of course and not necessarily how they see themselves. That is my biggest research takeaway: my constructions are my own.

I have learned once again that I do not trust educational systems. As a Black woman working on her doctorate I understand how hypocritical it is of me to say that, but it's true. Yes, I have managed to thrive and survive in these spaces; yes, I have learned how to publish articles about the work that specifically matters to me, however, is that enough? Is it enough that I have learned to assimilate, adapt and acquiesce to the traditions of the Ivory Tower and the Ivy League to get a degree? I struggle with my accumulation of degrees and titles in the name of education. I love this work and cannot picture myself doing anything but this work, but until I see more people that look like me in these spaces, I cannot help but feel alone. Yet there is an undeniable amount of power and privilege in my research and I know that I will continue to do scholarship around Black people and education.

The hope that each of the participants had in spite of their educational highs and lows in New York City public schools was inspiring yet frustrating for me. Why do they still have so much hope in educational systems? As I continued to reflect on this question, I continued to work on my dissertation, one that will lead to a Doctor of Philosophy degree. What will I do differently as a so-called doctor that I have not been doing before? That is what I am asking myself. I am constantly working through these tensions of my own intersections of Black, woman, mother, wife, poet, activist and scholar in academic spaces. There is a strong love and a deep resentment of the ways that I constantly have to prove myself in ways that others will never have to. But still, I am here and I love the work, even the tensions, bureaucracy and hierarchy.

Although I have a distrust of educational systems, I know that my voice and the voices of so many others who do similar work on race, education, literacies and masculinities are needed

to shift the paradigm of English Education. I know that doing this kind of work sometimes feels like an uphill battle. I know that sometimes my research will be viewed as me-search. However I draw on the words of poet June Jordan, for I know that in this dissertation I have relied on my own truths and the truths of the men respectfully and critically: “To tell the truth is to become beautiful, to begin to love yourself, value yourself. And that's political, in its most profound way.” I love myself and this work enough to know that even though I distrust educational systems, there is room for me to grow, create and find peace within these structures, while making spaces for more social justice aligned and multifaceted journeys.

As a qualitative researcher I have learned that analyzing data is more than reading conversational transcripts and coming up with codes that align to theoretical and empirical foci. I have learned when to accept that the data pushes against some of my conceptual frameworks while acknowledging the limits of my research design. One of the biggest lessons I have learned about qualitative research is that you must be willing to change your research questions in order to accommodate the voices of your research participants. I initially wanted to explore my role as a Black woman doing work with Black men until I realized the data did not necessarily speak to this experience. Of course all of the reflexive conversations I had with myself throughout the process were my own personal and positional data that can be explored at another time. However, part of doing qualitative work with human participants is acknowledging their major role in the work while thinking about how and why they decided to share some of their stories with you. Building powerful relationships with your participants that become more than answering a set of biased questions is the true goal of the qualitative researcher.

The internal research questions tied to my own positionality as a Black woman were touched upon throughout the poetic journeys I have taken throughout this work. It is only

through poetry that I felt comfortable enough to shed some of my own research layers. I learned that poetry is directly tied to qualitative research as it provides more questions about the data. The poems are meant to be exploratory in nature, uncovering and discovering the trials, tribulations and triumphs that emerge when doing this work. The poems are the leaves and the portraits are the branches. Thus, to understand the poems, you have to look carefully at the portraits, like a trained educational scientist.

Poetic Epilogue

These stories do not fit into boxes of Blackness
Tinged with post-racial lies.
These stories sting and strangle
The researcher lens.
Fogging it up and fleeing from
Post traumatic Slave disorder.

These stories be
All up in my thoughts, although I am not them.
I have taken on the responsibility
To tell these stories
Not for a grade
But for a chance to have these stories
Fly like fear
The day before they shot Martin.

These stories are not endnotes
In your multicultural anthologies.
They breathe and move with swag and stamina.
They think and throw light into theoretical darkness.
They sing and save the ones who will never even read
This
Story.

I remember when I thought about crafting a counterstory
And the metanarratives tried to push me into the past.
At first I surrendered until I heard Ms. Lorde
Screaming: "You betta go back and find yo story!"
And I did
Find the stories that were weaved in the words
Of dope brothas who raise children
And practice law
And work at malls
And defy Amerikan dreams that forgot about them.

These stories are not screensavers
That serve as background memories
But memories that serve as perpetual bookmarks
For the books that have yet to be written.

These stories are not asking for funding
But instead are asking for funds of knowledge
To pay for the price of power.

What does it mean to create stories
That continue to be on the outskirts of ontology?
Shaking the racist branches down to the core
Shouting at the top of academic mountaintops
Reserved for excusive remembers

What does it mean for a Black woman
To conceive a Black son in her Black body
While praying Outside forces do not destroy
The precious Black life she created with a Black man

And how do we raise Black men without fear
When the very fear of their faces are viewed as normal
How do we become color warriors
Instead of colorblind capturers
That rely on interest convergence to survive

I do not know.

But I do know that

These stories do not fit into boxes of masculinity
They are not covered in beards or wear cologne
They do not rap (or maybe they do?)
They do not wear their pants low (or maybe they do?)
These stories do not belong to you.

These stories are rememories
Conjured up in Beloved moments
Where hands hold hands
And freedom hangs like mistletoe.

To love these stories
Means to love change.
And to love change
Means to let go of the constructions
That
Constrict
More than it
Ignites.

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Appendix A
Getting to Know You Survey (2008 Research Study)

1. How do you identify yourself?

   Black Hispanic African American Other Human

2. Do you think your race/gender impacts your academic success? (Please Explain)

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

3. What kind of student are you? Please explain using details to support your response.

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

4. In terms of the New York City Standards Scale (1-4), what have you been classified as throughout your education?

   1 2 3
   4

   How does this number make you feel about yourself? Please explain using details.

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

5. What does literacy mean to you? What is the role of literacy in your life?

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

Appendix B
Recruitment Announcement

Are you a Black male between the ages of 20-30 who attended a New York City public school? If you are interested in discussing your high school experiences, current career path, perceptions of race, class and gender, public policy and masculinity, you would be ideal for my research study, which focuses on the ways Black males navigate schools (as well as other institutions), communities and family life. The study also includes constant individual self-reflection. If you are interested in speaking more with me please send me a Facebook message (Facebook name: Crystal Belle-Apenteng) or an email at cb2847@tc.columbia.edu. Food will be provided for all research conversations.

Appendix C
Conversational Questions

Research Conversation #1- Poem Discussion

In the first meet up we will discuss their reactions to the poem "When Schools Ain't Enough for Black Boys" and why.

Research Conversation #2- Getting to Know You

1) Please tell me about some of your interests and your current occupation.
2) What NYC high school did you attend? What were your general experiences in high school like?
3) How would you describe yourself to someone who does not know you?

Research Conversation #3- Yearbook Reflection

1) As you look through your high school yearbook, what does it mean to you? Why?
2) Did any teachers have an impact on you? Why/Why not?
3) Describe your relationship with your English teachers?
4) How do you define literacy?
5) How was literacy represented in your high school?
6) How does literacy play a role in your life?

Research Conversation #4- James Baldwin Quote
The participants will be sent the quote beforehand via email to reflect on before the conversation

"The American idea of sexuality appears to be rooted in the American idea of masculinity. Idea may not be the precise word, for the idea of one's sexuality can only with great violence be divorced or distanced from the idea of the self. Yet something resembling this rupture has certainly occurred (and is occurring) in American life, and violence has been the American daily bread since we have heard of America. This violence, furthermore, is not merely literal and actual but appears to be admired and lusted after, and the key to the American imagination."
~James Baldwin

1) What is your immediate reaction to this quote?
2) How do you define masculinity?
3) What is your understanding of the term Black masculinity?
4) How has your own life been impacted by masculinity?

Research Conversation #5- Research Reflections

1) What are your thoughts about the research process so far?
2) How does it feel to reflect on your educational experiences?
3) Would you say you have learned anything new about yourself so far?

Research Conversation #6- Policy and Black men

1) Have you heard of President Obama's "My Brother's Keeper" initiative? What do you think about it?
2) Do you believe this is in any way connected to your own life?
3) Where do you see yourself in the next 5 years?

Research Conversation #7- Research wrap up

1) Do you have any final thoughts or questions about the research?
2) How would you describe this journey for you?

Email Reflection

1) What are your thoughts about the research process?
2) How did it feel to reflect on your educational experiences?
3) Would you say you have learned anything more about yourself so far?